

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #02: Chapter 2:
Daniel and his Companions in the Court of the King of Babylon

In the previous lecture, we reviewed some of the background to *Sefer Daniel* and the historical period in which the events it describes took place. Let us now return to the text itself:

The king told Ashpenaz, the chief of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel, and of the royal descendants, and of the nobles – youths who were unblemished and of fair appearance and skilled in all knowledge, discerning in knowledge and perceptive in understanding, with the ability to stand in the king's palace, to whom they might teach the knowledge and the language of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's food and of the wine which he drank, that they might be raised for three years, at the end of which they would stand before the king. And among them were of the children of Yehuda – Daniel, Chanania, Mishael, and Azaria. And the head of the eunuchs gave them names: he gave Daniel [the name] Beltshatzar; to Chanania – Shadrakh, to Mishael – Meshakh; and to Azaria – Abed Nego. (1:3-7)

From his actions, it appears that at this stage, Nevukhadnetzar has no interest in destroying the kingdom of Yehuda; all he wants is to ensure that it would be subservient to him. He takes pains to provide a Babylonian education for the children of the nobility brought from Yehuda, thereby preparing the next generation of leadership.^[1] The children brought to Babylon would, upon reaching maturity, be placed in key positions in Jerusalem. Steeped as they are in the culture of the young Babylonian kingdom, they would help to assimilate their nation into the same culture in which the king of Babylon had raised them.

The verses indicate that this assimilation includes changing names and language – two of the four elements which stood in *Bnei Yisrael's* stead in Egypt; they changed neither their names nor their language, and by virtue of this they were redeemed.^[2]

What becomes of the king's plan?

Daniel had decided that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's food, nor with the wine which he drank; and he asked of the head of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. (1:8)

Daniel manages to maintain his principles without arousing conflict with those appointed over him:

God had given Daniel grace and compassion with the head of the eunuchs, and the head of the eunuchs said to Daniel: "I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink, for why should he view you as worse off than other youths of your age? You would thereby risk my head to the king." So Daniel said to the steward whom the head of the eunuchs had appointed over Daniel, Chanania, Mishael and Azaria: "Test your servants, I pray you, for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youth who eat of the king's food be observed by you, and according to what you observe – so shall you deal with your servants." And he consented to them in this regard, and tested them for ten days. And at the end of ten days they appeared better and healthier than all of the youths who ate of the king's food. And the steward had been taking away the food they should have eaten and the wine they should have drunk, and was giving them vegetables. (1:9-16)

From the text, it appears that the "king's food" is a generous and nutritious diet, such that the youths who eat it should be readily observed to be healthy and well-fed.

Daniel refuses to eat the king's food even though there is no mention of it not being kosher. Even if we assume that the food was not kosher, it is notable that the *Tanakh* makes no mention of this transgression in other places where it would be a relevant concern. In general, *Tanakh* notes only a few transgressions, including idolatry, prohibited sexual unions, murder, transgressions against charity and justice, and desecration of Shabbat. Yishayahu does mention non-kosher food – "eating swine flesh and detestable things, and mice" (66:17) – but the context seems to indicate that it is mentioned there as part of an idolatrous ceremony, as we deduce from the beginning of the verse: "Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves at the gardens..." Why, then, does Daniel make such an issue of the food?^[3]

The *gemara* (*Avoda Zara* 36a) explains that Daniel ruled out consumption of gentile bread, oil, and wine even prior to the formal rabbinical directive in this regard, which was part of the eighteen-point decree agreed upon by the Academy of Hillel and the Academy of Shammai (*Shabbat* 17b).^[4] As proof, the *gemara* cites these verses from *Sefer Daniel*. At this time, Daniel was very young, and it is not reasonable to suggest that his decree here was binding upon all of *Klal Yisrael* for all generations; however, it is possible that his conduct and his considerations guided the Sages of later generations to follow his example and to formalize this law for the entire nation.

Why does Daniel make this "decree"? Daniel and his companions are among the first captives of the Babylonian exile, which is destined to include many more within a short time. With the wave of a cruel hand, these four youths and their group are torn from their birthplace and their heritage. A foreign culture awaits them, replete with temptations and pleasures. It is clear to Daniel and to his companions – who have already been unwillingly issued with new names – that the price of these temptations will be assimilation into the new culture. Food and drink bring distant minds closer and

emphasize that which is common to even the most disparate cultures – the reality of physical existence and desires.

Here, Daniel stands firm and declares a principle which, up to this point, would have been unimaginable - even in exile, outside of the Chosen Land and even far removed from the Chosen People, we shall remain Jews. The fence that Daniel erects against gentile foods – even if they might be technically kosher – is a fence against involvement in the life and culture of the gentiles. His example inspired the Sages of later generations to introduce a decree against the bread, oil, and wine of non-Jews.^[5]

Daniel was not the first youth to be torn from his family and birthplace and taken to a foreign land. He was preceded by Yosef, and the links between these two characters pervade all of *Sefer Daniel*. Yosef's challenge concerned the temptations of a woman forbidden to him:

And it was, as she spoke to Yosef day by day, that he did not listen to her, to lie with her, to be with her. (*Bereishit* 39:10)

Rashi views Yosef's main challenge as concerning adultery with a married woman, and Ramban praises him primarily for his loyalty to his master, who had put his faith in him. But the Midrash appears to view Yosef's test in terms of the opportunity afforded him to forget his father's home and to assimilate into the nation and culture in which he now found himself, thereby starting a new, Egyptian chapter of his life:

"She caught him by his garment, saying" – At that moment, an image of his father came and appeared to him at the window, and said to him: Yosef, your brothers are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the *efod*, with you among them. Do you want your name to be erased from among them, and to be called a caller on prostitutes?... Immediately, "his bow remained firm." (*Sota* 36b)

By standing firm in this face of the difficult test, Yosef declared: Despite having been exiled from the Holy Land and separated from my Hebrew family, I remain a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, God of the heavens.^[6]

The test of the foreign woman is the test of assimilation – the prospect of parting permanently, for all generations, from the Jewish People. Daniel and his companions, according to the text, are young – too young, perhaps, to be seduced by the temptations of a woman. Their test concerns the temptations of food and drink; after all, these too are stations on the road to assimilation: "They decreed [a prohibition] on gentile bread and oil because of [gentile] wine, and [decreed against] their wine because of their daughters" (*Shabbat* 17b).

This slippery slope is clearly demonstrated in the episode recounted in the Torah at the end of *Parashat Balak*:

Yisrael dwelled in Shittim, and the people began there to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav. And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate, and they prostrated themselves to their gods. (*Bamidbar* 25:1-2)
This is precisely what God had warned against:

Lest you forge a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go astray after their gods and offer sacrifices to their gods, and they call you and you eat of their sacrifice; and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters go astray after their gods, causing your sons to go astray after their gods. (*Shemot* 34:15-16)

Food, foreign women, and idolatry are all part of the same threat.

Thus, Yosef and Daniel are similar insofar as they represent the initial exiles, preceding the rest of their generation – to Egypt and to Babylon, respectively – paving the way, through their selfless acts, to an avoidance of assimilation among the nations.

The comparison between the story of Yosef and that of Daniel also leads us to a contrast: Yosef, after setting a personal example in the struggle against assimilation by resisting Potifar's wife, goes on to make every effort to settle his brothers in the distant region of Goshen. To this end, he is even prepared to pay the price of presenting them as shepherds, an abomination in the eyes of the Egyptians - rejecting the convenient option of appointing them to senior positions in the Egyptian administration, as proposed by Pharaoh.^[7] Daniel, in contrast, upon rising to power in the wake of his interpretation of Nevukhadnetzar's dream, asks the king to appoint his three companions as royal ministers (*Daniel* 2:49), apparently harboring no fear that this will lead to their assimilation. Indeed, all three of them withstand the test of the golden idol in the plain of Dura, as we shall see.

*

The great test of Daniel's decree came a few generations later, in the days of Achashverosh, at the 180-day banquet and at the party afterwards:

Why were the enemies of Israel [a euphemism for Israel] in that generation deserving of annihilation?... Because they partook of the banquet of that wicked man [Achashverosh]. (*Megilla* 12a)

What in fact did that banquet lead to?

While the [nobles of the] different nations were eating and drinking, they occupied themselves with inane matters, one praising the beauty of Mede women, another praising the beauty of Persian women. The fool [Achashverosh] said to them: "The woman whose pleasures I enjoy is neither a Mede nor a Persian, but rather a Chaldean. Do you wish to see her?" They said to him, "Yes,

and let her be naked.” He told them, “So be it; she shall appear naked.” (*Esther Rabba* 3)[8]

The excess of food and wine led the participants into a vapid discussion of women, with its inevitable outcome.

*

All of this proceeds from the assumption that Daniel refused the king's food even if, technically, it was permissible to eat. Obviously, though, there is reason to doubt the *kashrut* of the meat served in the court of the Babylonian king. This being so, Daniel, in his refusal to touch the royal food, offers us an understanding of the midrashic teaching:

R. Yishmael taught: Transgression dulls a person's heart, as it is written, “You shall not make yourselves unclean with them [forbidden foods] and thereby become defiled (*ve-nitmetem*)” – do not read the word “*ve-nitmetem*,” but rather “*ve-nitamtem*” (“and thereby become dulled”). (*Yoma* 39a)

Chazal teach that forbidden foods dull a person's heart. Daniel and his companions, the only individuals among the group of youths who refused to defile themselves with the king's food, would appear to embody this teaching:

And the steward had been taking away the good they should have eaten and the wine they should have drunk, and was giving them vegetables. As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and skill in every type of knowledge and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in every type of vision and dreams. (1:16-17)

The juxtaposition of these verses indicates that these youths are granted wisdom because they did not defile themselves with forbidden foods, thereby implying that those who do defile themselves thus become dull-hearted – as in *Chazal's* interpretation of the verse in *Vayikra*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] Later, at the end of the Second Temple Period, there were kings of the Herodian dynasty who had been raised in the court of the Roman Caesar and conducted themselves according to its dictates.

[2] See *Shemot Rabba* 1, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 11, and many other *midrashim*. The other two elements were distancing themselves from improper sexual relationships and from gossip.

[3] Malbim (verse 8) maintains that even the bread given to them was part of idolatrous practices, and for this reason they would not compromise on this issue. We will adopt a different interpretation.

[4] The *gemara* discusses the question of why the prohibition of these gentile foods was, in effect, instituted twice. We shall not elaborate on this here; see also *Yerushalmi Avoda Zara* 2:8 and *Yerushalmi Shabbat* 1:4.

[5] The eighteen decrees of the Academies of Hillel and Shammai were instituted at a time when foreign elements and foreign culture were spreading inexorably throughout the country. Even prior to that, the

generation of the Maccabees had followed Daniel's example in their readiness to give up their lives rather than eat meat not slaughtered properly; we will discuss this at greater length in a *shiur* on the end of the *Sefer*.

[6] It is possible that the Ramban's interpretation, emphasizing Yosef's loyalty to his master, also returns to this same idea. Parting from Yaakov's household also means parting from his attributes of truth and loyalty, as demonstrated during Yaakov's period of labor for Lavan: "For these past twenty years that I have been with you, your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, nor have I eaten the rams of the flock. I did not bring to you that which was torn by wild beasts - I bore the loss of it; you were able to require it of my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was – in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and sleep fled from my eyes" (*Bereishit* 31:38-40). Temptation by Potifar's wife is an abandonment of Yaakov's path, in favor of a disgraceful betrayal of his master.

[7] See *Bereishit* 46:31-47:11.

[8] On this subject and on the many links between the story of Esther and the story of Daniel, see my article "Mordekhai Did Not Bow Down, Nor Prostrate Himself – Why?" in A. Bazak (ed.), *Hadassa Hi Ester* (Alon Shvut, 5757), pp. 151-70.