

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #14: Chapter 8:
The Vision of the Four Beasts

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At this point, we will jump from chapter 4 to chapters 7 and 8, and then return later to chapters 5-6. This will allow us to study the chapters in their chronological order. Chapters 1-4 relate to the period of Nevukhadnetzar. There are no events or visions in *Sefer Daniel* dating to the period of Evil Merodakh, who was the next king of Babylon. Chapter 7, which we shall address below, discusses the first year of Belshatzar, who succeeded Evil Merodakh,^[1] and chapter 8 describes the third year of his reign. Chapter 5, to which we shall return later, describes the day of Belshatzar's death, and chapters 6 and 9 date to the reign of Darius (Daryavesh) the Mede, who inherited the Babylonian kingdom from Belshatzar. Chapters 10-12 describe the period of Cyrus (Koresh), who reigned after Darius.

The reason that the chapters were written in the order that we have them is because of the clear division of the Book into two parts. Chapters 1-6 deal with the events that happened to Daniel and his companions and the dreams and riddles that he solved for others. Chapters 7-11 deal with Daniel's own visions, and their interpretation by heavenly angels in general, and the angel Gavriel in particular. Over the course of our discussion below, it will become clear why we have chosen to address the chapters according to the chronological order in which they took place, rather than in the order of their appearance.

Let us begin by looking at the vision of the four creatures:

In the first year of Belshatzar, king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head upon his bed; then he wrote down the dream, telling the sum of the matter. Daniel spoke and said: I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of the heaven broke forth upon the great sea. And four great beasts came up from the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion, and it had eagle's wings; I watched until its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made to stand on two feet, like a man, and a man's heart was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second, resembling a bear, and it raised up itself on one side, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told thus: "Arise, devour much flesh." After this, I beheld, and yet another, like a leopard, which had upon the sides of it four wings of a fowl; the beast had also four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and exceedingly strong, and it

had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the remnant with its feet; and it was different from all the beasts that had preceded it, and it had ten horns. I looked at the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another horn, a small one, before which three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots; and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. I watched until thrones were set out, and the Ancient One sat down: His garment was as white snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool; His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels burning fire... I watched until the beast was killed, and its body destroyed, and it was given to be burned with fire. And as for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away; but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. I saw in the night visions, and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one resembling a son of man, and he came to the Ancient One, and he was brought near before Him. And he was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, nor will his kingdom be destroyed. (7:1-14)

Daniel also receives the interpretation of the dream:

As for me Daniel, my spirit was pained in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head frightened me. I drew near to one of them that stood by and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me, and informed me of the interpretation of the things: "These great beasts, which are four, are four kings that shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever." Then I sought to know the truth concerning the fourth beast, which was different from all of them, exceeding terrible – its teeth of iron, and its nails of brass; these devoured, broke in pieces, and stamped the remnant with its feet; and concerning the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn which came up, and before which three fell; that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spoke great things, whose appearance was greater than that of the others. I watched, and this horn waged war with the holy ones, and prevailed against them; until the Ancient One came, and judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High; and the time came, and the holy ones possessed the kingdom. He said: "The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces. And as for the ten horns, ten kings shall arise out of this kingdom, and another shall arise after them; and he shall differ from the previous ones, and he shall subdue three kings. And he shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High; and he shall plan to change the seasons and the law; and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and half a time. But they shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be utterly consumed and destroyed. And the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them." This is the end of the matter. As for me

Daniel, my thoughts frightened me greatly, and my appearance was changed, but I kept the matter in my heart. (verses 15-28)

Rashi, following the interpretation set forth by *Chazal*, explains that the first beast is Babylon. The second, which devours, is the kingdom of Persia, known to us – especially from *Megillat Esther* – for its excessive feasting and banqueting. The third beast, resembling a leopard, is Greece, with the four wings representing the four smaller empires that grew out of the Greek Empire after Alexander's death. The fourth beast is Rome. Counting the ten horns, Rashi arrives at Vespasian. The last tyrant is Titus; the Ancient One – God – will judge him, and dominion will be given to Israel.

In explaining the expression "a time and times and half a time," Rashi calculates times for the redemption, following the example of R. Sa'adia Gaon, and arrives at approximately the year 1400. Abravanel has sharp criticism for this calculation, as well as other calculations suggested by the Ramban and Ralbag: "Since time has shown, for our sins, that their calculations ended up being false; they are vanity, of no use" (*ma'ayan* 8, *tamar* 10). Abravanel proposes a different calculation, adding approximately a hundred years onto the process and arriving at the year 1503 – in his own lifetime, eleven years after the expulsion from Spain and 6 years after the expulsion from Portugal. Owing to our sins, this calculation for the redemption was likewise not realized.

R. Sa'adia Gaon and Ibn Ezra differ from Rashi in one fundamental point, as explained in Chapter 4 of this series. According to their interpretation, the fourth beast is the kingdom of Yishmael (Islam), rather than the kingdom of Rome. Rome is apparently subsumed, according to their approach, in the reign of the third beast. We have already commented (in a previous *shiur*) on the source of this controversy between them.

Ralbag and Abravanel (*ibid.*, *ma'ayan* 8) trace the Roman emperors up until the birth of Christianity, and Abravanel takes issue with the Christian sages in this regard. If we take into account the interpretations of both Ralbag and Abravanel, the question of the ten horns remains problematic.^[2] The Maharal devotes the first part (*aggada*) of his book *Ner Mitzva* mainly to the four beasts in chapter 7 of *Sefer Daniel*, and explains their essence in a manner similar to the commentators discussed above. In any event, according to all these opinions, the four beasts parallel the four parts of the image which appeared in Nevukhadnetzar's dream.

Chazal, and almost all of the commentators, are unanimous in their interpretation, and their explanation should certainly be regarded as the authoritative understanding. However, it is possible that the vision can be interpreted in more than one manner. We shall attempt to mark a narrow trail alongside the highway upon which *Chazal* lead us.

Throughout our study of the *Sefer* thus far, we have adopted the view that Daniel does not see beyond the kingdom of the Hasmoneans.^[3] Bearing this in mind, perhaps there is some possibility of explaining the first beast as symbolizing not the kingdom of

Babylon, as all the commentators understand it, but rather Nevukhadnetzar alone. Let us look again at the description of this beast:

The first was like a lion, and it had eagle's wings; I watched until its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made to stand on two feet, like a man, and a man's heart was given to it. (7:4)

A human heart given to a beast is not a characteristic of the kingdom of Babylon as a whole. Rather, the images here recall what happened to Nevukhadnetzar himself (chapter 4): "Let his heart be changed from a man's, and let a beast's heart be given to him" (4:13); "until his hair grew like eagles' feathers" (4:30). After seven seasons, Nevukhadnetzar returns to his original state.

Pursuing this focus on the kings themselves, we might understand the devouring bear as symbolizing Evil Merodakh. Indeed, we know nothing about him or his wars; perhaps this is because he occupied himself solely with banqueting and feasting. We recall that Yehoyakhin is recorded as having "always eaten bread before him [Evil Merodakh], all the days of his life" (*Melakhim* II 25:29). Accordingly, Belshatzar is the leopard: an animal characterized by Chazal as being bold ("az"), in the sense of "courageous" but also "brazen." Both qualities are mentioned in the same teaching of the *Tannaim*:

Yehuda ben Teima said: Be bold (*az*) as a leopard and light as an eagle and swift as a deer and strong as a lion to perform the will of your Father in heaven. He also said: The brazen-faced (*az panim*) will go to Gehennom, and the shame-faced to Gan Eden. (*Avot* 5:20)

Belshatzar may have been a courageous fighter. The chapter that covers his reign certainly reveals his brazen disrespect; he brings out the golden vessels from the Temple and distributes them among his nobles and his wives and concubines, for all to drink wine. Even Nevukhadnetzar, his grandfather, who had originally taken these vessels from the Temple, did not dare to act in this manner. Thus, it is possible that he is the leopard, the third beast.

If all of the above is correct, then the main message of the vision concerns the fourth beast, as the content of the vision would indeed suggest, since at the time of the vision, the first three beasts were already known. The fourth beast is the kingdom of Persia, which is about to replace the three previous beasts – Nevukhadnetzar, his son, and his son's son – as Yirmiyahu had prophesized: "All the nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son, until the time of his own land will come, too" (*Yirmiyahu* 27:7). The Persian kingdom did, in fact, have ten successive rulers,^[4] and perhaps these are the ten horns. If so, the small horn that arises and brings down the kings that preceded it is Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire which he founded. Indeed, in the next vision, in chapter 8, the Kingdom of Greece is compared to a horn that suddenly arises with the collapse of its predecessors:^[5]

... And when he grew strong, the great horn was broken, and in its place there arose four clearly visible ones, towards the four winds of heaven. And from one of them there came forth a small horn which grew exceedingly great, towards the south and towards the east and towards the beautiful land. (8:8-9)

This kingdom is the subject of Daniel's visions, for a reason which will be explained at length in the next chapters. The thrones set out for the kings of Israel when the Ancient One (God) sits upon His throne are the Hasmonean kings. Had we merited it, their reign would have brought the redemption and the eternal Kingdom of God.

In any event, this vision – together with Yirmiyahu's prophecy concerning the fall of Nevukhadnetzar's grandson, and together with him the entire Babylonian kingdom – should be viewed as the background to Daniel's deciphering of the inscription on the wall in the third year of Belshatzar, informing him that his kingdom will be taken from him and given to Persia.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] In our discussion of chapter 5 of *Sefer Daniel*, we will elaborate on the order of the kings and their reigns.

[2] The Ralbag counts ten kings up until the Roman Emperor Constantine I, who accepted Christianity and made it the religion of the entire empire. Abravanel questions this; according to his count, Constantine was the 39th emperor.

[3] The same view is adopted by R. Chaim Galippa, as cited in *Sefer ha-Ikarim, ma'amar 4*, chapter 42. He does not explain this conclusion in the same way that we do, but to his view, the essence of the redemption in this vision is the royal house of the Hasmoneans. (The choice of which explanation makes more sense is left to the reader.) The author of *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* rejects his view, and Abravanel rejects this approach with great vehemence (*ma'ayan 8, tamar 2*).

[4] These are generally identified as: Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius I, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III, Arses (Artaxerxes IV), and Darius III. Darius III was the last king of the Persian Empire, which was conquered by Alexander the Great.

[5] There the text would seem to refer to the Seleucid dynasty.