YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #26: Yeshayahu and His Disciples, From the Time of Menashe Until the Destruction (3)**

**The persecution chapters; "innocent blood" and moral rebuke (Chapters 50-59)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

These chapters contain shocking descriptions that match the period of Menashe. They include the persecution and even execution (Chapter 53) of the prophet ("God's servant,” apparently as well as some of his disciples who continued his teachings); flagrant idolatry, with the slaughter of children for Molekh, and a king flattered with gifts ("with ointment") who  sends emissaries afar in order to inflict humiliation (Chapter 57); and finally, terrible sins and the spilling of innocent blood (Chapter 59). None of this matches the period of the Return after the Babylonian exile, and there is no evidence or context connecting these events with the transition from Babylon to Persia and Cyrus's ascent to power.

On the other hand, the exile from the kingdom of Israel as well as from the kingdom of Yehuda is present as a bitter reality in Yeshayahu's prophecies already from the time of Achaz (end of Chapter 11), as well as in the chapters currently under discussion (50-59). Jerusalem is described as in mourning and humiliated, in need of consolation and a shaking off "from the dust" (52:2); the city is filled with ruins. However, *it is still standing*; a description of complete destruction appears only at the end of the psalm-like lamentation (64:9-10).

Hence, to my mind, Chapters 50-59 serve as decisive proof that Yeshayahu's prophecies continued – by the prophet himself and by his disciples – in the midst of a raging confrontation with the rulers in the time of Menashe and Amon. The description of this period in *Sefer Melakhim* is brief and devoid of explanation: Menashe sheds "innocent blood very much" (*Melakhim* II 21:16) – but why? And when did this happen? How did the kingdom of Yehuda descend to such moral depravity? Once we have identified the historical context of Chapters 50-59 in *Yeshayahu*, we gain a complete, full picture of one of the darkest periods in Jewish history.

**Execution of Yeshayahu and his disciples (Chapters 52-53)**

According to *Chazal*,[[2]](#footnote-2) it is the king of Yehuda – Menashe,[[3]](#footnote-3) son of Chizkiyahu, of the house of David – who orders the execution of Yeshayahu the prophet. The “servant of God” is arrested, tortured, and paraded in a degrading and humiliating manner before the public; he suffers terrible pain and is ultimately put to death on false charges. It would appear that several executions took place, and that this is the "innocent blood" that Menashe spilled "very much, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; beside his sin in causing Yehuda to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the Lord" (*Melakhim* II 21:16) – in other words, in addition to his idolatry. The prophets became enemies of the regime because they opposed idol worship and fought against idolatry and the official policies of the Menashe-Amon cabal.

The chapter about "God's servant" describes shock over the prophet's execution – following severe torture, silenced with a gag so as to prevent any further protest – from the point of view of the spectators:

He was oppressed, and tortured, and could not open his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away… for he was cut off out of the land of the living… and they made his grave with the wicked… although he had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in his mouth. (53:7-9)

The spectators included disciples of the prophet, who loved and respected him, along with all those who remained silent either out of fear of the regime or because they had reconciled themselves to idolatry, with everyone choosing his own path and minding his own business, not daring to join the prophets' protest. All were forced to witness the horrific spectacle, and they sensed that the condemned men, whose agonized faces were too horrible to behold (53:2-3), bore the iniquity of the entire generation:

Surely our diseases did he bear, and our pains he carried…

And he perished because of our sins; he was crushed because of our iniquities,

The suffering of our good life was upon him, and with his wounds we were healed.

We all like sheep went astray, each turning to his own way, and the Lord caused the iniquity of us all to alight upon him. (53:4-6)

The prophecy concludes with a prayer of atonement, and a eulogy describing the future triumph of the “servant of God” who was executed: his progeny would continue his path, such that it would be remembered in the future, and his tremendous reward would be shared widely, like the spoils of war:

…to see if his soul would offer itself in restitution, that he might see his seed prolong his days, and that the purpose of the Lord might prosper by his hand. …

My servant justified the Righteous One to the many (= before the rulers) and he bore their iniquities;

Therefore I will divide for him (= his descendants) a portion of the great (= a portion of the property of the rulers, who will fall) and he shall divide the spoil with the mighty, because he bared his soul unto death… (10-12)

The grim description here explains Yeshayahu’s disappearance during the time of Menashe, and the continuation of his path and his prophecies through his disciples. Indeed, *Chazal* transmit the following chilling tradition from a genealogy scroll found in Jerusalem:

And it was written in [the scroll], Menashe killed Yeshayahu.

Rava said: "He [Menashe] judged him [for allegedly opposing the Torah of Moshe!] and then killed him. He said to [Yeshayahu], “Moshe, your master, said: ‘For man cannot see Me and live’ (*Shemot* 33:20), but yet you say, ‘I saw the Lord sitting upon a high and lofty throne’ (*Yeshayahu* 6:1).” …

Yeshayahu said, “I know that he [Menashe] will not accept anything I tell him; if I answer him [the truth], I will make him into an intentional transgressor.” He therefore uttered a Divine Name and was swallowed up within a cedar tree. [Menashe’s servants] brought the cedar tree and sawed through it. When the saw reached where his mouth was, Yeshayahu died – because of what he had said: “In the midst of a people of unclean lips do I dwell” (*Yeshayahu* 6:5). (*Yevamot* 49b)

This chapter is a scathing indictment, within, the Jewish people regarding the spilling of “innocent blood” – the execution of Yeshayahu and his disciples in the time of Menashe-Amon. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the struggles against Rome during the late Second Temple Period.

The Christian tradition interpreted this chapter as a prophecy concerning the Nazarene with a name very similar to that of the prophet, but he was crucified by a foreign ruler – a Roman – who also crucified thousands of Jews (and others) who opposed his regime. Later, the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, and then projected its crimes and iniquities onto the Jews. The Christian world did all it could to cast blame on the Jews – until eventually the Jewish People in its entirety became the “persecuted servant of God who is executed,” since the Jewish commentators explained that the “servant of God” referred to in this chapter referred to the Jewish nation suffering in exile, especially in light of the Christian claims. Thus, the Christian interpretation of the chapter catalyzed Jewish exegesis.

In the famous Disputation of Barcelona in 1263, Ramban was called upon to engage in a formal debate against a convert from Judaism to Christianity, in the presence of King James I of Aragon, focusing especially on this chapter.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was the only time that a Jewish scholar was given the freedom to present the Jewish view. The king recognized Ramban as the winner of the disputation and retracted his demand that Ramban convert; he also awarded him a sizeable monetary prize. However, the Christians could not accept these results; Ramban was expelled from Spain and settled in *Eretz Yisrael*.

It was only after the establishment of the modern State of Israel in *Eretz Yisrael* that the Christian Church officially retracted its collective accusation of the Jews for supposedly abetting the crucifixion carried out by the Romans.

**The vision of redemption vs. bitter reality (Chapter 54)**

In these prophecies, we can easily allow ourselves to be carried along with the wondrous prophetic vision. It is far more painful to consider what it was like in Yehuda at the time of the prophecy – the state of the land, the kingdom, and the Jews – as reflected in the following fragments:

O barren one… you, who did not travail [in birth] … children of the desolate one…

the shame of your youth… the reproach of your widowhood…

forsaken and grieved in spirit… a wife of [one’s] youth who is rejected… I have forsaken you…

In slight anger, I hid My face from you for a moment…

O you afflicted, storm-tossed, not comforted…

I have created the destroyer, to wreck…” (54:1-16)

This is not the period of the return to the land, but rather a time of exile; a period of desolation and profound despair. (It must be remembered that the exile had started already, with the destruction of the Galilee and Shomron, and of Lakhish and the Judean lowlands, in the time of Achaz and Chizkiyahu.)

The prophet struggles with all his might against this bitter reality – just as he did in the time of Achaz, in his prophecy of the “shoot out of the stock of Yishai” and the ingathering of exiles that would be comparable to the Exodus from Egypt (Chapter 11). His struggle is waged to keep hope alive, to maintain Jewish faith so it will not disintegrate – and he is successful. Jews have sung this song of faith in future joy for two thousand years, as though they could already feel it even in the depths of the darkness in which they found themselves:

Sing… break forth into song, and croon…

Enlarge the place of your tent…

For you shall spread to the right and to the left…

Fear not, for you shall not be ashamed…

With great compassion I shall gather you. …

With everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. …

My kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall My covenant of peace be removed… (54:1-10).

**“Innocent blood” and the abominations of Menashe (1) (56:9 – 57:11)**[[5]](#footnote-5)

All beasts of the field – come to devour; all beasts in the forest.

His watchmen are all blind, without knowledge; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; raving, lying down, loving to slumber.

And the [attack] dogs are greedy; they cannot be satisfied;

And these shepherds [= the "leadership"] cannot understand;

They all turn to their own way, each to his gain, one and all.

“Come, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.”

The righteous one perishes, but no one takes it to heart; people of kindness are taken away with none understanding, for the righteous one is taken away from the evil to come.

Peace shall come [to the righteous one]; they rest in their beds, each one who walks in his uprightness.

But you – draw near here, you sons of the sorceress [rulers of Yehuda], the seed of the adulterer and the harlot [the entire kingdom].

Against whom do you make sport? Against whom do you make a wide mouth, and draw out the tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the seed of falsehood,

Inflaming yourselves among the terebinths, under every leafy tree; slaying the children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks? …

Even to them you have poured a drink-offering; you have offered a meal-offering. Should I console Myself for these things?

Upon a high and lofty mountain you have set your bed; you also went up there to offer sacrifice.

And behind the doors and the posts you have set up your memento [statues], for you have uncovered [your nakedness] from Me, and have gone up; you have enlarged your bed [making room for others] and forged yourself [a covenant] with some of them; you have loved their intimacy; you have sought their arm [in embrace].

And you have lavished the king with ointment [gifts], and increased your perfumes, and sent your ambassadors far off, even down to the netherworld.

You were weary with the length of your path, yet you did not give up hope… But as for Me – you have not remembered Me, nor laid it to heart…

After recounting the (shocking) execution of the "servant of God" (Chapter 53), the text goes on to elaborate on the story of Menashe's reign in greater detail. The drama starts with an invitation ("Come!") to the "beasts of the field" to confront head-on the "beasts of the forest." The onlookers who should offer warnings are "blind,” the watchdogs love to sleep, and the attack dogs[[6]](#footnote-6) are "greedy; they cannot be satisfied" (56:9-11). The "shepherds" (i.e., the leadership) "all turn to their own way, each to his gain." Both those who have profited from the situation and those who have thrown up their hands in despair have drunk themselves into a stupor, and fantasize that "tomorrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant" (ibid. 12).

Meanwhile (in Chapter 57), "the righteous one perishes, but no one takes it to heart,” and the "people of kindness" die and "rest in their beds" (57:1-2) in peace and tranquility, having been spared the sight of the ongoing debacle. What in fact is happening? Ritual harlotry and idolatry in every home, behind "the door and the post.” And the nadir of this sickness – Molekh: "slaying the children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks" (57:3-8).

At the same time, the king (of Yehuda; presumably Menashe) is busy receiving expensive gifts, conducting regional politics ("sent your ambassadors far off"), and taking steps to ensure his political and cultural survival, under Assyrian control, by assimilating into the pagan environment ("even down to the netherworld") (57:9).

Thus we see that this chapter holds the key to understanding the terrible situation of the time: the coterie surrounding Menashe (like the advisors of Achaz in his time) views Chizkiyahu's path as the primary cause leading to Sancheriv's campaign and the destruction of Lakhish and the cities of the lowlands. They therefore conclude that the proper strategy for survival is to integrate into the political and religious environment. Anyone associated with the policy and direction that were taken by Chizkiyahu is viewed as an enemy of the regime.

Yeshayahu and his disciples, who strenuously oppose the brazen paganism that has spread throughout Jerusalem, are persecuted, tortured, and executed.

**"Innocent blood" and the abominations of Menashe (2) (Chapter 59)**

The final chapter in this horrifying series of prophecies (Chapters 50-59)[[7]](#footnote-7) opens with a list of the sins of the generation of Menashe:

* The shedding of "innocent blood" (59:7);
* Robbery, violence, and deceit – "They hatch basilisks' eggs … he that eats of their eggs, dies…" (v. 5);
* And all of this is a "hiding of (God's) face,” driving a wedge between God and Yehuda: "For your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, that He will not hear [your prayers]" (v. 2).
* Clusters of prophets and their disciples have been reduced to groping in the dark: "We walk in gloom; we grope for the wall like the blind; like those without eyes do we grope; we stumble at noon as in the twilight; we are in dark places like the dead" (vv. 9-10).
* The prophets desperately seek salvation, but it is "far off from us" (v. 11).

The bitter despair of the prophet's disciples in view of Menashe's cruel, stable, and lengthy reign (55 years – *Melakhim* II 21:1) gives rise to a fearsome prophecy in which God sees that "there is no man" and manifests Himself as the Lord of vengeance:

The Supreme One of recompense, the Supreme One shall repay: fury to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies…." (vv. 15-18)

For only then will the fear of God spread "from the west… and from the rising of the sun" (v. 19):

And a redeemer will come to Tzion, and to those that turn from transgression in Yaakov, says the Lord. (v. 20)

The prophet concludes with a forging of an eternal covenant of prophetic redemption by God's word:

And as for Me, this is My covenant with them, says the Lord: My spirit that is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your children, nor out of the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, from henceforth and forever. (v. 21)

**Redemption – through righteousness and justice (Chapters 54-58)**

Returning to Chapter 54: the prophet makes just one demand of the "wife of youth" (v. 6) in order that she be worthy of her salvation and the majestic palaces that God will build for her out of "sapphires" (v. 11):

Establish yourself in righteousness; distance yourself from oppression, for you shall not fear, and from ruin, for it shall not come near you. (54:14)

This is a distinct continuation of Yeshayahu's message from the outset:

Tzion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness. (1:27)

If this demand is fulfilled, then the children of Tzion will be students of God and worthy of following His ways:

And all your children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children. (54:13)

Most of the prophecies in these chapters do not add anything new regarding the ways of God's service in relation to the very first chapter of *Yeshayahu*. God is available to those who seek Him and close to those who call upon Him – not in the Temple or via sacrifices (even while the Temple is still standing), nor even through prayer and fasting, but rather through repentance and a turning away from evil and iniquity (55:7):

Thus says the Lord: Observe justice, and perform righteousness, for My salvation is near to come, and My favor to be revealed. (56:1)

In Chapter 1 (13-15), the prophet had equated prayers and festive convocations with sacrifices and offerings, and the reading of the Torah on Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat with incense and meal offerings. God has no desire for any of these rituals unless performed by people worthy of them, with clean hands. Similarly, in Chapter 58, the prophet dismisses fasting and confession where there is no righteousness and justice. Even proper observance of Shabbat is dependent on uprightness and justice.

The prophet Amos (8:4-5) likewise denounces those who observe Shabbat but await its departure so as to return to their deceit in the marketplace. Yeshayahu expresses the same message repeatedly (1:13-17; 58:13-14).

Nothing has changed in the approach of Yeshayahu (and his disciples) regarding the proper way to seek God. The quest for God does not cost money (58:1-2), and it brings benefits in the form of the "nourishment" and "water" of uprightness and justice, thereby ensuring the endurance of the "everlasting covenant; the sure mercies of David" (55:3).

The models of serving God emphasized at the time of the Return to the land (from Chaggai to Malakhi) appear nowhere in Chapters 40-66 of *Yeshayahu*. The religious revival of Ezra the Scribe (*Nechemia* 8-10), along with the prophecies of Malakhi, focus the service of God on reading the Torah, fasting, confession, tithing, sacrifices that are not despised, and taking care in the sphere of marriages – i.e., remaining within the bounds of halakha and all precautionary measures to preserve Jewish lineage (*Ezra* 9-10). All this is very different from the seeking of God in *Yeshayahu* (throughout the *sefer*), which occurs principally through “righteousness and justice.”

Yet they seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways; as a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the law of their God, they ask of Me righteous laws; they seek to draw near to God. (58:2)

**Jews becoming assimilated and foreigners converting (Chapter 56)**

When it comes to the pathways of serving God, there are no differences between the earlier and later chapters of *Sefer Yeshayahu* – but a new and surprising prophetic concept does appear in Chapter 56, out of a completely new Jewish reality. The exile (which, as mentioned, had begun with the Assyrian deportations from Shomron and the lowlands of Yehuda) brought masses of Jews into close, daily contact with foreigners – both within the boundaries of *Eretz Yisrael* and outside of them. On one hand, this led to situations where Jews became assimilated and worshipped idols, or fell into captivity and were enslaved. On the other hand, a phenomenon appeared whereby foreigners became interested in Judaism. Just as there have been Jews throughout the exiles who have grown distant from their religious heritage, at the same time, there have always been non-Jews who have been powerfully impacted by the spectacle of the Jewish family and the Shabbat. And the prospect of welcoming and embracing them was always accompanied by profound concerns.

Jewish captives, castrated so that they could serve queens and princesses without the kings and princes having to worry (as described in *Megillat Esther*), lost the possibility of producing progeny. At the same time, those belonging to the category of “the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord” (56:3) felt like outcasts in relation to established Jewish families, who sought to avoid marriages that could stain their lineage in any way. Both of these categories cried out their pain: what was the use of observing Shabbat, even on a firm basis of righteousness and justice, as demanded by the prophet, if there could not be no continuity through Jewish family and progeny?

Human continuity is embodied in progeny with names: “so shall your seed and your name remain” (66:22).

Animals, too, have progeny, but biological continuity on its own is meaningless for humans without the memory that is connected to names. People remember names, and names are stronger than seed: sometimes friends or students remember someone who has passed away more than the person’s biological offspring do.

Therefore, the prophet addresses both Jewish eunuchs on one hand, and foreigners “who joined themselves to the Lord” on the other, and promises continuity of “an everlasting memorial (*shem* – lit. ‘name’), that shall not be cut off,” a “memorial (*yad va-shem*)better than sons and daughters” (56:3-7).

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In our times, with the annihilation of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, similar questions arose with regard to thousands of families of long-established Jewish lineage that were cut off completely, on one hand, and families of mixed marriages that have made *Aliya*, on the other. The State of Israel, as the State of the ingathering of the exiles, the State of the survivors, created the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum to create a tangible memorial within the city of Jerusalem for all future generations; at the same time, Israel is ready to absorb (in accordance with the Law of Return) all descendants of a Jewish grandparent – all those who the Nazis regarded as Jews and therefore condemned to die.

Yad Vashem on one hand, and the Law of Return on the other, are clear evidence of the realization of the words of the prophets of Israel in the State of Israel.

**“Why have we fasted, yet You did not see?” (58:3) – Pathways of repair and repentance (Chapter 58)**

The fundamental concept underlying a fast is equality – the principle that we are all created in the image of God. When we fast, everyone is hungry; when we are suffering, our differences are set aside. In contrast, when some people eat sumptuous banquets while others have to suffice with dry bread, society is plagued by socio-economic gaps and competition; the weak are trampled, and injustice and oppression become routine.

A day of fasting can become a springboard for change and repair, *if* we properly understand the day’s significance and act accordingly. But if the fast day becomes a ceremonial performance, with a “fist of evil” (58:4) beating upon an inflated chest full of scheming, competition, and evil, then the fast has no value.

A critical question here is what the less fortunate sectors will eat at the end of the fast: will the hunger and affliction simply go on and on? If the stronger, wealthier elements of society experience the fast as a single ceremonial day, while the destitute experience it as a permanent way of life, God will not accept the fast or its prayers and ceremonial confessions.

Fasting is not a later religious idea, born in the Babylonian exile. Admittedly, while Shabbat is a Divine command, most fast days were established at man’s initiative – but already at the time of King Achav, the queen (seeking to have Navot executed on false grounds) sends letters saying, “Proclaim a fast, and set Navot at the head of the people” (*Melakhim* I 21:9). Even the people of Nineveh proclaim a fast and wear sackcloth when they hear God’s decree as spoken by Yona (*Yona* 3:5-10).

There is something that Shabbat and fasts share in common: Shabbat, too, is based on the idea of equality. It is a time to set aside social and economic competition, a time when equality is strengthened. But if people spend Shabbat planning the continuation of the rat race, with continued injustice, then there is no value to Shabbat.

The same criticism expressed by Amos (8:4-7) towards those who “observe” Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh but wait impatiently for the resumption of trade conducted with deceit, is also sounded by Yeshayahu and his disciples (in 1:13-17 and in 58:13-14), in relation to Shabbat as well as fasting and prayer. Proper, sincere Divine service is measured in terms of righteousness and justice.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Chapters 50-59 should be read as a single unit; the division into separate chapters does not accurately reflect the content. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bavli Yevamot* 49b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The sole defense of Menashe that I was able to find in Tanakh is not his surrender, which is recorded in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II (33:12-13) but of which there is no hint in *Melakhim* and *Yirmiyahu* (15), but rather the fact that he rose to power at the age of twelve (*Melakhim* II 21:1). His age indicates that the blame lies mainly with the adult ministers who surrounded him – seemingly, outspoken opponents of the path taken by Chizkiyahu. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ramban describes the disputation in detail, including his commentary on this chapter. See *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. I, p. 299-326. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is impossible to explain a single verse of this chapter in accordance with the approach of secular biblical scholarship, which understands Chapters 40-66 of *Yeshayahu* as belonging to some later prophet. Indeed, Yechezkel Kaufman (*Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisraelit*, 5732, vol. VIII, p. 139) writes that Yeshayahu’s rebuke here looks back on the sins of the past, as in *Sefer Yechezkel*. However, in truth this is the time of the prophet Yeshayahu and his disciples, during the reign of Menashe. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Repressive regimes have always made use of fearsome attack dogs. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The focus of discussion on the prophecies of "Cyrus," and the theological polemic surrounding the "servant of God," have generally deflected attention from the description of the period of Menashe that is set forth in terrible clarity in Chapters 50-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)