

SEFER DANIEL
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Shiur #07: Chapter 5a – The Golden Idol

1. The Decree

Chapter 3 does not deal openly with Daniel, but rather with his three colleagues – Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya – who sanctified God's Name by refusing to bow to the idol that Nevukhadnetzar had set up. There is a common denominator linking the three narratives that concern Nevukhadnetzar – his first dream, his second dream, and, in between, the story of the idol in the plain of Dura, which we will discuss here. These early chapters constitute a series of narratives describing how Nevukhadnetzar came to recognize the supremacy of God's Kingship. Perhaps there is also another common factor – Daniel. Although his name is not mentioned explicitly, he may be the fourth, anonymous person who walks about in the furnace together with Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya.^[1] Alternatively, it is possible that the text is not presenting a series of narratives, but rather a single narrative of three chapters.

Let us examine the episode of the idol:

Nevuchadnetzar the king made an image of gold: its height was sixty cubits, its breadth was six cubits; he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. And Nevuchadnetzar the king sent to gather together the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nevuchadnetzar the king had set up. Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces gathered together for the dedication of the image that Nevuchadnetzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And the herald cried aloud: "To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the golden image that Nevuchadnetzar the king has set up. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be thrown on the spot in the midst of the burning fiery furnace!" Therefore, when all the people heard the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, and all kinds of music, then all the peoples, the nations, and the languages fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nevuchadnetzar the king had set up. (*Daniel* 3:1-7)

In his first dream, Nevukhadnetzar had seen an image whose head was made of gold, its trunk and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of brass, and its legs of iron and clay. Daniel had interpreted the dream as showing symbols of the nations which would

replace the "golden head" – Nevukhadnetzar and his Babylonian kingdom – and rule in its stead. Perhaps Nevukhadnetzar was now reacting to this interpretation, which was altogether not to his liking, by building an image that was all gold, from head to toe, to symbolize a Babylonian kingdom that would continue forever, invincible, with no nation nor any god able to defeat it.[\[2\]](#)

Can an artificial image constructed for a specific reason compete with an image viewed in a dream? If a dream shows us meaningless things or reflections of our own thoughts, then surely there is no need for such a huge investment in order to compete with it! If, on the other hand, a dream conveys God's message to man, then of what use is an inanimate idol?

If Nevukhadnetzar put so much into this image, it means that it could influence the results of the dream. Here, it would seem, it is not the image itself that is of central importance, but rather the achievement of having all the peoples and languages bow down to it simultaneously, thereby acknowledging the unquestioned kingship of the creator of the image – Nevukhadnetzar and his Babylonian kingdom. Once they acknowledged this in an obligatory ceremony, a future attempt to retract their recognition of Nevukhadnetzar as king and inherit his kingdom would have no historical validity, nor any national validity.

Nevukhadnetzar's image does not solve the principal danger portrayed in the dream. The danger lies not in the silver, brass, or iron kingdoms that would replace the Babylonian kingdom of gold, but rather in the stone that is cut out and grinds up all of these kingdoms – symbolizing God's Kingship and its manifestation in the Kingdom of Israel. Despite this, it may be that Nevukhadnetzar's idol was designed even to solve the problem of the future victory of God's Kingship. For if all of Israel would now recognize Nevukhadnetzar's idol, they would be subjugated to it, from a spiritual and religious point of view, and the possibility of God's Kingship would leave this world and rise to the heavens.

The idea that the people's act of bowing down to Nevukhadnetzar's idol blocks any future possibility of extricating themselves mentally and spiritually from his reign would alone have been sufficient, even had the idol not taken the form of an entirely golden image to compete with the image in the dream. However, the compounding of the two images – the one seen in the dream and the other which Nevukhadnetzar uses to fight against it in reality, along with the king's religious repression of his subjects – creates a winning combination in both the upper worlds and the earthly reality.

Nevukhadnetzar's plan, then, was an excellent one. But three Jews – Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya – disturbed it by consistently refusing to bow down to the idol:

Therefore, at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and brought accusation against the Jews. They spoke and said to Nevuchadnetzar the king: "O king, live for ever! You, O king, made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music shall fall

down and worship the golden image; anyone who does not bow down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon – Shadrack, Meshack, and Abed-nego; these men, O king, have shown no regard for you. They do not serve your gods, nor do they worship the golden image which you set up." (3:8-12)

Just three Jews. Can a mere three men pose a threat to the king's plan which is obeyed by the entire world? Apparently they can. In time, Haman, son of Hamedata the Aggagite, would likewise grow infuriated that the entire kingdom was bowing down to him except for a certain individual:

Haman recounted for them the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all about how the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king. And Haman said further, "Even Esther the queen let no one come in with the king to the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and tomorrow, too, I am invited to her, together with the king. But all of this is of no avail to me, so long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." (*Esther* 5:11-13)

We will address this comparison at length later on.

Nevukhadnetzar attempts to coax the three to give in and to bow down to his idol, along with everyone else. They stand by their refusal, are cast into the fiery furnace, are miraculously saved from harm, and lead Nevukhadnetzar to proclaim publicly the supremacy of God's Kingship over his own kingship.

2. Avraham and Nimrod

What the text records as having taken place between Nevukhadnetzar and these three Jews is recounted by *Chazal* as also having taken place some fourteen hundred years previously, between Nimrod, king of Babylon, and Avram the Ivri – our forefather Avraham:

He [Terach] took him and handed him over to Nimrod, who said to him, "Worship the fire." Avraham answered him, "Then should I worship water, which extinguishes fire?" Nimrod said to him, "So worship water!" He answered, "Then let me worship the clouds, which carry the water." He said to him, "Worship the clouds!" He replied, "Then let us worship the wind, which scatters the clouds." He said, "Worship the wind!" He replied, "Then let us worship man, who withstands the wind." He said to him, "You talk too much. I worship only fire; I shall cast you into it, and let the God whom you worship come and save you." (*Bereishit Rabba* 38:13)

It is difficult to find any textual allusion to this story of the furnace in relation to Avraham. On the face of it, it would seem that *Chazal* simply "copied" the experience of Chanania,

Mishael, and Azarya to the life of Avraham.[3] Since there seems to be little connection between the "victims" – Avraham on the one hand and the three men on the other – the link would seem to lie in the comparison between Nimrod, the ancient king of Babylon, and Nevukhadnetzar, the new Babylonian king.

The whole earth was of one language and of one speech. And it happened, as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shin'ar and they settled there... And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and we shall make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth." ... Therefore the name of it was called "Bavel," for there God confounded (*balal*) the language of all the earth, and from there God scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (*Bereishit* 11:1-8)

The sin here is not immediately apparent. However, this narrative does shed light on a different matter – the elaboration in the list of Noach's descendants:

And Kush bore Nimrod; he began to be a mighty on in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before God; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod – a mighty hunter before God." And the beginning of his kingdom was Babylon, and Erekh and Akkad and Kalneh in the land of Shin'ar. (*ibid.* 10:8-10)

Nimrod was the first king of Babylon, and it was at his orders that the people commenced building the tower, inviting God's fierce response.

Chazal seem to hint to the connection between Nimrod's tower of Bavel and Nevukhadnetzar's golden image:

R. Yochanan ben Zakkai said: What reply did a heavenly voice give to that wicked one [Nevukhadnetzar (Rashi ad loc.)] when he said, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High" (*Yeshayahu* 14:14)? A heavenly voice emerged and said to him, "[You are a] wicked one, son of a wicked one, descendant of the wicked Nimrod, who caused the entire world to rebel against Me with his kingship." (*Pesachim* 94a-b)

This would suggest that Nevukhadnetzar, too, sought to rise to heaven, "above the heights of the clouds."^[4]

Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the similarity between the tower, with its top in heaven, and Nevukhadnetzar's image, which stands sixty cubits tall – the equivalent of a modern 12-story building. While this falls short of the "tower with its head in the heavens" that was planned by the builders in Babylon under the rule of Nimrod, if we consider that the entire image was made of pure gold and built using the construction technologies of the time, Nevukhadnetzar's image may have been an edifice no less impressive than that of Nimrod. Many of the *Rishonim* assert that it was "a monument to honor the king;"^[5] we may therefore suppose that at the top, at a height of sixty cubits, there appeared a likeness of Nevukhadnetzar's face, all in pure gold.

(To be continued)

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[1] This is what Abarbanel maintains (*ma'ayan* 6, *tamar* 3) in his second explanation. R. Sa'adia Gaon adopts the explanation proposed on the *gemara* (*Pesachim* 118a) that the fourth figure was the angel Gavriel. Rashi appears to hint to this too. See also Abarbanel in his first explanation.

[2] Based on the explanation of R. Sa'adia Gaon and the Malbim (3:1). Abarbanel (*ma'ayan* 6, *tamar* 3) provides a similar explanation, suggesting that Nevukhadnetzar believed that dreams were realized in accordance with their interpretation, and that he was capable of interpreting the dream about the image in his own way. We adopt a very different approach here.

[3] The connection between the two narratives is made explicit in the *gemara*: "When the wicked Nimrod cast Avraham into the fiery furnace, [the angel] Gavriel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Master of the universe, let me go down and cool the fire and save the righteous one from the fiery furnace.' God said to him, 'I stand alone in My world, and he stands alone in his world; it is appropriate that the One Alone [on High] should save the one alone [down below].' But because God does not withhold reward from any of His creations, He said: 'You will merit to save three of his descendants'" (*Pesachim* 118a). The reference there, as explained in the *gemara*, is to Chanania, Mishael, and Azarya.

[4] For further discussion of the parallel between Nimrod and Nevukhadnetzar, see Tosafot, *Chagiga* 13a, s.v. "*ben beno*" (and see also note there); Maharsha ad loc., *Chiddushei Aggadot* ("*Nimrod*").

[5] See, for example, Tosafot, *Pesachim* 53b. We will elaborate further on this later on.