YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***SEFER DANIEL***

**By Rav Yaakov Medan**

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**Shiur #20: Chapter 12b: Daniel's Prayer (continued)   
(*Sefer Daniel* - chapter 9)**

**2. Revisiting the Lions' Den**

Here we make an assumption that has no explicit basis in the text. This assumption is the connection between our chapter and the narrative in chapter 6, which we discussed previously.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us return to Daniel's high hopes for the seventieth year, inspiring his great prayer for the redemption, a prayer which had been anticipated and awaited by Yirmiyahu. In a development that is clearly the work of Satan, it is specifically in this year, the seventieth year, that the ministers of Darius the Mede invent the decree prohibiting prayer to any god or power except for Darius himself. Daniel is well aware that this decree may cause the time for redemption to be missed. He does not view it as an incidental development. He views it in the context of Yirmiyahu's words on prayer, and understands that the decree is a test that God is imposing on His people, on the eve of the redemption, to see whether they love God with all their heart and all their soul and whether they will fulfill Yirmiyahu's prophecy simply and wholeheartedly:

And you shall call upon Me, and go, and pray to Me, and I will hear you. And you shall seek Me, and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. (*Yirmiyahu* 29:12-13)

Daniel views the situation as a test – but not in the sense that he is certain that God will save him. He intends to give up his life if he is caught in prayer, but is not prepared to miss the hour of favor that is criticial for the redemption.

We previously cited the Ritva on *Pesachim* 25, who provides support for giving up one's life when a foreign ruler issues decrees against Judaism, even to maintain prayer (and not only in avoidance of the three cardinal prohibitions), in a case in which this area of observance is being neglected – that is, for the purpose of serving as an example to the generation and thereby spurring them to repentance. Daniel extends the license to give up one's life in defiance of a decree against Judaism to another area affecting the generation as a whole – the hour of the imminent redemption, an hour requiring self-sacrifice and devotion to God that goes beyond everyday conduct and even beyond everyday Halakha.

Let us return to our other question, regarding the reason that Daniel faces towards Jerusalem. We previously showed that the Babylonian Talmud maintains (with the exception of two opinions) that the concept of facing Jerusalem applies only while the Temple is standing and the Divine Presence rests within it. The teaching based on the world “*talpiot*” – “the *tel* to which mouths (*piot*) turn” – understands the word “*tel*” as meaning “foundation;” the reference is to the Temple, the foundation of the entire world. Indeed, it is natural that while the Divine Presence rests in the Temple, prayer should be directed there. But the Jerusalem Talmud maintains that prayer is directed to the same place even when the Temple is in ruins. There, the interpretation of “*talpiot*” is "the mound to which all mouths pray." The direction expresses the subject of the prayer. In the Babylonian Talmud, "One who wishes to become wise should pray towards the south" – since wisdom is associated with the south. "One who wishes to become wealthy should face towards the north" – for there is the source of wealth, since the Table with the showbread was on the northern side of the Temple.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the same way, one who wishes to pray for the rebuilding of Jerusalem should pray in its direction.

Daniel's prayer is, in its entirety, a supplication for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Therefore, he faces through the windows towards Jerusalem. This image was eternalized and accepted as *halakha* throughout the Diaspora since, following Daniel's example, we too pray mainly for the rebuidling of Jerusalem and the Temple and the restoration of the Divine Presence there, may it come speedily in our days.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We suggest that this should inform our reading of chapter 6 and of chapter 9. In chapter 6, the ministers of Darius the Mede forbid prayer. Daniel, aware of the prohibition, nevertheless goes to his home, with its windows open towards Jerusalem, and pours forth the supplication recorded in chapter 9 concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He is caught in the midst of his prayer, thrown to the lions, and miraculously delivered.

**3. Aspects of Daniel's Prayer**

Daniel starts his prayer with "the great and awesome God," omitting from his description the third traditional title, "mighty." The *gemara* in *Yoma* explains this by means of a question: "His children have been handed over into servitude; where is His might?"[[4]](#footnote-4)

The first part of his prayer is a confession. This confession is not in the style of that of Yom Kippur, which essentially asks for forgiveness, but rather in the style of the public confession that we recite in the lamentations on Tish'a be-Av – essentially an acceptance of God's justice and the recognition of His righteousness. Many of the sentences in Daniel's prayer have entered the confession that is part of our regular prayers, especially the long *Tachanun* recited on Mondays and Thursdays, which discusses the return from exile, Jerusalem, and the Temple. The connection between the confession that we recite and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is our supplication for forgiveness. The connection between the confession and Daniel's prayer – the longer *Tachanun* – is the acknowledgement of God's judgment and the punishment that has befallen us, before we ask for Divine mercy.

After the confession and acceptance of Divine judgment comes Daniel's supplication. It does not proceed from the promise of redemption after seventy years, but rather recalls God's many mercies and His great Name, which is desecrated and scorned by the nations so long as *Am Yisrael* is in exile. In the prayer just before *Tachanun*, "*Avinu Malkenu*," we express these two concepts in two successive requests:

Our Father, our King – act for the sake of Your many mercies;

Our Father, our King – act for the sake of Your great, mighty, and terrible Name, by which we are known.

In his prayer, Daniel also mentions that the evil that has befallen Jerusalem is unparalleled anywhere under the heavens. Nevukhadnetzar destroyed many cities, as did the kings of Assyria. But the degree of cruelty demonstrated in Jerusalem was unheard of.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**4. Calculations of the Time for Redemption**

In response to Daniel's prayer, the angel Gavriel appears and reveals to him that redemption will come:

And while I was still speaking in prayer, the man Gavriel, whom I had seen in my vision at the beginning, flew swiftly and approached me at about the time of the evening sacrifice. And he caused me to understand, and he spoke with me, and said, “Daniel, now I have come forth to give you skillful understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went forth, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved; therefore look into the word and understand the vision. Seventy weeks (*shavu'im shiv'im*) are decreed for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression and to make an end to sins and to atone for iniquity, and to bring an everlasting righteousness, and to seal up vision and prophet, and to anoint the holy of holies. Know, therefore, and understand that from the going forth of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the anointed prince shall be seven weeks (*shavu'im shiv'a*). Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be rebuilt, with broad places and a moat, but in a troubled time. And after sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall be no more; and the city and the Sanctuary shall be destroyed by the people of a prince who will come, and his end shall be with a flood, and and to the end of the war desolations are decreed. And he shall make a firm covenant with the many for one week, and during half of the week he shall cause sacrifice and offering to be halted, and upon the wing of abominations shall come one who causes desolation, until the decreed destruction is poured out upon he who causes desolation. (9:21-27)

Despair of redemption may lead *Am Yisrael* to become completely assimilated in its place of exile. Only hope can keep a nation alive without its land and its kingdom. Yirmiyahu deviated from the boundaries maintained by the other prophets and set a time limit for the Babylonian exile – seventy years from the ascent of Nevukhadnetzar. When the seventieth year arrives, the angel conveys to Daniel the hope for the end to this exile, the hope that is meant to strengthen the nation so that they will not despair. But the time of the redemption is conveyed in the form of a riddle, and the angel instructs Daniel, "Know, therefore, and understand." It is clear that both the angel and Daniel are deliberately formulating the message in such a way that not everyone will be able to decode its meaning. Nevertheless, we may attempt to understand what the text means.

The accepted interpretation in the Talmud (*Nazir* 32b) and all the commentators is that the "seventy weeks" allude to the 490 years between the destruction of the First Temple and the destruction of the Second Temple. This period includes within it the seventy years of desolation from the destruction of the First Temple until the second year of the reign of Darius (the Persian), when the building of the Second Temple commenced, and the 420 years that the Second Temple stood.[[6]](#footnote-6)

According to this interpretation, Daniel foresaw the year of the destruction of the Second Temple. But this presents a problem – it suggests that the Second Temple was destroyed not (or not only) because of the sins of *Am Yisrael*, but because God had already decreed the destruction in advance. In addition, it would seem to imply that after those 490 years, there is an end to all the transgressions of *Am Yisrael* through their suffering ("to finish the transgression…. and to atone for iniquity"). But it was specifically then that the nation's worst troubles began in their long exile! Moreover, according to our understanding of the text thus far, Daniel did not discuss any period so distant in the future.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In any event, this is how the message was interpreted by R. Sa'adia Gaon, Rashi, and the other commentators who followed their lead. According to Rashi, the "*shavu'im shiv'a*" are the years of exile. From the destruction of the First Temple until the return to Tzion, there were 52 years, which are "seven sevens" plus another three years. The "sixty-two sevens" (or "sixty-two weeks") are the years from the return to Tzion until the destruction of the Second Temple: 420 years that the Temple stood, and the preceding 18 years, from the time of the Return until the construction of the Second Temple began.

Abravanel adopts a similar approach in his commentary, arguing against the Christian scholars who used this interpretation to support the vision of the birth of their messiah:

Behold, the Christian scholars have made these words – “until the anointed prince” and “seal up vision and prophet,” etc. – the jewel and foundation of those who believe in their faith. Because they found the Sages’ explanation and the logical interpretation of these verses to be difficult, they made an effort to negate and question their interepretation of the “seventy weeks.” And so that the truth will be apparent to all, I chose to gather from their works, one here and one there, and I will respond to them as I see fit. (*Ma’ayan* 10, *Tamar* 7).

Perhaps the Christian calculation is based on adding the "seventy weeks" (or "seventy sevens") and the "seven weeks" (or "seven sevens"), arriving at a total of 539 years. After all, according to the accepted historical scholarship, this vision was uttered in the first year of Darius the Mede, which was the year 539 B.C.E. If indeed the Christian messiah was born in the year 0, as was generally accepted until quite recently, then their calculation works out very nicely. Thus, this chapter could be seen as providing support for the Christian faith (as Abravanel points out), and it is therefore not surprising that the Christians “promoted” Daniel to the status of a prophet.

Elsewhere, we raised an opposing claim.[[8]](#footnote-8) The accepted historical chronology of events proceeds from the outset from the need to arrive at the number 539. In order to arrive at this calculation, the duration of the Persian Kingdom was revised by Christian scholars during the Middle Ages, such that the exact coincidence of the dates is not all that surprising.

Perhaps the "seventy sevens" allude to the years of *Am Yisrael* from the time of its creation – the Exodus from Egypt – until "the anointing of the holy of holies" – the conclusion of the construction of the First Temple. The period from the Exodus until the beginning of the construction lasted 480 years, and the construction lasted another 7 years.[[9]](#footnote-9) This brings us to a total of 487 years – which is almost exactly "seventy sevens" (490 years). After "seven sevens" – 49 years from the completion of the construction of the Temple – Assa, king of Yehuda, was born. From the words of the early prophets it seems possible that he was meant to be the *Mashiach*, and perhaps he is the "anointed prince" (*mashiach nagid*) mentioned here in Daniel's vision. In his time, a great salvation took place, but owing to his sins, he did not merit the full redemption (see *Divrei Ha-yamim II* 15). In the "sixty-second week" – the 429th year after the start of Assa's reign – the dedication of the Second Temple took place, in the sixth year of Darius. Following this came the subjugations hinted to at the final verses of the vision.

We might suggest another way of calculating the redemption in accordance with the "*shavu'im shiv'im*" in our chapter. If we count the "*shavu'im*" as days rather than years, the angel is confirming for Daniel that the return to Tzion and the beginning of the rebuilding of the Temple will take place during the coming year (490 days are approximately one year and 4 months). The total count arrived at if we add "*shavu'im shiv'im*," "*shavu'im shiv'a*," and "*shavu'im shishim u-shenayim*" is almost three years, and this may allude to the three-year reign of Cyrus, who is referred to by Yishayahu (end of chapter 44 and beginning of 45) as "*mashiach*."[[10]](#footnote-10) The death of Cyrus, the "*mashiach*," heralded a difficult period for *Am Yisrael*, as alluded to by Daniel in the final verses of his vision.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Still, the vision remains opaque and its riddle awaits a solution.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Cf. Yirmiyahu 7 and 26. The detailed prophecy that "this House shall be like Shilo" appears there in chapter 7, as part of the rebuke. The broader narrative about Yirmiyahu's arrest and trial, in the wake of his declaration of this prophecy, appears only in chapter 26. Similarly, in our case, the broader narrative about Daniel's trial and verdict and the story about the content of his prayer appear in two different chapters. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Bava Batra* 25b. R. Yitzchak, to whom the teaching is attributed, speaks specifically about the direction of prayer. He does not talk about journeying in one of these directions, as some people mistakenly understand his intention; see Rashi ad loc. A person is not meant to seek out wealth or wisdom for himself by moving himself in one direction or the other; rather, he is meant to ask for these gifts from God to Whom both wealth and wisdom belong. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All of this is elaborated upon at length in our article, "*Kivvun ha-Tefilla*," in N. Aryeh (ed.), *Binyan Ariel Yair* (Ramat ha-Golan, 5762), pp. 362-387. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 7:3) cites the same question. The full quote from the Babylonian Talmud reads as follows: "For R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? For they restored the old glory. Moshe had originally said, ‘The great, mighty, and terrible God.’ Yirmiyahu, in his time, said: ‘Foreigners are crowing in His Sanctuary – how can He be called 'terrible'?’ So he omitted the word 'terrible.' Daniel, in his time, said: ‘Foreigners are subjugating His children; how can He be called 'mighty'?’ So he omitted the word 'mighty.' The Men of the Great Assembly came along and said: ‘On the contrary – that is precisely His might: that He overcomes His inclination, and shows forebearance towards the wicked. And this precisely is His terribleness: that were it not for their fear of God, how could one lone nation exist among the other nations?’ But how, then, could Yirmiyahu and Daniel have uprooted the tradition instituted by Moshe? R. Elazar taught: Knowing that the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth, they did not want to utter false words" (*Yoma* 69b). In the Jerusalem Talmud, in contrast, the final sentence reads: "R. Yitzchak ben El'azar said: The prophets know that their God is true, and do not seek to flatter." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is noteworthy that in this final verse of Daniel's prayer, and throughout, there is a strong emphasis on "His city" – Jerusalem. Even Daniel's windows are said to face towards Jerusalem (rather than “the Land of Israel” or “the Temple”). This point demands closer attention. We are used to emphasizing the centrality of *Eretz Yisrael* and of the Temple. In between these, the status of Jerusalem is somewhat overshadowed and overlooked. But Jerusalem has its own independent status as the object of Jewish prayer, and this status is expressed in the prayer uttered by Daniel.

   In fact, Jerusalem was always a central concept in the consciousness of *Am Yisrael* throughout the generations in exile. In the *Amidah* prayer, we say, "And return in mercy to Your city, Jerusalem," as an expression of our longing for the redemption. The *midrashim* and *aggadot* similarly focus on Jerusalem.

   What is the special place occupied by Jerusalem in Jewish consciousness? In general, we might say that the concept of *Eretz Yisrael* is fundamentally bound up with the forefathers. *Eretz Yisrael* is the inheritance promised to the forefathers, as God told Avraham, "To your descendants I shall give this land" (*Bereishit* 12:7). As part of the same context, mention is made of Mount Moriah, the site of the future Temple, in the story of the binding of Yitzchak. In contrast, Jerusalem is not to be found in the stories of the forefathers. To our understanding, it is more closely bound up with the Exodus from Egypt. The forefathers struck roots in the land; they dug wells, led their flocks, engaged in agriculture. The establishment of the monarchy under David represents the completion of the enterprise initiated by the forefathers. The establishment of the Kingdom of Israel was the conclusion of a process that began with the Exodus from Egypt, the process of leaving slavery for freedom, with the idea of the nation's own monarchy representing the opposite of a state of slavery. The climax of the Exodus was the call by Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael*, "God shall reign for ever and ever!", at the end of the Song of the Sea. Jerusalem, as the royal city, is bound up with the Exodus, while the Temple is the continuation of the revelation of the Divine Presence at Sinai (a concept that we shall not elaborate on here).

   In any event, it is important to remember that Jerusalem has its own special spiritual status, and the verses here are an outstanding example of prayer that is focused on Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to historical scholarship, the second year of the Persian Darius, when the rebuilding commenced, was the year 521 B.C.E., and the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. Thus, according to this system, the Temple stood for 591 years. However, according to a *beraita* in *Seder Olam* and the *gemara* in *Bava Batra* 4a, the Second Temple stood for only 420 years. Its construction began in the year 3408 and it was destroyed in 3828. The discrepancy between these two calculations is discussed at length in our article and that of C. Chefetz in *Megadim* 14 on the period of the kings of Persia and Media. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Malbim (9:24) indeed views the period of the Second Temple as a continuation of the punishment, since during this period *Am Yisrael* was subservient to Persia, Greece, and Rome. Along with the Babylonian subjugation that preceded the building of the Second Temple, there were a total of 490 years of subjugation. But then God tested them and found them unworthy, and their punishment was intensified by the long exile that followed. This may explain the matter of the four kingdoms. The period of "seventy weeks" indeed featured only four kingdoms; afterwards, there were others. Our explanation here adopts a different understanding of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See our article in *Megadim* 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "And it was, in the four hundred and eightieth year from the Exodus of *Bnei Yisrael* from the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of the reign of Shelomo over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the House of God" (*Melakhim* I 6:1). "And in the eleventh year, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, the House was completed, in all its details and and all its specifications; so he spent seven years building it" (ibid., 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Ibn Ezra, who was apparently familiar with a similar interpretation and sought to counter it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is also possible that the "*shavu'im shiv'im*" are the years of transgression for which seventy years of exile were decreed so that the land could rest. All the related calculations appear in Malbim's commentary on our chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)