

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #16: Chapter 10:
The Writing on the Wall

1. Calculation of the years

Belshatzar, the king, made a great feast... (5:1)

The period of Nevukhadnetzar is over, and *Sefer Daniel* moves on to the period of Belshatzar. We will begin by reviewing the order of the kings of Babylon during this period.

The father of the dynasty, Nevupalaser – who fought Pharaoh Nekho in Charan in the war in which Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda, was killed (see *Melakhim* II, end of chapter 23, and *Divrei Ha-yamim* II, end of chapter 35) – is mentioned nowhere in *Tanakh*, nor in *Chazal's* teachings. He was succeeded by his son, Nevukhadnetzar. Here, *Chazal* and the commentaries uniformly adopt the chronicle of the *Seder Olam*:

And Nevukhadnetzar ruled for forty-five years; Evil Merodakh for twenty-three, [and] Belshatzar, his son, for three. (*Seder Olam*, chapter 28)[\[1\]](#)

The length of Nevukhadnetzar's reign may be deduced from the text. He rose to power in the fourth year of Yehoyakim, as we are told explicitly by Yirmiyahu:

The word which came to Yirmiyahu concerning the entire people of Yehuda, during the fourth year of Yehoyakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda – which was the first year of Nevukhanetzar, king of Bavel. (*Yirmiyahu* 25:1)

Yehoyakim ruled for eleven years, following which Yehoyakhin ruled for three months. The exile of Yehoyakhin therefore took place in the eighth year of Nevukhadnetzar, as indeed we find explicitly written in the text:

Yehoyakhin, king of Yehuda, went out to the king of Babylon – he and his mother and his servants and his ministers and his officers – and the king of Babylon took him in the eighth year of his reign. (*Melakhim* II 24:12)

From the context, we deduce that the "eighth year of his reign" means the eighth year of the reign of Nevukhadnetzar.

The 37th year of the exile of Yehoyakhin was the year that Evil Merodakh rose to power:

And it came to pass in the 37th year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, king of Yehuda, in the 12th month, on the 27th of the month, that Evil Merodakh, king of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, raised up the head of Yehoyakhin, king of Yehuda, from the prison. (ibid., 25:27)

This means that Nevukhadnetzar reigned for eight years before Yehoyakhin and 37 years after him – a total of 45 years.

What is the source upon which the *Seder Olam* bases the assertion that Evil Merodakh reigned for 23 years and Belshatzar for 3 years? It seems that the three years of Belshatzar are deduced from the text in *Sefer Daniel* itself:

In the third year of the reign of King Belshatzar, a vision appeared to me – I, Daniel – after that which had appeared to me previously. (8:1)

The vision in chapter 7 took place in the first year of Belshatzar's reign, while the vision in chapter 8 appeared in his third year. Since no mention is made of any further years on the throne, the *Seder Olam* assumes that Belshatzar's reign lasted no more than three years. It is possible that the *Seder Olam* deduces this as a sort of rule – the text aims not to obscure history, but rather to record it. Furthermore, the vision in chapter 8 foretells the imminent downfall of the Babylonian kingdom. The vision depicts the rise of Persia, and then of Macedonia, as irreversible fact; hence, the reign of Belshatzar will shortly be coming to an end.

It may be that the *Seder Olam* uses the same sort of reasoning to conclude that Cyrus (Koresh) ruled for three years, since no mention is made of him or anything that he did beyond that time:

In the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, a word was revealed to Daniel, whose name was called Beltshatzar... (10:1)^[2]

It is possible that the *Seder Olam* adopts the same policy for calculating the reign of all kings whose duration is not explicitly mentioned.

The *Seder Olam* also knew, on the basis of *Yirmiyahu* chapters 25 and 29, that seventy years had been allotted for the Babylonian empire. Hence the assertion that Evil Merodakh –the only Babylonian king mentioned by the text as ruling in between Nevukhadnetzar and Belshatzar – reigned for 23 years, so as to arrive at a total of 70.^[3]

The fact that there were only two more Babylonian kings after Nevukhadnetzar may be deduced from *Yirmiyahu*:

And now I have given all of these lands into the hand of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, My servant; and I have given him all the beasts of the field, to serve him. And all the nations shall serve **him, and his son, and his son's son, until**

the time of his own land comes, and then many nations and great kings shall make him their servant. (*Yirmiyahu 27:6-7*)

In short, it may be that historical statements of this sort by *Chazal* may be based on a close examination of the text, rather than on a tradition that they had received.^[4] Concerning any matter of chronology that is not explicitly set forth in the text, it may be that *Chazal* had no clear information.

According to Babylonian inscriptions, Evil Merodakh (who reigned for only 2 years!) was succeeded by his brother-in-law, Nergal Saretzer. He, in turn, was followed by the last of the kings of Babylon, Nevuna'id, who ruled for 17 years; Belshatzar was his son. The reliability of these sources is limited, however. It is also possible that owing to the lack of importance of Nergal Saretzer as king, *Chazal* included his years within the reign of Evil Merodakh. Another possibility is that Nevuna'id is a generic term, like "Pharaoh," and hence the reign of "Nevuna'id" may not be telling us anything about the king's name. Alternatively, it may be that in his time, his son Belshatzar was the active force in his father's kingdom, such that the kingdom is referred to as his.^[5] In any event, there are many different possibilities for solving this contradiction; we shall not elaborate further.

2. The Sin

Let us now turn our attention to Belshatzar's feast, which heralds the downfall of the Babylonian empire:

Belshatzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before this thousand. Belshatzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the vessels of gold and of silver which Nebuchadnetzar, his father, had taken out of the Sanctuary which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines, might drink from them. Then they brought the golden vessels which had been taken out of the Sanctuary of the House of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king, and his lords, his wives and his concubines, drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. At that same time the fingers of a man's hand emerged and wrote, opposite the candlestick, upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts frightened him; his loins were loosened, and his knees knocked against each another. The king cried aloud to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon: "Any man who can read this writing, and make known to me its meaning, shall be clothed with purple, and have a chain of gold around his neck, and shall rule as one of three in the kingdom." So all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing, nor make its meaning known to the king. Then King Belshatzar was very frightened, and his countenance was changed, and his lords were perplexed. In light of the words of the king and his lords, the queen came into the banquet

house. The queen spoke and said: "O king, live for ever! Let your thoughts not frighten you, nor let your countenance be changed. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods was found in him; and King Nevuchadnetzar, your father, made him master of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers – your father, the king himself, since superlative spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpretation of dreams, solving of riddles, and loosing of knots, were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Beltshatzar. Now let Daniel be called, that he may make known the interpretation. (5:1-12)

We might have viewed the feast as an expression of debauchery alone. However, the *gemara* in *Megilla* views it as a victory celebration, marking the seeming victory over the prophecy of Yirmiyahu, which had foretold the end of the Babylonian empire after seventy years and which now seemed to have been disproved:

What was [Belshatzar's calculation]? As it is written, "For when seventy years are up for Babylon, I shall remember you," and it is written, "That the desolation of Jerusalem would have completed seventy years." He [Belshatzar] calculated the 45 years of Nevukhadnetzar, and 23 years of Evil Merodakh, and two years of his own, totalling seventy... He said, "Now it is certain that they will not be redeemed; I shall bring out the vessels of the Temple and use them." Hence, Daniel said to him, "But you have lifted yourself against the Lord of the heaven, and they have brought the vessels of His House before you." And it is also written, "On that night, Belshatzar, the [Chaldean] king, was slain," and it is written, "And Darius the Mede received the kingship; he was about sixty-two years old." (*Megilla* 11b)

It is unreasonable to expect a prophecy to be fulfilled with the precise accuracy of a calendar date. Why did Belshatzar not take into account that the downfall of Babylon might still happen just a short time after the seventy years were up? We might suggest that the reason for his certainty was that Yirmiyahu's prophecy had indeed seemed on the verge of being realized during the war that was waged at that time between the armies of Belshatzar and those of Persia and Media.^[6] But what actually happened was the opposite: Belshatzar's forces overcame the armies of Persia and Media, and the Babylonian kingdom emerged strengthened and victorious. Belshatzar now heaped scorn on the hopes of the Jewish People for the downfall of Babylon and their own subsequent redemption.^[7] In light of this victory, he held his feast, brought out the vessels of the Temple, and defiled them with his debauchery, thereby demonstrating his spiritual victory over the prophecy and showing that he was no longer afraid of its realization.

Belshatzar embodied the lesson of the verse, "Pride comes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (*Mishlei* 16:18). That very same night saw the turnaround; Belshatzar was murdered, and the kings of Persia and Media seized the throne of Babylon.

Belshatzar's drunkenness and defeat recall what happened to Ben Haddad, king of Aram, when he and the other kings who were his allies became drunk and were defeated by the meager army of Achav.^[8] In the contempt he showed for the vessels of God's Temple as a way of showing defiance following his victory, Belshatzar recalls what Meisha, king of Moav, did following his victory over the Israelite tribes who lived on the eastern side of the Jordan (a war alluded to in *Melakhim* II 1:1):

And I slew all of them, 7,000 men... and I took from there the vessels of the House of the Lord and I dragged them before Kemosh...^[9]

This disrespect shown for the vessels of the Temple, dragging them before the pagan god Kemosh, had been a terrible desecration of God's Name.

Let us now return to *Sefer Daniel*. The text describes how it was the queen who suggested to Belshatzar to appeal to Daniel for help. Seemingly, it is the queen mother who is referred to here.^[10] She was not a participant in the decadent banquet of the young women; she still remembered the wisdom and actions of Daniel, who had since lost his special status.

The text goes on to describe what happened when Daniel was brought before the king:

Then Daniel was brought before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Are you Daniel, of the children of the captivity of Yehuda, whom the king, my father, brought out from Yehuda? I have heard concerning you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and great wisdom are to be found in you. And now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me, that they might read this writing and make its meaning known to me, but they could not declare the meaning of it. But I have heard concerning you that you can provide interpretations and loosen knots; now, if you can read the writing and make its meaning known to me, you shall be clothed with purple, and have a chain of gold around your neck, and shall rule as one of three in the kingdom."

Then Daniel answered and said before the king: "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to someone else; nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and make its meaning known to him. O you king – the Most High God gave Nevukhadnetzar, your father, the kingdom, and greatness and glory and majesty; and because of the greatness that He gave him, all the peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared him: he slew whoever he wished to, and kept alive whoever he wished to, and raised up whoever he wished to, and put down whoever he wished to. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened, so that he acted proudly, he was deposed from his royal throne, and his glory was taken from him, and he was driven from the sons of men, and his heart was made like the beasts, and he dwelled with the wild asses; he was

fed with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he came to know that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and He sets over it whoever He chooses. And you, his son Belshatzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all of this; rather, you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven, and they have brought the vessels of His House before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines have drunk wine in them, and you have praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see, nor hear, nor know; and the God Who has your breath in His hand and to Whom all your ways belong – you have not glorified Him. So the part of the hand was sent from before Him, and this inscription was written. And this is the inscription which was written: '*Menei, menei, tekel u-farsin.*' This is what it means: '*menei*' – God has numbered (*mana*) the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. '*Tekei*' – you are weighed on the balances and found lacking. '*U-Farsin*' – your kingdom is divided (*nifresa*) and given to the Medes and the Persians." Then Belshatzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed in purple, with a chain of gold around his neck, and a proclamation was made concerning him, that he would rule as one of three in the kingdom. (5:13-29)

Unlike his attitude towards Nevukhadnetzar, the "servant of God," Daniel is cold and distant towards Belshatzar. Belshatzar is drunk and surrounded by his concubines. He is showing contempt for the vessels of God's House, which Nevukhadnetzar had respected. Belshatzar has nothing of value to offer in the contest between Babylon, "queen of kingdoms," and the eternal Kingdom of God. Daniel offers him no grace and no opportunity for correction. Daniel also has no fear of him. Earlier, in our discussion of chapter 8, we saw that Daniel already knew through a vision of the imminent collapse of the Babylonian kingdom. Indeed, events transpire with great speed:

On that same night, Belshatzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. (5:30)

Thus, when he comes to speak before Belshatzar, Daniel already knows that this king, despite all his power, is destined to lie in his grave before the night is over. This knowledge certainly influences his attitude as well.

Let us now consider the brief message itself – the inscription on the wall:

"And this is the inscription which was written: '*menei, menei, tekel u-farsin.*'^[11] This is what it means: '*menei*' – God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. '*Tekei*' – you are weighed on the balances and found wanting. '*U-farsin*' – your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians." (25-28)

Two actions are described here – "numbering" and "weighing." Let us attempt to understand what this means. Yirmiyahu prophesized:

... And these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. And it shall be, when seventy years are complete, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, says the Lord, for their sin, and the land of the Chaldeans, and I shall make it desolate forever. (*Yirmiyahu* 25:11-12)

Yirmiyahu repeats this message again in his prophecies of consolation:

For so says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will remember you and fulfill My good word to you, to restore you to this place. (29:10)

The kingdom of Babylon was allotted only seventy years. We find no comparable limitation on Egypt or Assyria. Perhaps the duration of the Babylonian empire was determined in advance because of the link that the prophets draw between the downfall of Babylon and the redemption of Israel, whose exile is of a limited and defined duration. But there may be a different reason: the Babylonian empire was a tremendous world power, and God allowed this power to replace the Kingship of God over the world.^[12] Perhaps it was for this reason that there was a need for the prophets to limit its duration, in order to show a clear differentiation between it and the eternal Kingdom of God.

The "counting" represents God's management of history. Man is powerless to interfere with or influence it. When the seventy years are over, the kingdom is finished. In this sense, the destruction of Babylon is predetermined, and not related to any actions on the part of Belshatzar.

However, the vision also speaks of "weighing." This element speaks to man's actions at the moment of truth, where his behavior might perhaps affect the decree of a predetermined date. This duality in relating to history is to be found also in the calculations of the redemption of *Am Yisrael*. On the one hand, there are calculations of years and generations; on the other hand, there is the universally acknowledged connection between redemption and repentance.^[13] With regard to the redemption from Egypt as well, there is extensive discussion among *Chazal* regarding the period of four hundred years – the pre-determined heavenly decree – and the question of the behavior of *Am Yisrael*. Conversely, we also find attempts to explain the Destruction of the Temple not only in terms of the transgressions of *Am Yisrael*, but also as the fulfillment of an ancient Divine decree.^[14] Daniel tells Beshatzar, "You have been weighed on scales and found deficient" (5:27) – meaning, your actions, and not (only) the number of years of the Babylonian empire, have caused its destruction.^[15]

The scope of our discussion does not allow us to cover all the sources relevant to the relationship between calculations of or dates for redemption, on the one hand, and man's actions, on the other, with respect to the actual time of redemption or of destruction. We shall look at just one *midrash* which addresses this question and arrives at a conclusion:

There was a righteous man who had become impoverished, with a good wife; he worked as a laborer. Once, as he was plowing in the field, Eliyahu came to him in the form of an Arab and said to him: "You have six good years allotted to you. When do you want them – now or towards the end of your life?" He said to him, "You are a magician. I have nothing to give you; leave me alone." But he came to him three times, and the third time he said, "I shall go and consult with my wife." He went to his wife and told her, "Someone came to me, taking the trouble to appear three times, and told me: 'You have six good years; when do you want them – now or towards the end of your life?'" He then asked her, "What do you say?" She said to him, "Go and tell him – Bring them now." So he said to him, "Give them to me now." Eliyahu told him, "Go home, and by the time you reach the gate of your courtyard you will already see blessing spread in your house." His children were searching in the dust and they found a treasure which could sustain them for six years, and they called their mother, such that the moment he reached the gate, his wife came out to tell him the good news. He immediately gave thanks to God, and felt at peace. What did his good wife do? She said to him, "God has already extended His thread of kindness over us by giving us enough money to sustain us for six years; let us engage in acts of kindness for these years, for then perhaps God will give us more" – and so she did. Whatever she did each day, she instructed her son, "Write down all that we are giving" – and so he did. When the six years were up, Eliyahu returned and told the man, "The time has come to take back that which I gave you." He said to him, "When I took it from you it was only after consultation with my wife; I shall likewise return it only with her approval." He went to her and told her, "The old man has come back to take what is his." She said to him, "Go and say to him: If you have ever found people more faithful than us, give them your treasure." And God saw their words and the acts of kindness which they had performed and granted them favor upon favor, thereby fulfilling that which is written: Charity leads to peace. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth #607*).

The *midrash* teaches us here that despite the set timeframe of six years, the actions of the couple caused the time of favor granted to them to be extended.

As stated, we shall not address the very broad question of fate vs. freedom of action that arises here; we shall suffice with a brief discussion of the fate of the Babylonian kingdom in our chapter. Was the collapse of Babylon due to the seventy-year timeframe, which came to its end that night, or was it the result of Belshatzar bringing out the vessels of the Temple and getting drunk on the wine that he and his concubines drank from them? Let us examine the verses once again:

Belshatzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the vessels of gold and of silver which Nebuchadnetzar, his father, had taken out of the Sanctuary which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines, might drink from them. Then they brought the golden vessels which had been taken out of the Sanctuary of the House of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king, and his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from

them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. (5:2-3)

Unlike Nevukhadnetzar, who had preserved the vessels of the Temple and showed awe and respect for God, Whose Temple he had destroyed,^[16] Belshatzar was an irreverent, impulsive reveler. He reminds us of Achashverosh, who was to rule just a short time later. Achashverosh, too, would revel at his banquet and invite his wife; there, too, *Chazal* teach that he brought out the vessels of the Temple and used them at his feast. The feast of Achashverosh was similarly suddenly cut short in the middle, owing to the behavior of Vashti towards the king. *Chazal* address the similar fault of these two kings at their respective feasts:

Achashverosh said: "Belshatzar made his calculations, but he was mistaken; I shall make my calculations and I shall not be mistaken..."

He said: "What mistake did he make? I shall make the calculation without that mistake. Does the text say, 'The kingdom of Babylon'? [No,] it says [only], 'Babylon.' What does 'Babylon' mean? The Babylonian exile. How many years are left to be accounted for? Eight." He calculated these years, taking one year of Belshatzar and five years of Darius and Cyrus, and the three years of his own reign, and arrived at 70. When he saw that the seventy years were over and Israel had not been redeemed, he said, "Now it is certain that they will never be redeemed. I shall bring out the vessels of the Temple and use them." Satan appeared and danced among them, and killed Vashti. (*Megilla* 11b)

Belshatzar and Achashverosh were both familiar with the prophecy, and each of them arrived at his own calculation of the seventy years.^[17] Both of them reached the conclusion that the seventy years were over and that there was no longer anything to fear – at which point each of them brought out the vessels of the Temple. Both were mistaken in their calculations.^[18] Their sin was at the moment when they were put to the test, and the essence of their sin was their attempt to trample God's Kingship in His Temple. The appointed "hour" in the original Divine decree was simply a time for being put to the test – to see whether Belshatzar clung to the same arrogance which had brought punishment upon Nevukhadnetzar, in which case the sin of his forefathers would be visited upon him.^[19]

3. The Repair

Let us now turn our attention from the punishment brought upon Belshatzar and the Babylonian kingdom to the repair brought about by the inscription on the wall:

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that God's word by the mouth of Yirmiyahu might be fulfilled, God stirred the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also in writing, saying: "So says Cyrus, king of Persia: The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build Him a House in

Jerusalem, which is in Yehuda. Whoever is among you of all of His people – may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Yehuda, and build the House of the Lord God of Israel; He is the God Who is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left, from any place where he dwelled, let the people of his place help him with silver and with gold and with goods and with beasts, along with a free-will offering for the House of God which is in Jerusalem.” So there rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Yehuda and Binyamin, and the *Kohanim* and the *Levi'im*, and all those whose spirit God had stirred up to go up and build the House of God in Jerusalem. And all those who were around them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver and with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, aside from all that was willingly offered. And King Cyrus brought forth the vessels of God's House which Nevukhadnetzar had brought out of Jerusalem and had placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus, king of Persia, brought them out by the hand of Mitredat, the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbatzar, the prince of Yehuda. And this is their number: thirty basins of gold, a thousand basins of silver, twenty-nine knives; thirty bowls of gold, another four hundred and ten silver bowls, and a thousand other vessels. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand four hundred; all of this Sheshbatzar brought up, when the captivity of Babylon was brought up to Jerusalem. (*Ezra* 1:1-10)

What caused Cyrus, a foreign king, to address the Jews with such urgency right at the beginning of his reign, to send them back to rebuild God's Temple, and – strangest of all – to immediately hand over the vessels of the Temple which he had captured from the king of Babylon and were now held in his palace?

Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* XI 1:2) suggests that Cyrus knew of his Divinely-determined destiny from the prophecy of Yishayahu:

[God,] Who says of Cyrus: “[He is] My shepherd, and shall perform all My pleasure,” and saying of Jerusalem: “It shall be built;” and to the Temple: “The foundation shall be laid” – So says God to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him, and to loosen the loins of kings, so as to open doors before him, and so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you, and make straight that which is crooked; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut apart the bars of iron. And I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, so that you will know that I am the Lord Who calls upon your name, the God of Israel. (*Yishayahu* 44:28-45:3)

We propose that Cyrus did not know of Yishayahu's prophecy, but did know of Daniel and the writing on the wall – an event which would likely have become famous.

The text here demands a close reading. The vessels mentioned in chapter 1 of *Sefer Ezra* are precisely the sort of vessels which would likely have been used at Belshatzar's feast. The text lists smaller vessels; there is no mention of the Table or the Menorah being returned. We know nothing about them or their fate.^[20] It would seem

that Cyrus's initiative did not have as its main objective the return of *Am Yisrael* to their land, nor the rebuilding of the Temple. What he sought was mainly an arrangement for the vessels of the Temple, whose presence in Babylon intimidated him. He desperately wanted to send the vessels to their place, just as the elders of the Philistines had sent back the Ark of God after they had been stricken on its account in Ashdod and in Gat.^[21] He had no desire to be punished as Belshatzar had been punished before him.

However, unbeknownst to him, Cyrus was carrying out the role which Divine Providence had ordained for him, creating the turning point from which the great wave of return to Tzion could proceed:

For the sake of My servant, Yaakov, and Yisrael, My chosen one, I shall call you by your name; I have given you a title, although **you do not know Me**. I am God, and there is no other; besides Me there is no god; I have girded you, although **you do not know Me**. (ibid. 45:4-5)

Thus, Daniel and his Book were also a preparation for the building of the Second Temple. We may assume that Daniel's forgotten fame was now recalled, and that Daniel was able to advise Cyrus as to how to show favor to God's nation that was returning to its land, just as he had advised in the days of Nevukhadnetzar.

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We may add a further point. After the death of Belshatzar, we are immediately told:

And Darius the Mede received the kingship; he was about sixty-two years old. (6:1)

For what reason does the text specify the age of the King of Media? Usually, the *Tanakh* mentions only the ages of the kings of the house of David. The *Seder Olam* explains:

What do we learn from the words, "about sixty-two years old"? That on the same day that Nevukhadnetzar entered the Sanctuary, in the days of Yehoyakhin, his adversary was born – this was Darius. (*Seder Olam*, chapter 28)

The exile of Yehoyakhin and Nevukhadnetzar's subsequent invasion of the Sanctuary took place in the eighth year of Nevukhadnetzar's reign. The seventy years of the Babylonian exile are counted from Nevukhadnetzar's rise to power. Hence, sixty-two years had passed since Nevukhadnetzar had entered the Sanctuary.

The above *midrash* concerning Darius recalls an *aggadah* which appears in several places, according to which *Mashiach* was born on the day that the Temple was destroyed.^[22] Here, too, we have a hint of redemption: we recall that concerning Cyrus, whose reign commenced eight months after Babylon was conquered by Darius, Yishayahu had prophesized: "So says God to His anointed one, to Cyrus." As we saw

in the first verse of Sefer Daniel, along with the exile of Yehoyakhin, Nevukhadnetzar had also brought to Babylon the vessels of God's House. Sixty-two years later, it was Cyrus – Darius's heir – who, intentionally or unintentionally, undertook to reinstate them.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] See also *Megilla* 11b. The *gemara* there speaks about two years of Belshatzar's reign, but it is clear from the biblical text that he began a third year of reign.

[2] Admittedly, in this regard, the sources give rise to differences of opinion, since the *gemara* in *Megilla* 11b indicates that Cyrus ruled for five years.

[3] Actually, we arrived at a total of 71, but one year was shared by two kings – the end of one reign and the beginning of the next. As noted, the *gemara* mentions only two years of Belshatzar's reign.

[4] This is an alternative to the assumption of C. Chefetz in his article, "*Malkhut Paras u-Madai bi-Tekufat Bayit SheniUu-Lefaneha – Iyyun Me-Chadash*," *Megadim* 14 (5751), pp. 78-147. He maintains that *Chazal* possessed an tradition upon which they based their statements concerning history (see, for example, p. 82). Although this hypothesis cannot be disproved, in our view, it has no basis. We therefore maintain, as noted here and as mentioned repeatedly in our article, "*Mavo Le-Ma'amaro shel C. Chefetz al Malkhut Paras u-Madai*," *Megadim* 14 (5751), pp. 47-77, that *Chazal's* teachings in this regard should be viewed as being based solely on the actual text.

Two examples may serve to support our view:

a. According to *Chazal* (*Tosefta Zevachim* 13: 6 and elsewhere), the First Temple stood for 410 years. This calculation is arrived at very simply: if we add up the reign of each of the kings of Yehuda from the fourth year of Shlomo (when the Temple was inaugurated), as presented in *Sefer Melakhim*, we arrive at 429 years. Since there were 19 kings in total, we must subtract 19 "handover" years (since the text includes them in its count both as the final year of the previous king and the first year of the next king); thus we arrive at 410.

b. The *Seder Olam* (chapter 13) treats the reign of Shaul as a period of two years, on the basis of *Shmuel* I 13:1. According to most of the commentators, this verse should not be understood literally, since it seems unlikely that everything that is recorded concerning the reign of Shaul in *Sefer Shmuel* could have happened within such a brief period of time. Nevertheless, as we see, the *Seder Olam* does not deviate from the time-frame explicitly set forth in the text.

Concerning the calculation of the reign of each of the kings of Babylon, see clarification note 13 on Chefetz's article.

[5] Grintz posits that Belshatzar was the head of his father's army. See Y.M. Grintz, *Mechkarim Ba-Mikra* (Jerusalem, 5739), p. 266.

[6] Abravanel (*ma'ayan* 7, *tamar* 1) and Malbim (5:1) trace the events of this war based on the writings of Josephus. Cf. *Antiquities of the Jews* 10, 11, 2: he mentions this war, but says nothing of the apparently anticipated victory over Belshatzar.

[7] As we find in *Yirmiyahu* 50-51. Yirmiyahu drew a clear connection between the downfall of Babylon and the redemption of Israel.

[8] See *Melakhim* I 20.

[9] Mesa Stele, in A. Demsky, *Madrikh li-Mekorot Chitzoni'im le-Toldot Yisrael bi-Yemei ha-Mikra* (Ramat Gan, 5742), pp. 10-11.

[10] Abravanel (*ma'ayan* 7, *tamar* 1) and the Malbim raise the question of whether this was the queen mother, the queen grandmother, or the wife of Belshatzar.

[11] The *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 22a) cites four opinions among the *Amoraim* as to why the Babylonian enchanters were unable to decipher the message. We shall focus here on the opinion of Rav, who proposes that the inscription was written in "*atbash*" form – a form of *gematria* whereby the first letter of the alphabet (alef) is replaced by the last (taf); the second (bet) by the second to last (shin), etc. This form of writing with reference to the punishment awaiting Babylon is known to us from two sources in *Yirmiyahu*, and it may be that this is the basis for Rav's suggestion that here, too, the inscription

concerning the downfall of Belshatzar was written in "atbash" form. The two relevant verses in *Yirmiyahu* are: "The king of Sheshakh will drink after them [from the cup of punishment]" (*Yirmiyahu* 25:26) – "Sheshak" is "Bavel" (Babylon) in an "atbash" inversion; and "... and among those who dwell in Lev Kamai, a wind of destruction" (51:1) – "Lev Kamai" is the "atbash" inversion of "Kasdim" (Chaldeans).

[12] "I have made the earth, and man, and the beasts that are upon the face of the earth, by My great power and by My outstretched arm; and I give it to whoever I choose. And now I have given all of these lands into the hand of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, My servant; and I have given him all the beasts of the field, to serve him" (*Yirmiyahu* 27:5-6).

[13] See *Sanhedrin* 97b–98a and elsewhere.

[14] The lamentation, "*Eikha et asher kevar asuhu*," composed by R. Elazar ha-Kalir (*Kinot le-Tish'a be-Av*, D. Goldschmidt edition [Jerusalem, 5728], pp. 59-65) brings together a number of *midrashim* which view the Destruction as a reality dictated from the beginning of time owing to a primal decree or because of primal sins.

[15] Malbim (verses 34-36) explains that while the prophecy of *Yirmiyahu* in chapter 25 allots only seventy years to the kingdom of Babylon, according to the prophecy in chapter 27, the kingdom of Babylon belongs to Nevukhadnetzar, his son, and his son's son. It would not have been the time for Belshatzar to die were it not for his sin at the feast. This is Malbim's resolution of the seventy years, on the one hand, with the sin on the other. We propose a different explanation.

[16] In the *aggadot* surrounding the Destruction, we find similar expressions of awe for the Temple among the nations. For instance, the *midrash* describes how the Romans were afraid to start plundering the vessels of the Temple, so they enlisted a Jew – Yosef of Shita – to lead the way: "Let one of them [the Jews] be the first to take them [the vessels of the Temple]" (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:22).

[17] The difference between them, according to the *gemara*, is that Belshatzar began his calculation with the year that Nevukhadnetzar rose to power, and used that as the starting point for the seventy years allotted to the Babylonian kingdom. Achashverosh, on the other hand, began his count with the year of the exile of King Yehoyakim. In fact, the count began with the year of the Destruction of the Temple; indeed, seventy years later its reconstruction began (see *Zekharia* 1:12). The *gemara* hints here to the fact that there are actually two separate counts of seventy years: one pertaining to the duration of the Babylonian kingdom and the other to the duration of the Destruction –the length of time that the Temple would stand in ruins. We shall address this at greater length in chapter 12.

This principle of different possibilities for the starting point for a period of time recalls *Chaza'l's* teaching concerning the contradiction between different verses regarding the length of the Egyptian exile. From *Bereishit* 15:13, it appears that the exile will last for 400 years, while *Shemot* 12:40 speaks of 430 years. According to the *Mekhilta* (*Bo, parasha* 14), this discrepancy reflects the period of time in between the forging of the "covenant between the parts," when the Divine decree was issued, and the birth of Yitzchak, the point from which the 400-year count began.

[18] It should be pointed out that there is some similarity between our narrative and the episode of the Golden Calf. According to R. Yehuda Ha-levi, Moshe gave no indication to the people as to when he would come back to them after ascending Mount Sinai to receive the Torah (*Sefer Ha-Kuzari* 1:97). However, according to the *midrash* (*Shabbat* 89a), as cited by Rashi, Moshe told them that he would ascend the mountain and remain there for forty days. The people calculated wrongly and concluded that since the appointed time had come and gone, Moshe was not going to return. As a result, they too made a feast: "The people sat to eat, and they drank, and they rose up to make merry" (*Shemot* 32:6). Without addressing in detail the symbolic significance of each instance, we may say that, like the use of the vessels of the Temple in our case, the worship of the Golden Calf also represented a distortion of elements borrowed from the Divine Chariot and their misuse for forbidden purposes.

[19] See *Berakhot* 7a; *Sanhedrin* 27b.

[20] According to the *Tosefta* in *Sotah* (13: 1), the Ark had been hidden earlier on, in the days of Yoshiyahu, and was not taken to Babylon.

[21] See *Shmuel* I 5:6.

[22] See, for example, *Bamidbar Rabba* 13.