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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag**

HAFTARA -- Sefer Yirmiyahu -part two

Does God talk to His people through historical events?
And if He does, how are we supposed to interpret His message?

That is certainly a major question today, no less than it was during the time period of Yirmiyahu.

In the following shiur, as we discuss Yirmiyahu's rebuke of the nation prior to the destruction of the Temple, we will find several examples of how our prophets had already dealt with that question several thousand years ago.

[If you read 'between the lines', you may notice how their message may be no less applicable today.]

INTRODUCTION

In last week's shiur, we explained how Yirmiyahu's rebuke to the nation fell on deaf ears, as the people felt sure that they were worshipping God in the proper manner (in the Bet ha'Mikdash).

Nevertheless, a cursory reading of Yirmiyahu chapter two, certainly leaves us with the impression that the people of Israel were ardent idol worshipers - and it was primarily that sin (of idol worship) that angered God so much - that He allowed His Temple to be destroyed, and His nation to be exiled. [e.g. see 2:5, 11, 27-28]

So why was the nation punished? What sins led to the Temple's destruction? And why does the navi [prophet] accuse 'devout Jews' of 'idol worship'?

To answer these questions, we undertake a careful reading of that chapter, while considering its historical setting.

THE 'TIME SET' -

Let's begin by returning to the opening lines of Sefer Yirmiyahu, to pinpoint when and why Yirmiyahu began to deliver his prophecies.

"The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiyah ... to whom God had spoken in the days of Yoshiyahu the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the **thirteenth year of his reign**...(see 1:1-3)

This opening date - the 13th year of Yoshiyahu - is more than just a 'technicality'; for according to Divrei Ha'Yamim II (see 34:1-4), that year coincides with the beginning of Yoshiyahu's great reform - when he abolishes idolatry, reversing the policy of his father [Amon / see D.H. II 33:21-25].

To get a feel for how zealous Yoshiyahu was to rid Israel from idol worship, let's take a quick look at how Sefer Divrei ha'Yamim describes early years of his reign:

"Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem. And he did that which was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father....

In the **eightth year of his reign**, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father...

In the **twelfth year** he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the BAMOT [high places], and the Asherim, and the graven images, and the molten images." (see 34:1-3)

DESTROYING THE IDOLS / RENOVATING THE TEMPLE

This 'reform' was more than just philosophical. The people 'took to the streets' - destroying all forms of idol worship. Pay careful attention to how idol worship was totally eradicated at this time, not only in Judah, but also up north as well:

"And they broke down the altars of the Baalim in his presence; and the sun-images, that were on high above them, he hewed down; and the Asherim, and the graven images, and the molten images, he broke in pieces, and made dust of them, and strewed it upon the graves of them

that had sacrificed unto them. And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and purged Judah and Jerusalem.

And so he did in the cities of Manasseh and Ephraim and Shimom, even unto Naphtali, with their axes round about. And he broke down the altars, and beat the Asherim and the graven images into powder, and hewed down all the sun-images throughout all the land of Israel, and returned to Jerusalem" (see 34:4-8)

Only six years later, Yoshiyahu begins a total renovation of the Bet ha'Mikdash - as it had been neglected during the time period of Menashe and Amon. During that renovation, they found a copy of an original Sefer Torah from the time of Moshe Rabeinu - and event that Yoshiyahu used to further instill the people with the need to repent and return to devout worship of God. [See Divrei ha'Yamim II chapters 34 & 35 for complete details!]

It's rather clear from the description of this time-period in Divrei ha'Yamim, that during the 13th year of the reign of Yoshiyahu - idol worship in Judah was 'out'. So what is Yirmiyahu complaining about?

THE FALL OF ASHUR [& THE RETURN TO ZION]

As you read the above psukim, you may have wondered (if you know your Jewish history) why Yoshiyahu traveled as far north as far north as Menashe & Naphtali (the northern Shomron & Gallil) to destroy the idols (see again D.H. II 34:6-7). After all, Yoshiyahu's reign was many decades after the Ten Tribes had been exiled by Ashur (during the time period of his great grandfather Chizkiyahu). Were there Jews still living in the Shomron some seventy years later?

To answer this question, once again we must consider the historical setting - for it was precisely during the reign of Yoshiyahu when the great empire of Ashur began to crumble. Their great city of Ninveh had fallen, leaving a vacuum in the military control of Mesopotamia - which provided an opportunity for some of the Assyrian Exile to return. In fact, Chazal claim that Yirmiyahu himself went on a mission to Mesopotamia to encourage their return! [See Megilla 14b, and Radak on II Melachim 22:14. See also Yirmiyahu 3:11-14!]

THE 'TESHUV' DURING THE TIME PERIOD OF YOSHIYAHU

From this perspective, the time period of Yoshiyahu could be considered no less than 'messianic'. The empire of Ashur, Israel's greatest enemy had fallen. The Exile had begun its return. Israel's borders were expanding. The King was just and upright; idol worship was eradicated. Was this the redemption that Issiah had envisioned? Was the worst over?

The people of Judah had every reason to think so. They returned to God, renovated His Temple, and became dedicated to its rituals and service (simply read Melachim II chapter 23). Religious observance was on the rise, and so too the spirit of nationalism.

Nevertheless, the prophets (such as Chulda / see Melachim II 22:14-16 and Tzefania, as well as Yimiyahu) realized that their "teshuva" [repentance] was only skin deep. They warned the people that calamity was forthcoming, should they not perform proper "teshuva". But their words fell of deaf ears, as the people were convinced that they had repented - for they had returned to ritual.

As the years passed, redemption remained incomplete. Israel began to suffer from attacks by their local enemies. - But who was to blame for these calamities, God or the people?

The people think that as long as they perform all the rituals, i.e. as long as they offer the proper sacrifices and pray for the redemption of Israel - God should (and will) continue to assist them. The prophets must explain, that there is much more to Judaism than the offering of sacrifices, and praying for prosperity. God **also** expects His nation to act in a manner that is just and upright - to become a model nation, characterized by exemplary behavior, acting in the ways of "tzedek u'mishpat". [See Breishit 18:17-19.] Without that, their sacrifices and prayers become meaningless.

With this in mind, let's return to our study of Sefer Yirmiyahu, to better appreciate why the navi accuses the nation of idol worship - even though they don't appear to be worshipping other gods.

'WHERE' IS GOD - OR WHY IS HE NOT 'HERE'!

Yirmiyahu's opening rebuke, that begins in 2:4, accuses the people for blaming God for their misfortune:

"ma matzu avoteichem **bi** avel" - What fault did you find in Me - that caused you to distance yourself [from God]?"

[See 2:4-5, note that 1:1 thru 2:3 discusses the navi's appointment, while his actual rebuke of the people begins in 2:4. Based on the story in Yirmiyahu chapter 36, it seems that 2:4 was the opening line of the "megillat sefer" the Yirmiyahu read to the people in the bet ha'Mikdash, when they gathered on a fast day.]

In the next pasuk, the navi accuses the present generation for following in the crooked ways of the forefathers, who didn't 'appreciate' God for taking them out of Egypt:

"Neither did they say: **'Where** is the God that brought us up out of the land of Egypt; that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts.... And I brought you into a land of fruitful fields, to eat the fruit... but when ye entered, you defiled My land, and made My heritage an abomination"

Then he invokes a similar complaint about the leaders of the people:

"the **kohanim** did not ask: **'Where** is God' - and the **teachers of the Torah** did not **know Me!** - and the **leaders** transgressed against Me; and the **prophets** also prophesied by Baal..." (see 2:6-8)

At first glance, the opening rebuke has nothing to do with these lines that follow. First, he accuses the nation for 'blaming God' for their misfortune - then he complains that they did not search (or look) for God at all. Are these two separate complaints?

In our above quotes, we have translated the Hebrew word **"ayeh"** as 'where' [as most all English translations do].

However, that translation may not be so accurate, for "ayeh" in Hebrew does not always imply a simple "where". In Hebrew, if you want to ask 'where' something is - the word is "aifo"; while if you enquire why something is not here - the word is "ayeh".

[For example, when Yitzchak (on his way to the Akeyda) wants to know why there is no lamb; he asks his father "ayeh ha'seh l'Olah" - he doesn't want to know 'where' the lamb is, rather, he wants to know why the lamb is not here. On the other hand, when Yosef is searching for his brothers, he asks the stranger "aifo heyim ro'im" - where are they grazing their sheep - implying where are they - i.e. at what location.]

If this understanding is correct, then when Yirmiyahu accuses the nation for not asking **"ayeh Hashem..."** - this implies that he is bothered because the nation has not asked: Why has God not been with us, i.e. why is He not helping us (as He had done when He had taken us out of Egypt). Stated more simply, Yirmiyahu is angry at the people for blaming God when calamity befell them, rather than blaming themselves.

Yirmiyahu is trying to tell the people that calamity that befalls the nation should be understood as sign from God that He is disappointed by their behavior, and hence the need to repent properly. The people counter that they are angry with God, for they feel that He should have helped them, especially in lieu of the numerous offerings that they bring to the Temple.

From a prophetic perspective, this attitude - that by ritual alone, one can (and should) expect God's favor - is equivalent to idol worship, thus allowing Yirmiyahu (and other prophets as well) to be so harsh in their criticism - accusing a 'devout nation' of idol worship, as they stand before Him in His own Temple (see again Yirmiyahu chapter 7).

WHAT ARE THE TEACHERS DOING WRONG?

Yirmiyahu's censure of the "kohanim" - who officiate in the bet Hamikdash - for not asking this same question "ayeh Hashem" (see 2:8) can be understood in the same manner; however, what is his criticism of the "tofsei ha'Torah" - those who uphold (or teach) the Torah - that they don't **KNOW** God ["lo y'dauni"/ see 2:8)?

From this pasuk alone, it's unclear what this word "y'dauni" refers to, but from several other sources in Yirmiyahu, it's rather clear - and congruent with our above explanation. Later on, in chapters 8 & 9 (not by chance the Haftara for Tisha b'Av), when Yirmiyahu tries to explain why God is bringing destruction upon His people, we find both the word Torah and the concept of what it means 'to know God'. We'll selectively quote from those chapters, but it is recommended that you read them in their entirety. Yirmiyahu asks a rhetorical question:

"Why does this rebellious people refuse to return...

I attended and listened, but they spoke not aright; no man repented from his wickedness, saying: 'What have I done?'

... How can you say: 'We are wise, and the **TORAH** of God is with us?'" (see 8:5-8) ...

"And they bend their tongue, their bow of falsehood; and they are grown mighty in the land, but not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and **Me they KNOW not...**

Take heed every one of his neighbour, and trust not your own brother; for every brother acts subtly, and every neighbor goes about with slanders... (see 9:2-3)

And they deceive every one his neighbor, and truth they speak not; they have taught their tongue to speak lies, they weary themselves to commit iniquity. They live in the midst of deceit; through deceit **they refuse to KNOW Me...**" (9:4-5)

"Shall I not punish them for these things...?" (see 9:8)

Who is the wise man, that he may understand this?

Wherefore is the land perished and laid waste...?

And God said: Because they have forsaken My **TORAH** which I set before them, and have not hearkened to My voice, neither walked therein" (see 8:11-12)

Finally, pay special attention to these two final psukim (the finale of the Haftara for Tisha b'Av), for they explain precisely what it means 'to **KNOW** God':

"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; -- Rather - let him glory in this: that he understand, and **KNOW ME** - for I am the **LORD** who exercises **mercy, justice, and righteousness**, on earth; **for in these things I delight**, says the **LORD**." (see 9:22-23)

To 'know God', means to understand that He expects man to act in the ways of "chesed, tzedek u'mishpat" (see Rambam's conclusion to Moreh Nevuchim). According to Yirmiyahu, those who were teaching the Torah were teaching everything but these concepts - as they were putting all of their emphasis on ritual rather than on ethical behavior.

[See also Yirmiyahu 22:16 in its context, & Breishit 18:17-19.]

PROPHETS OF BAAL, or LIKE BAAL

In 2:8, Yirmiyahu concludes with one final rebuke to the 'prophets' - "v'ha'Neviim nibu b'Baal" - which would imply that the "neviim" - usually referring to God's prophets - were speaking on behalf of the God Baal (a well know Canaanite rain god). But why would they be doing this, if only a few years earlier, Yoshiyahu had eradicated all idol worship, including the Baalim, from the land?

It seems once again that Yirmiyahu is being sarcastic in his criticism - for he compares God's prophets - who focus only on ritual - to prophets of other gods. One could suggest a very logical reason for this comparison, for worship of Baal is a classic example of offering a sacrifice for the sake of 'return' - for if you offer Baal the proper sacrifice (their prophets claim) - Baal will provide you with rain at the proper time.

[See Hoshea 2:18-22! - You see the exact same theme!]

If the people of Israel view their own God in a similar manner, that by simply offering him "korbanot", He will provide them with their physical needs, then they are treating their God like Baal. Instead, God wants His prophets to explain that rain will come at the proper time as a function of deeds and dedication to God, and not for the sake of offerings. [Note how we emphasize this very point in our daily recitation of Kriyat Shema, as detailed in Sefer Devarim chapter 11).

These same false prophets (of God) continue to promise the people that everything will be fine -that God will help them (as long as they bring their offerings), thus misleading the people and causing them not to repent properly.

[See 8:10-12, 14:11-18, and 23:9-40.]

WHAT ARE WE DOING WRONG?

Yirmiyahu continues his censure of the nation, but to conclude the shiur - let's simply point out numerous other examples that support our above explanation - and how the people think that they are doing fine, while the navi totally disagrees. For example, Yirmiyahu asks the people:

"How can you say: 'I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baalim'? ..." (see 2:23 in its context)

Clearly, the people think that they doing nothing wrong. Similarly, to show how the people are blaming God, and how God wants them to blame themselves, note 2:29-30:

"Why do you all argue against me? You have all transgressed! - **Have I smitten your children in vain?** - They do not know how to receive rebuke; your own sword has devoured your prophets..." (see 2:29-33)

Later on:

"But you contend: 'I am innocent; surely His anger is turned away from me'--behold, I will judge you, because you say: 'I have not sinned!'" (see 2:35)

In regard to not learning from God's punishment:
"... Therefore I have withheld the showers and the 'malkosh' [late winter rain] didn't come; But you kept the forehead of a harlot - you refused to be ashamed..." (see 3:3)

Finally, let's cite one last example from a prophetic conversation that takes place in chapter three, between God and a group of returnees, who think they have repented, and God implores that their repentance is not complete:

"Hark! upon the high hills is heard the suppliant weeping of the children of Israel; for that they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the LORD their God

[GOD SAYS:]

"Return, you backsliding children, I will heal your bad ways"

[THE PEOPLE ANSWER (repenting):]

"Here we are, we have come unto You; for You are our God' ... truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel... Let us lie down in our shame, and let our confusion cover us; for we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day; and we have not hearkened to the voice of the LORD our God."

[GOD QUESTIONS:]

"If you indeed want to repent, O Israel, return unto Me; --If you will indeed put away thy detestable things out of My sight, and will not waver; And will swear in God's Name, only **in truth, in justice, and in righteousness**; then shall the nations bless themselves by Him, and in Him shall they glory." (see 3:20 thru 4:1)

However, later it appears that they did not change, for:

"As a cage is full of birds, so are their houses full of deceit; therefore they are become great, and waxen rich - yet they don't plead the cause of the orphan...and the rights of the poor do they not judge...

Shall I not punish for these things? says Hashem" (5:27-29)

period of Yoshiyahu - in an attempt to better understand the nature of Yirmiyahu's rebuke in chapter two. It was a tragic time period, for the people truly believed that they had returned to God, and hence expected that their 'redemption' would continue.

Yirmiyahu tries to explain how the people have misunderstood what God desires from them, but it doesn't seem to work.

Their 'self-righteousness' rather than 'true righteousness' had blinded them.

Let's hope that through our study of Yirmiyahu, not only during this time of the year, but also during this critical time in our national history, that we too can learn from our mistakes - and see our calamities as a signal from God that we too must re-examine ourselves, and to make every effort to act (as individuals and as a nation) in a manner that we become deserving of true redemption.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

In summary, we have considered the historical setting of time