

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #12: Chapter 7a:
Nevukhadnetzar's Second Dream

1. The Dream, the Interpretation, and the Advice

“Nevuchadnetzar the king of all peoples, nations, and languages that live in all the earth; much peace unto you. I see fit to declare the signs and wonders that the Most High God has wrought for me. How great are His signs, and how mighty are His wonders! His Kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation. I, Nevuchadnetzar, was at rest in my house, and flourishing in my palace. I saw a dream which made me afraid; and my imaginings upon my bed and the visions of my head frightened me. I therefore issued a decree to bring all the wise men of Babylon before me, that they might make known to me the meaning of the dream. Then came the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers, and I told the dream before them, but they did not tell me its interpretation. Last to come before me was Daniel, whose name was Beltshatzar, like the name of my god, with the spirit of the holy gods in him, and I told him the dream. Beltshatzar, master of the magicians, concerning whom I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no secret troubles you: tell me the vision of the dream that I have seen, and its interpretation.” (3:31-4:6)

Unlike the first dream, the context here is described only briefly, with more extensive attention to the dream itself, its meaning, and its realization.

Thus were the visions of my head upon my bed: I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, of great height. The tree grew, and was strong, and its height reached heaven, and it could be seen to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit plentiful; in it was food for all. The beasts of the field sat in its shade, and the birds of the heaven rested in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. I saw in the visions of my head upon my bed, and, behold, a watcher and a holy one came down from heaven. He cried loudly, saying thus: 'Cut down the tree, and shear off its branches, shake off its leaves, and scatter its fruit; let the beasts move from under it, and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, in a band of iron and brass, amidst the grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts, of the grass of the earth. Let his heart be changed from a man's, and let a beast's heart be given to him; and let seven seasons pass over him. This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the holy ones; to the intent that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men,

and He gives it to whoever He desires, setting up over it the lowest of men.' This dream I, king Nevuchadnetzar, saw; you, Beltshatzar, declare its interpretation, since all the wise men of my kingdom are unable to tell me the interpretation. But you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you." (4:7-15)

Once again, as in our earlier discussion (chapter 3) of the dream of Pharaoh's butler, the dream appears fairly easy to understand: a tree whose heart (before the change) is the heart of a man must symbolize a man. The tremendous power of the tree and its influence over the entire earth can point only to Nevukhadnetzar – especially since it is Nevukhadnetzar who experiences the dream, and the dream is about him. The content, concerning a man who needs to be taught knowledge of God's rule, is likewise better suited to Nevukhadnetzar than to anyone else. Can it be possible that Nevukhadnetzar did not understand the meaning of the dream, and that he was truly in need of outside interpretation? Could his wise men and magicians possibly not have understood what it meant? Was Daniel's Divine inspiration really required for this?

Strangely enough, even Daniel himself has difficulty spelling out what the dream means:

Then Daniel, whose name was Beltshatzar, was dumbfounded for one hour, and his thoughts terrified him. The king spoke and said, "Beltshatzar, let the dream and its interpretation not terrify you." Beltshatzar answered and he said, "My lord, the dream is for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies." (4:16)

With the king's encouragement, Daniel overcomes his fear and declares the meaning of the dream:

"The tree that you saw, which grew and was strong, and whose height reached the heaven, and which could be seen throughout the earth; whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit plentiful, with food in it for all; the beasts of the field sitting in its shade and the birds of the heaven resting in its branches – it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong, and your greatness has increased and reaches the heaven, and your dominion extends to the ends of the earth. And as to the king having seen a watcher and holy one descending from the heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the ground, in a band of iron and brass, amid the grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of the heaven and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, until seven seasons pass over him' – this is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord, the king. You shall be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling will be with the beasts of the field, and you shall be made to eat grass like oxen, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven seasons shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of man, and He gives it to whom He wishes. And as for it being said that the stump of the roots of the tree be left – your kingdom shall stand in wait for you, after you come to know that the heavens rule."

Daniel's greatness here lies not in his wisdom, but in the courage required to utter this harsh forecast before the seemingly omnipotent ruler, with no attempt to hide the seriousness of the message and its implications. Nevukhadnetzar understood the meaning of the dream quite well, but could not bring himself to acknowledge its interpretation to himself. His ministers, likewise, understood what the dream meant but dared not verbalize it, fearing for their lives.

A prophet and interpreter of dreams through God's spirit is marked not only by the wisdom that God grants him. In many instances in *Tanakh*, God's spirit is linked not only to understanding of things that regular people would not know, but also to the courage to verbalize these messages:

But I am filled with the power of the spirit of God and courage to declare to Yaakov their transgression, and to Yisrael their sin. Hear this now, I pray you, the heads of the house of Yaakov and the rulers of the house of Yisrael, who abhor justice and pervert all uprightnes; who built up Tzion with blood, and Yerushalayim with injustice. Their heads judge for bribes, and their *kohanim* teach for a price, and their prophets divine for money, and they lean upon God, saying: "Is God not in our midst? No evil can befall us." Therefore, because of you, Tzion will be plowed like a field, and Yerushalayim will be heaps of rubble, and the Temple Mount like the high places of the forest. (*Mikha* 3:8-12)

The "spirit of God" often refers in *Tanakh* to a courageous spirit, and this is indeed one of the characteristics of the prophets.^[1] It seems that the prophet Mikha was put on trial after speaking so harshly against the national leadership and disseminating such terrible forecasts concerning Yerushalayim and the Temple. At a certain stage, it seems, there was even talk of executing him for his temerity:

Then certain men of the elders of the land rose up and spoke to all the assembly of the people and said, "Mikha the Morashti prophesized in the days of Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda. And he said to all the people of Yehuda, 'So says the Lord of Hosts: Tzion shall be plowed like a field, and Yerushalayim will be heaps of rubble, and the Temple Mount like the high places of the forest.' Did Chizkiyahu, the king of Yehuda, and all of Yehuda, then put him to death? Did [Chizkiyahu] not fear the Lord, and beseech the Lord, so the Lord regretted the evil that He had spoken against them? Shall we then do this great evil to our souls?" (*Yirmiyahu* 26:17-19)

Despite the danger, Mikha declared God's word to the people. Yishayahu, Yirmiyahu, and the other prophets of Israel did likewise.^[2] Some paid for this with their lives. Thus, the "spirit of God" that fills the prophet is also a spirit of great courage, as evidenced in God's words to Yirmiyahu, in the prophecy of his induction:

Behold, I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar, and walls of brass against the whole land, against the kings of Yehuda, its princes, its *kohanim*, and against the people of the land. And they will fight against you, but will not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. (*Yirmiyahu* 1:18-19)

We have previously explained our view that Daniel was not a prophet, and his words and actions proceeded from the level of *ruach ha-kodesh*, which is lower than that of prophecy. Thus, we can understand his initial fear of stating the interpretation of the dream:

Then Daniel, whose name was Beltshatzar, was dumbfounded for one hour, and his thoughts terrified him. The king spoke and said, "Beltshatzar, let the dream and its interpretation not terrify you." Beltshatzar answered and he said, "My lord, the dream is for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies." (4:16)

Furthermore, this may also explain the advice which Daniel attaches to the interpretation:

"Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you, and redeem your sins with charity, and your transgressions through compassion to the poor, that your tranquility may be extended." (4:24)

This advice is not part of the interpretation of the dream.^[3] Why was there a need for it? Why should Nevukhadnetzar not receive the punishment coming to him for his actions in the ruin of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the exile and massacre that he had wrought?

Chazal actually criticize Daniel for this:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav, and R. Yehoshua ben Levi questioned: Why was Daniel punished? Because he offered advice to Nevukhadnetzar. (*Bava Batra* 4a)

The *gemara* notes the case of one of the Sages, Bava ben Buta, who suggested to Herod that he build on to the Temple, expressing surprise at this suggestion in light of the criticism of Daniel. The *gemara* explains Daniel's mistake based on the principle that a non-Jew should not be advised to give charity, since "the kindness of the nations is [counted as] sin."^[4] However, it may be that this reservation applies specifically where the non-Jew is an evil person. We know, for example, that Ezra accepted contributions from Artaxerxes, king of Persia, and Moshe also told Pharaoh, "You shall also give offerings and sacrifices into our hands" (*Shemot*10:25).

Perhaps Daniel feared leaving the king with just the interpretation of the dream, with no advice as to how to avoid its realization. He was punished for this, because fear guided him to act improperly in this regard.

Daniel's punishment, according to the *gemara* (*Bava Batra* 4a) was that he was thrown into the lions' den, or that he was castrated and became the chamberlain Hatakh, one of Ester's servants (see *Esther* 4).^[5]

Still, this seems difficult to understand: was suggesting a path of repair to Nevukhadnetzar truly such a great sin? Does God not want even the greatest of sinners to repent?

Let us consider what happens next:

All of this came upon the king Nevukhadnetzar. At the end of twelve months, he was walking in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spoke and he said, "Is this not the great Babylon which I have built as a royal residence, by the might of my power and for the honor of my majesty?" As the king was still speaking, a voice came down from heaven, saying, "To you it is spoken, King Nevukhadnetzar; the kingdom has departed from you. You will be driven away from man, and your dwelling will be with the beasts of the field; you will be made to eat grass, like the oxen, and seven seasons will pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whoever He desires." (4:25-29)

It is not clear from the text why Daniel's advice helped only for twelve months and no more. The *midrash* tell us:

The wicked one [Nevukhadnetzar] immediately opened his treasure houses and distributed to them for twelve months. After twelve months, the wicked one forgot his dream, and began walking about his palace. He heard the sound of the destitute masses in front of his treasure house, and said to his servants, "What is this sound that I hear?" They told him, "The poor, whom you drove out, are demanding sustenance." He was seized with meanness; "The king spoke and he said, 'Is this not the great Babylon which I have built as a royal residence, by the might of my power and for the honor of my majesty?'" (4:27). He said: Were it not for my treasure house, how could I build this entire kingdom? He instructed and ruled for them, as it is written, "As the king was still speaking..." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Wicked one – Who granted you tranquility all of those twelve months? Was it not the charity that you executed?..." (*Tanchuma, Mishpatim* 4)^[6]

From the *midrash*, it seems that Daniel's advice could have been effective indefinitely, had Nevukhadnetzar continued to follow it. However, after twelve months,

he was seized with miserliness and stopped giving charity to the poor.^[7] The *midrash* finds it necessary to connect the cessation of the charity with the textual description of how the punishment came when Nevukhadnetzar was standing proudly atop the palace and declaring the praises of the majestic empire that he had built.

Perhaps there is an alternative possible reading of the verses. The dream described Nevukhadnetzar as a king whose power led him to arrogance, such that he forgot the true Ruler of the world and its inhabitants. The dream and its interpretation appear to have been a punishment of Nevukhadnetzar for his sin in setting up the image in the plain of Dura, which itself had been an attempt to deflect the meaning of his first dream about the image with the head of gold.^[8] Nevukhadnetzar had commanded all the nations and peoples to bow down to it simultaneously, throwing into the fiery furnace anyone who rebelled. Corresponding to his outrageous arrogance, his punishment – measure for measure – was unparalleled degradation, whereby he would be forced to live with the beasts of the field and to eat the food of animals.

Charity to the poor did not have the power to solve Nevukhadnetzar's fundamental problem of arrogance and self-importance. Perhaps this was Daniel's sin: he failed to state the message to Nevukhadnetzar fully, instead planting in him the hope that the charity that he would distribute to the poor would placate God's anger over the king's arrogance. If a person has sinned through arrogance, can he bribe God, Who shows no partiality and takes no bribes, by giving charity so that God will forgive his sin?

The purpose of charity is to arouse the Divine attribute of mercy, in keeping with the mercy of the giver of charity. But the attribute of mercy is not a waiving of the sin and its punishment. "Anyone who says, 'God is a foregoer [of punishment for transgressions, and one may therefore sin with impunity]', foregoes his own life."^[9] The attribute of mercy sets aside the punishment in order to allow man to repair his sin. In this instance, the sin was arrogance. How did Nevukhadnetzar use the extension granted him in order to correct his sin?

At the end of twelve months, he was walking in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon. The king spoke and he said, "Is this not the great Babylon which I have built as a royal residence, by the might of my power and for the honor of my majesty?" (4:26-27)

Nevukhadnetzar continues to be arrogant and full of self-importance. Since the postponement has achieved nothing, the Divine attribute of mercy is silenced – despite the charity given by Nevukhadnetzar. As he declares the praise of his own handiwork

and grandeur, a Divine voice emerges and tells Nevukhadnetzar that his sin is about to be met with its punishment.

Let us pay closer attention to one detail of this new manifestation of Nevukhadnetzar's arrogance, walking about on the roof of his palace and priding himself on his city and his kingdom. Nevukhadnetzar is not the first king to walk about on the roof of the palace and look out over the city. He was preceded in this by King David:

And it came to pass one evening that David arose from his bed and walked about on the roof of the king's house. And from the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was of very beautiful appearance. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And he was told, "Is this not Bat Sheva, daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uria, the Hittite?" (*Shmuel II* 11:2-3)

The preceding chapters in *Shmuel II* (chapters 8 and 10) describe David's military conquests, which transform his kingdom into an empire, stretching all the way to Aram Naharayim on the banks of the Tigris. In chapter 11, we find David walking about on the roof of the royal palace. From there, he falls to the depths of his sin with Bat Sheva and Uria, and into the abyss of shame and punishment that followed, all the way to the tent of Avshalom, his son, who lies with David's wives on the roof of his house – the same roof where David, the new emperor, had walked until his sin. It was from a similar roof, and owing to a similar sin, that Nevukhadnetzar fell as low as he did, as we shall see.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] The Rambam devotes extensive discussion to this point; see *Moreh Nevukhim* 2:45, the section starting with "The first level...". See also our previous discussion concerning Yosef's interpretation of the dreams of the royal butler and baker and of Pharaoh himself.

[2] Sometimes, the prophets failed in this regard, for various reasons, and God's response was to withhold prophecy from them. See, for example, *Shemuel I* 16.

[3] Malbim, commenting on this verse, does find a connection between the dream and Daniel's counsel. In the dream, Nevukhadnetzar is told, "All flesh was fed from it" – meaning, that Nevukhadnetzar (the great tree) should provide sustenance for the poor. Malbim explains that Daniel did not repeat this image in the body of his interpretation of the dream, leaving it for the end. He then proposes an understanding based on this view.

[4] See *Bava Batra* 10a.

[5] This is supported by the text itself. In the next chapter, in the days of King Beltshatzar, noone recognizes Daniel; see 5:11.

[6] Rashi adopts the same explanation in his commentary ad loc.

[7] From the *gemara* in *Sotah* 20b, it appears that Nevukhadnetzar gave charity only on the very day that Daniel advised him to do so, and the merit of this was sufficient to delay his punishment for twelve months. We adopt here the view of the commentators who maintain that Daniel's advice was that he give charity every day in order to postpone the punishment permanently.

[8] The Malbim, commenting on 4:23, understands the second dream and what happened in its wake as a punishment for Nevukhadnetzar having set up the idol in the plain of Dura, for the purposes of eternalizing his kingdom.

[9] *Bava Kama* 50a, and other *midrashim*. See also Ramchal's *Mesilat Yesharim*, *Sha'ar ha-Zehirut*.