

The Legacy of Yirmiyahu

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The legacy of Yirmiyahu is considered by many to be that of the Navi who alerted the Jews to the possibility of upcoming destruction, and the need to change their actions in order to avoid it. Each year, the month of Av arrives, and with it, the dual emotions that it represents; the grief and the mourning as well as the solace linked with the hope of return. For the time period of the shiva d'nechemta, the seven weeks of solace following *Tisha B'av*, we read Yeshayahu's expressive and powerful words of reassurance. For the tears and grief leading up to and including *Tisha B'av* itself, we turn to the painful words of Yirmiyahu, the prophet of the *churban*, both in the mournful tunes of *Megillat Eicha* as well as in the cautionary admonitions of Sefer Yirmiyahu itself, read during the haftarot leading up to *Tisha B'av*. In fact, Chazal themselves (Baba Batra 14b) have divided these two prophets into two clear categories; calling Yeshayahu "כולר נחמה", complete consolation, and Yirmiyahu "כולר תוכחה", complete reproach.

And so, the lines are drawn. In the minds of many, Yeshayahu, as his name denotes, is the prophet of *yeshuah*, salvation, while Yirmiyahu is the prophet of defeat and destruction. He is the "Jeremiah" of Rembrandt's "*Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem*", a painting depicting a worn, defeated prophet watching as his city is burned, his king blinded, his people led into captivity. Moreover, from the entirety of Sefer Yirmiyahu and its descriptions of his efforts throughout the forty years before the destruction, it would seem that through his entire career, Yirmiyahu faced a perpetually stubborn nation, politically determined to continue down a futile path of revolt and bloodshed. Spiritually, they were content with their smugly self-assured religious practices that rid them of any spiritual accountability. In terms of the leadership, Yirmiyahu faced a string of monarchs who vacillated between ignoring him and allowing the angry mobs to repeatedly assault him.

The words of his sefer are replete with examples. In 7:3 and 7:10-14, he exhorts the people to change their ways, lest the Beit Hamikdash be destroyed. The result? Yirmiyahu is put on trial by the masses and sentenced to death for his words. In 11:2-5, in a speech to the people of his own hometown of Anatot, Yirmiyahu encourages them to return to God if they wish to continue living in the land. The result? His own people attempt to poison him. Even in the final year before the *churban*, Yirmiyahu struggles to relay the futility of the revolt against Bavel. He

continues to encourage a return to God as the only way to any sort of victory. The result? He is ignored by his king and thrown by the military leadership into a pit to starve to death.¹²⁵

In fact, as we read *Megillat Eicha* on *Tisha B'Av*, it seems that as a prophet sent to open the people's eyes to the possibility, and then the eventuality, of one of the greatest tragedies in history, Yirmiyahu simply failed. While the definition of success and failure when it comes to the words of the prophets (and the attention paid them by the people) is one that is too broad to be discussed here, it would behoove us, most especially at this time of year, to briefly touch upon the topic as it regards Yirmiyahu. To do so, opens for us an incredible vision of the *churban*, and the *nechama* that accompanies it.

Perhaps one of the most pivotal *perakim* to learn as we begin this discussion is perek 29, the text of a letter that Yirmiyahu sends to the people who have been exiled to Bavel with King Yechaniah, also known as “גלות החרש והמסגר” (“exile of the craftsmen and smiths”), as many of the craftsmen and artisans were exiled along with them.

1 Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the residue of the elders of the captivity, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon, 2 after that Jeconiah the king, and the queen-mother, and the officers, and the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen, and the smiths, were departed from Jerusalem; 3 by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent unto Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying:

(א) ואלה דברי הספר אשר שלח ירמיה הנביא מירושלם אל יתר זקני הגולה ואל הכהנים ואל הנביאים ואל כל העם אשר הגלה נבוכדנאצר מירושלם בבלה: (ב) אחרי זאת יכניה המלך והגבירה והסריסים שרי יהודה וירושלם והחרש והמסגר מירושלם: (ג) ביד אלעשה בן שפן וגמריה בן חלקיה אשר שלח צדקיה מלך יהודה אל נבוכדנאצר מלך בבל בבלה לאמר:

The first 3 pesukim serve as the introduction. The timing is directly after the second wave of exiles to Bavel, which occurred under the reign of King Yehonya. With him, we are told, went much of the aristocracy, leadership and skilled craftsmen of the nation. In addition, we are informed that Yirmiyahu entrusts this letter into the hands of two familiar, upright and reliable, people.¹²⁶

The remainder of the letter can then be divided into 2 parts, pesukim 4-11 and 12-14.

4 Thus said the L-RD of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all the captive people, whom I have caused to be carried away captive from Jerusalem unto Babylon: 5 Build houses, and dwell in them, and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; 6 take wives, and have sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and

(ד) כה אמר ה' צבאות אלהי ישראל לכל הגולה אשר הגליתי מירושלם בבלה: (ה) בנו בתים וישבו ונטעו גנות ואכלו את פרין: (ו) קחו נשים והולידו בנים ובנות וקחו לבניכם נשים ואת בנותיכם תנו לאנשים ותלדנה בנים ובנות ורבו שם ואל

¹²⁵ See פרק ל"ח for fascinating similarities in the text to the Yoseph story.

¹²⁶ אלעשה בן שפן is from the noteworthy שפן family, who proved their loyalty during Yirmiyahu's trial (26:24) and גמריה בן חלקיה hails from the family of the גדול כהן who, with the help of the שפן family, initiated the purge against idolatry demanded by Yirmiyahu towards the beginning of his time as a נביא.

daughters; and multiply there, and be not diminished. 7 And seek the peace of the city to which I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray unto the L-RD for it; for in the peace thereof shall you have peace.

תמעטו: (ז) ודרשו את שלום העיר אשר הגלית אתכם שמה והתפללו בעדה אל ה' כי בשלומה יהיה לכם שלום:

First, Yirmiyahu makes three demands of *Bnei Yisrael*; 1) build homes and plant gardens, 2) marry, have children and multiply, and 3) pray for the welfare of the foreign government in which you live, so that you may have peace¹²⁷. In its most simplistic interpretation, these three commands are directions. The purpose of these directions is then explained:

8 For thus said the L-RD of hosts, the God of Israel: Let not your prophets that are in the midst of you, and your diviners, beguile you, neither hearken to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. 9 For they prophesy falsely unto you in My name; I have not sent them, said the L-RD. 10 For thus said the L-RD: After seventy years are accomplished for Babylon, I will remember you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. 11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the L-RD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

(ח) כי כה אמר ה' צבאות אלהי ישראל אל ישיאו לכם נביאיכם אשר בקרבכם וקסמיכם ואל תשמעו אל חלמתיכם אשר אתם מחלמים: (ט) כי בשקר הם נבאים לכם בשמי לא שלחתיים נאם ה': (י) כי כה אמר ה' כי לפי מלאת לבבל שבעים שנה אפקד אתכם והקמתי עליכם את דברי הטוב להשיב אתכם אל המקום הזה: (יא) כי אנכי ידעתי את המחשבת אשר אנכי חשב עליכם נאם ה' מחשבות שלום ולא לרעה לתת לכם אחרית ותקוה:

Yirmiyahu is giving the exiled Jews of Bavel the reasoning behind the three commands of building, marrying and praying for the host government. His explanation is quite logical. He is instructing them to fulfill these three commands because the exile will last longer than they think. In fact, it will last for a life time.¹²⁸ Thus, if they hope to survive, they must do what Jews have done for centuries; rebuild homes, rebuild families and hope to live in peace until they are eventually able to return to the land which they lost (10-11)¹²⁹. Then, in pesukim 12-14, Yirmiyahu turns to the second part of his letter. The next order of business is the religious aspect; the encouragement to pray to God while in exile.

12 And you shall call upon Me, and go, and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you. 13 And you shall seek Me, and find Me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart. 14

(יב) וקראתם אתי והלכתם והתפללתם אלי ושמעתי אליכם: (יג) ובקשתם אתי ומצאתם כי תדרשני בכל לבבכם: (יד)

127 It is debatable whether the goal of "peace" is attached merely to the command to pray for the foreign government or to all three commands. For our purposes, we can assume it doubles back to all three requests. The fulfillment of all three will ultimately lead to peace in exile.

128 תהלים פרק צ פסוק י: ימי שנותינו בהם שבעים שנה נאם בגבורת שמונים שנה

129 A look at the pattern of building, planting and marrying as it appears throughout Tanach is worthy of more detailed analysis than I could do justice here. One interesting note, however, is its echo of the exemptions from a מצוה as they appear in כה-ה דברים: (anyone who recently built a house, planted a vineyard or was married). At a time, when Yirmiyahu begins to call for military submission in the struggles with Babylonia, the terms are contextually appropriate ones.

And I will be found of you, says the L-RD, and I will turn your captivity, and gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, says the L-RD; and I will bring you back unto the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

ונמצאתי לכם נאם ה' ושבתי את שבותכם
וקבצתי אתכם מכל הגוים ומכל המקומות
אשר הדחתי אתכם שם נאם ה' והשבתי
אתכם אל המקום אשר הגליתי אתכם
משם:

Yirmiyahu commands them to pray to God while in exile. This command too, if fulfilled, will result in a return to the land, as promised at the end of pasuk 14.

In other words, the letter reads as follows; you are currently headed into a prolonged destruction and exile. To survive, and eventually return to your land, you will need to do two things. On the one hand, you must work to build a *physical* community in exile (4-6). However, more importantly, to be able to return, you must recognize that God alone has the power to bring you back. Therefore, you must pray to Him to reverse the decree and return you to your land (12-14). Two simple instructions.

But the letter is far more meaningful than its initial reading seems to suggest. To appreciate this, we must understand that the galut of Yechania (about 11 years prior to the final destruction and exile) marked a complex turning point, or rather, a no-turning-back point, for the *nevuot* of Yirmiyahu and ultimately, all of Judaism. Yirmiyahu's *nevuot* now began to encourage the monarchs and the people to submit to the Babylonians, to accept the destruction of much of Israel, perhaps even its religious center, as inevitable, and to do their best to live as a vassal state under the Babylonian Empire. Understandably, this was not a message that the politically and religiously self-assured people were willing to hear. But Yirmiyahu, their *navi*, knew that once the destruction hit, they would find themselves in a situation that despite all the tragedies in Jewish history, will always be remembered as one of the worst – because the nation landed in the absolutely unknown. The contrast would be unbearable; the religious center with its priests and sacrifices – the only way in which they really knew how to connect to God - would be gone. Their central monarchy, the idea of having a political entity of their own, destroyed, and its constituency enslaved to another nation. And for the first time since they entered it close to 1,000 years before, the majority of Jewish life would move out of its land and into exile. With religion, land and leadership gone, they would find themselves in communal and religious territory that was completely unfamiliar. Such a drastic change in their political, social and religious reality could only result, as it did for so many other refugee peoples, in assimilation and death.

In this letter, Yirmiyahu provides the Jewish people with the blueprint to encounter a life in the Diaspora, a life that, as we so well know, would last for thousands of years¹³⁰.

It is not merely instructions to enable a return. Yirmiyahu, in this pivotal letter to his exiled people, intends his instruction to be not only about what to do so that you can come back one day, but about how to survive not coming back for an extended period of time.

130 Even the return during the times of Ezra and Nechemia and the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash*, would serve as an interim relationship period, and not an absolute reversal to the times of בית ראשון ב

And here's how he does it. He provides them with a plan for survival by forcing them to acknowledge their reality and then rebuild from it. Do not waste time, neither communally, nor religiously, yearning for a return to a way of life and a form of religious connection that was corrupted and damaged. Part 1 (4-6), the rebuilding of the physical community is not just an instruction book for survival; it is the notification of their new reality¹³¹. Yirmiyahu is telling them: "Here is what your new reality is. You will be building homes and having children in this new place. You will exist under this foreign government. In general, whether you like it or not, you **will** become a concrete part of the foreign land in which you live. Hopefully, that will happen peacefully". (Of course, there will always exist the tension between the need to build life in exile and the hope of return. Pasuk 9 acknowledges this tension by warning them against believing in the false prophets and dreamers who are telling them that return is imminent. That would be living in a dreamland at the expense of what the new reality demands of them.) Then, pesukim 12-14 (part 2) is about how to begin to rebuild what is most important – the community's damaged relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. A relationship that will now be based, not upon the land and the Beit Hamikdash, but around the command to pray to God as it appears in 12-14.

To understand the foresight and brilliance of Yirmiyahu's command, these pesukim require a closer look. Perhaps the most important thing he does in this perek is introduce the idea of prayer as the essential mode of connection to God (in no less than 4 separate terms, each of which speaks to a different element of prayer). The **key**, however, to Yirmiyahu's message is the way the word "והלכתם" is stuck strangely into the middle of the 2 descriptions of prayer (וַיִּקְרָא אֲתָם ("א תי וְהִלַּכְתֶּם וְהִתְפַּלְלִיתֶם אֵלַי"). In a simple reading, it can be read as "Go and pray to me". Alternatively, it can be read as "והלכתם מגלות". This reading would imply an if-then clause. If you pray to me, I will listen to your prayers and you will "go" to your land, i.e. return from exile. But in line with our reading of Yirmiyahu's message in this perek, the word "והלכתם" should actually be attached to the "והתפללתם" and read as "ongoing prayer" or "continuous prayer"¹³². Yirmiyahu is handing them a new form of religious service, one that will be "continuous" and lasting. Prayer, rather than sacrifice, will be the new, and continuous, form of relationship with *God*. This, then, is the new long-term plan for a relationship with God in an extended life in the Diaspora. It is the creation of the concept that historian Henry Feingold calls "the non-anthropomorphic relationship with Gd"; a group religious identity that is more about the abstract, intangible sacrifice of the heart than of the physical sacrifice of the altar.

It is an upheaval in religious life as they knew it! Yirmiyahu's message to the people is as follows: Forget the sacrifices, the land, the king – all the symbolic aspects of the relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, that ultimately were just that – symbols, and symbols that due to

131 The idea of customizing themselves to a new reality or existence, is further found in the words "רבו ואל תמעטו" at the end of pasuk 6, since these words seem reminiscent of the original מצוה given to mankind in בראשית א:כב. Here, they are "starting again", so to speak. Another interesting comparison lies in the dual promise to Avraham of a great and numerous nation alongside the promise of the land. Here, they are enjoined to continue the process of the building of the nation, albeit, for the interim, without the land.

132 פירושי שד"ל – "והלכתם מביע את ההמשחיות: תקראו אלי כל הזמן" Similar to the phrase "הולך ו..." which, when attached to a verb, means to be "continuously" doing something.

excessive reliance upon them, can be cited as, if not the source, then at least the vehicle, of the failure. You don't need those things. In fact, they were hurting you. Your relationship with your God, a new and stronger relationship, can be based and built upon the decision to seek Him out and open an ongoing dialogue with Him.

Rather than Yirmiyahu being the pessimistic, failed prophet, by handing them a method of religious survival, he is actually the greatest optimist of all.

And with a glance through history, one can argue for the success of Yirmiyahu's message as well. Feingold coins a term called "Jewish exceptionalism" which describes the unique duality that exists amongst the American Jews he writes about. These Jews, he says, have an incredible ability to survive in and acculturate to new environments, while maintaining "an enduring link" to "a separate religious civilization with its own history" and identity¹³³. A living demonstration of the duality to which Yirmiyahu speaks in our perek! Just as Yirmiyahu had explained to the Jews of the *churban*; understand and work with the fact that the physical life of the Jews is being moved to the Diaspora (Part 1) and therefore, that your relationship with God must be refocused to be attuned to that reality (Part 2).

As Feingold points out,

"... the Jewish relationship to the American host culture is unique because there exists a separate continuous historical experience to which Jews relate as part of their identity. It has its claims. The formation of Jewish group identity is itself exceptional because for millennia it was not territorially, but spiritually rooted. Like the Jewish God, Jewish group identity was non-anthropomorphic- not anchored in material reality, but in an idea. The result was that not only was there a slower rate of acculturation for American Jewry, but one which occurred on different terms. They could not be classified as a religious denomination, nor as a hyphenate group. They were clearly not a race nor were they an ethnic group. The classification could not be found. To be sure, Jews became Americans, even "exaggerated Americans," but they also retained a strong loyalty to their Jewishness which, as we have seen, actually transcends the phenomenon of intermarriage... The tension between the two (American and Judaic culture) is sometimes difficult to negotiate, but it also contains what makes American Jewry and its history, exceptional."¹³⁴

In light of this message of Yirmiyahu's, Hashem's final promise of "ושבתי את שבותכם" in pasuk 14 can also be understood more deeply. The shoresh "שוב" is unique in that "... while basically a verb of motion ... [it] embrace[s] both physical motion and religious relation, what might be called the 'covenantal' usage of the verb"¹³⁵. It is the only verb of motion that is so frequently understood in both physical and covenantal ways. The covenantal usage is not about physical movement, but expresses a "movement" or "change" in the type or degree of loyalty on the part of *Bnei Yisrael* or

133 A midrash on American Jewish history, Henry L. Feingold, Albany : State University of New York Press, c1982, preface pxii.

134 Zion in America : the Jewish experience from colonial times to the present, Henry L. Feingold. New York : Hippocrene Books, 1974. p 331

135 The Root Šubh in the Old Testament : with particular reference to its usages in covenantal context, William L. Holladay, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1958, p1

their God, each for the other”¹³⁶. This understanding of the verb occurs with unusually high frequency in Yirmiyahu’s writings and has become familiar to us through its later abstraction, “teshuva”. While one can assuredly read the pesukim as a simple promise of physical return to the land by God, should we merit it, what Yirmiyahu *covenantally* promises is that if we listen to his blueprint for a life in exile, we will end up with a new and stronger relationship *with* God.

Thus, the “return” of which Yirmiyahu speaks when he promises “וְשַׁבְתִּי אֶת שְׁבוּתְכֶם”, is not necessarily the promise of physical return, but the promise that the Jews will be able to find a path to God, even while in exile. If they foster a community of focused prayer and connection, then the Brit of Sinai, the relationship of the bride and the groom, will be rebuilt and fortified, even without the underlying land.¹³⁷ It is the challenge of a more esoteric or intangible monotheism; a move from a direct sacrifice-focused relationship to one that is more inherent, and perhaps, as we in the 21st century might argue, more difficult, requiring more spiritual discipline. Yet, as promised here in this perek, this new relationship has the potential to be not only critical and durable, but a thriving and powerful one in its own right.

Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expands on this, pointing out that

*“... the irony is that it took the loss of Israel’s national independence to bring about the flowering of its religious vision. Now that the Temple lay in ruins, every Jew became a holy person, offering prayer instead of sacrifice, and achieving atonement through repentance... The synagogue replaced the Temple. Repentance substituted for the rites of the High Priest. Judaism, no longer a religion of land and state, became a faith built around homes, schools, and communities... and [this] would sustain them as a nation.”*¹³⁸

The *churban*, as Yirmiyahu well knew, would force the Jewish community out of their self-assured religious state, and obligate them to begin again, and strive for something better.

Of course, we suffer in exile. Both for reasons of physical persecution and because we acknowledge our imperfect religious existence, we bitterly mourn the destruction and fervently pray for the ultimate return to our land. As the Chafetz Chaim remarks, the land is the body to our soul¹³⁹. The Jews of the *churban* lost sight of the soul, due to misplaced confidence in the body. While we suffer without our body, we have learned, and continue to learn, in no small part as credit to Yirmiyahu, how to protect and nourish the soul of our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu while it is removed from its bodily state.

Ultimately, this pivotal letter to the exiles is a microcosm and a key to understanding all of Sefer Yirmiyahu. His constant grievances against the way the Jews served God in the *Beit Hamikdash*, while to his contemporaries would have been perceived as unheeded warnings, from our retrospective vantage point, were actually guidelines for a life with God, in Exile from His Temple. Imagine how the destroyed, confused and helpless religious community could reread

136 Ibid pp2, 152, 157

137 Of course, it can be read as more than two separate meanings. For ultimately, one is reliant on the other; succeed in rebuilding the loyalty and relationship, and you will then merit the physical return.

138 A Letter in the Scroll, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, New York, 2000. p150 and 152.

139 הפך היים על התורה p65

the warnings and criticisms of his sefer and find religious instruction in those very criticisms, by understanding that it wasn't sacrifices that God wanted and therefore, it wasn't sacrifices they would need in order to reconnect to Him. And for us then, the life and book of Yirmiyahu is a charge, a rallying call that is not only intensely relevant to us as Diaspora Jews, but is also a strange, yet comforting form of consolation. For consolation can be found not only in the promise of an eventual return *from* exile, but in the idea that we were left with the guide to return to God while *in* it.

And being as the legacy of an individual or leader is really determined more by history's hindsight than by the situation he leaves behind when he expires, perhaps Rembrandt's "*Jeremiah*" as a lone representation of his prophetic tenure is a misguided one, and Yirmiyahu, his mission, and his words, are a triumph, and a solace, after all.