

**THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
YIRMIYAHU AND THE FALSE PROPHETS (23:9-40)**

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INTRODUCTION

In chapter 22, Yirmiyahu accused the kings of the house of David of having veered from David's path of judgment and justice, and at the beginning of chapter 23 (1-8) he reproached the "shepherds of Israel" for having breached their duties. The next collection of prophecies is directed primarily at the spiritual leadership of the people – the prophets. One of Yirmiyahu's most difficult and complex challenges as a prophet is standing up to the false prophets, who prophesy in the name of God but present the very opposite position, predicting peace for the nation. The question of distinguishing between true prophets and false prophets arises already in the section devoted to the prophet in *Devarim* 18:

(20) But the prophet who shall presume to speak a word in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. (21) And if you say in your heart: How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? (22) Know that when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken, but the prophet has spoken it out of presumption; you shall not be afraid of him.

The method of distinguishing between true and false prophets proposed in these verses seems to be simple. The main problem is that the criterion is not immediate; it can be tested only retroactively, by examining whether the prophecy was fulfilled over the long term. These verses, which deal with distinguishing between a prophet of God and a false prophet, are echoed in some of Yirmiyahu's prophecies, as we shall see below.

We are familiar with clashes between true and false prophets from other places in the Bible. The first recorded confrontation took place between Tzidkiyahu the son of Kena'ana and Mikhayahu the son of Yimla in I *Melakhim* 22, and from then on we find such confrontations with regard to most of the prophets – Yeshayahu, Yechezkel, and others. But for no other prophet does this type of confrontation play such a central role in his world as it does for Yirmiyahu. False prophets are mentioned in many places over the course of the book; later in the book, four false prophets with whom Yirmiyahu contended are even mentioned by name. Dealing with the false prophets put Yirmiyahu's life in danger; in the prophecy regarding God's Temple (7:26), the prophets along with the priests try to kill Yirmiyahu for his prophecy. The excessive repetition of the words "says the Lord" in Yirmiyahu's prophecies

(171 times!)¹ may be another expression of the his contending with the false prophets, against whom he was forced to emphasize that his prophecy was really the word of God.

THE FALSE PROPHETS AND THE CULTURE OF DECEIT IN THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU

In several places in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu, we find rebukes directed against the prophets. Yirmiyahu groups the prophets together with the priests and other leaders, accusing them of falsehood and even of prophesying in the name of the Ba'al:

The priests said not: Where is the Lord? and they that handle the Torah knew Me not; the rulers also transgressed against Me, and the prophets prophesied by the Ba'al and walked after things that did not profit. (2:8)

The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and My people love to have it so; and what will you do when the end of it comes? (5:31)

Elsewhere, Yirmiyahu identifies their prophecies as part of the culture of lies and deceit that took over the whole of Yehuda:

For from the least of them even to the greatest of them everyone is greedy for gain; and from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely. They have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people superficially, saying: Peace, peace; then there is no peace. (6:13-14)

Then said I: Ah Lord God! Behold, the prophets say to them: You shall not see the sword, neither shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place. Then the Lord said to me: The prophets prophesy lies in My name; I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spoke I to them. They prophesy to you a false vision and divination, and a thing of naught, and the deceit of their own heart. Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the prophets that prophesy in My name, and I sent them not, yet they say: Sword and famine shall not be in this land; by sword and famine shall these prophets be consumed. (14:13-15)

However, in these isolated verses Yirmiyahu's reference to the false prophets is general in nature. In chapter 23, Yirmiyahu focuses exclusively on the matter of the false prophets and establishes certain criteria for testing the credibility of a prophet. In this respect, chapter 23 serves as an important cornerstone for understanding the phenomenon of prophecy in general against the background of the phenomenon of false prophecy, and as a sort of introduction to the stories of Yirmiyahu's confrontations with the false

¹ In *Yeshayahu*, in comparison, the expression appears 24 times. See, in this regard, P. Meltzer, "Kavim Meyuchadim Be-Nevu'ato shel Yirmiyahu," *Iyyunim Be-Sefer Yirmiyahu II*, pp. 192-194.

prophets that will come in the following chapters. In the course of the chapter, the contrast between true and false prophets is presented from several perspectives, and emphasis is placed on the falseness that characterizes all of their behavior. We will not study the prophecy in order, but rather try to draw these criteria from it and understand their significance.

THE PERSONALITY OF THE PROPHETS

Several criteria that will be developed later in the prophecy are already concentrated in the opening section. At this stage, we will relate to only one criterion – the personality of the prophets:

(9) To the prophets, my heart within me is broken; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine has overcome, because of the Lord and because of His holy words. (10) For the land is full of **adulterers**; for because of swearing, the land mourns; the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. For their course was evil and their force unjust. (11) **For both prophet and priest are hypocrites**; even in My house have I found their wickedness, says the Lord. (12) Therefore, their way shall be to them like slippery ways in the darkness: into which they shall be driven and fall: for I will bring evil upon them, the year of their punishment, says the Lord. (13) And I have seen folly in the prophets of Shomron; they prophesied by the Ba'al and caused My people Israel to err. (14) But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing; **they commit adultery, and walk in lies**; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that none returns from their wickedness; they are all of them become to Me like Sodom, and its inhabitants like Amora. (15) Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets: Behold, I will feed them with wormwood and make them drink the water of gall: for from the prophets of Jerusalem has **hypocrisy** goes out to all the land.

The prophecy opens with a direct appeal "to the prophets." Yirmiyahu describes his own prophetic experience as a sort of drunkenness that fogs the senses because of the word of God. However, he does not contrast false prophecy with this experience, but rather shifts to a description of the sins of adultery in the country, accusing the prophets of Jerusalem of adultery. The focus here is on the moral conduct of the false prophets.

The conclusion that rises here is that one cannot separate the prophet's personality from his prophecy. Prophecy is not a profession external to the prophet's person; rather, it must fill his entire world. Hence, a prophet who sins in his personal life cannot be a true prophet in his public life. We should also consider the nature of the sin described here – adultery. Yirmiyahu uses this sin as a metaphor for the people's betrayal of God. It joins with the culture of lies and deceit that characterizes society in general and the false prophets in particular. Here, the connection between the two domains of their lives is strengthened. A person who has become accustomed to the culture of lies and deceit in his personal life will also be affected by it in his public life as a prophet.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PROPHECIES

A reexamination of the first section reveals another criterion. In verses 13-15, Yirmiyahu relates to the purpose of the prophecies. He draws a comparison between the prophets of Shomron, who prophesied around a century earlier, and the present day prophets of Jerusalem: "And I have seen in the prophets of Shomeron... But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen..." Yirmiyahu himself distinguishes between the two classes of prophets. The prophets of Shomron were prophets of the Ba'al – "they prophesied by the Ba'al" – whereas the prophets of Jerusalem deliver false prophecies in the name of God. What then is the purpose of the comparison? The common denominator, besides the falsehood that underlies them both, is found in the purpose of their prophecies. The prophets of Shomron prophesied in the name of the Ba'al and misled the people of Israel; they caused them to stray from the righteous path. In the same way, the prophets of Jerusalem also "strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that none returns from his wickedness." A prophet is also measured with respect to the outcome of his prophecy. A prophecy that leads to the misleading of the people, that causes the people to deteriorate morally, is not a true prophecy. The purpose of the true prophet is to bring the people to repent. To this end, he reveals his prophecy to the people.

Yirmiyahu used his prophecies of calamity not only to reveal the future to the people, but also to stir them to repent and change their ways. This is what he says about the true prophets (22):

But if they had stood in My counsel, then they should have caused My people to hear My words, **and turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings.**

Paradoxically, the prophecies of calamity are delivered so that the people should annul them with their repentance. False prophets, on the other hand, reassure the people and predict peace, and thus they strengthen the hands of the sinners and do not encourage them to mend their ways:

(16) Thus says the Lord of hosts: Hearken not to the words of the prophets that prophesy to you; they lead you into vanity; they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord. (17) They say still to them that despise Me: The Lord has said: You shall have peace; **and they say to everyone that walks after the stubbornness of his own heart: No evil shall come upon you.**²

² The expression "walking after the stubbornness of one's heart" appears a few more times in the book of *Yirmiyahu*. The source of this expression is *Devarim* 29:17-18: "Lest there should be among you... a root that bears gall and wormwood: and it come to pass, when he hears the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying: **I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart,** to add drunkenness to thirst." Here too we are dealing with a person who hears the curse pronounced upon the sinners, but disregards it and continues in his sinful path. It is interesting that the previous expression which likens sinners to gall and wormwood, is also found in our chapter: "Therefore thus says the Lord of

The false prophets challenge the prophecies of the true prophets, who say, for example, "I will bring evil upon them" (11:1), and prophesy instead that "no evil shall come upon you." This results in the moral corruption of society as a whole: "They are all of them become to Me like Sedom, and its inhabitants like Amora." Sedom and Amora might not serve here merely as a symbol of moral corruption. Prior to the overturning of Sedom and Amora, the angels went to Sedom and examined the actions of its residents; Lot warned his sons-in-law about what was to happen, and they scorned his warning. In the same way, the residents of Jerusalem who make light of the prophecy of calamity and remain unconcerned about their behavior are liable to bring upon themselves the fate of Sedom and Amora. Moral complacency and disregard of one who comes to rebuke – to the point of trying to kill him (Yirmiyahu in Jerusalem, and Lot and the angels in Sedom) – characterize both societies.³

(32) Behold, I am against those that prophesy lying dreams, says the Lord, and do tell them, **and cause My people to err** by their lies, and by their vain boasting; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them; **therefore they shall not profit this people at all**, says the Lord.

In addition to their prophecies being false, the false prophets sin by virtue of the fact that they do not benefit the people with their prophecies, but rather cause them harm. The role of the true prophet, from the days of the patriarch Avraham, is to warn about the faults of society and try to fix them, thus trying to prevent the moral deterioration so that it not be destroyed like Sedom. The false prophets, on the other hand, work in the opposite manner: They turn Jerusalem into Sedom by way of their false prophecies of reassurance, and thus they also betray their role as prophets.

THE WORDING OF THE PROPHECY

hosts concerning the prophets: Behold, I will feed them with **wormwood**, and make them drink **the water of gall**; for from the prophets of Jerusalem has hypocrisy gone out to all the land." The combination of these two expressions is found also in *Yirmiyahu* 9:13-14: "But **they have walked after the stubbornness of their own heart**, and after the Be'alim, as their fathers taught them. Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will feed them, this people, with **wormwood**, and give them **water of gall** to drink." Another similarity is the connection to Sedom and Amora, which appears also in our prophecy: "They are all of them become to Me like Sedom, and its inhabitants like Amora," and in *Devarim*: "And that the whole land is brimstone, and salt, and burning, that it is not sown, nor bears, nor does any grass grow on it, **like the overthrow of Sedom, and Amora**, Adma, and Tzevoyim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath" (29:22).

³ An additional link between Jerusalem and Sedom is apparently alluded to in 5:1: "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in its broad places, If you can find a man, if there be any that does justice, that seeks the truth; and I will pardon it." In this verse, Yirmiyahu addresses the problem of the "visibility" of righteous men in the city – are righteous men found in the city's streets, or do they stay indoors? On the connection between the righteous of Jerusalem and the righteous of Sedom, see Ibn Ezra in his commentary to *Bereishit* 18:26, regarding the requirement that the righteous of Sedom be "in the city": "The meaning of 'in the city' is that they fear God in public. And similarly: 'Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem.'"

Another criterion for distinguishing between the two types of prophecy - the wording of the prophecies – is alluded to in verses 30-31:

(30) Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, that steal My words every one from his neighbor. (32) Behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, that use their tongues, and say.

These verses describe two stylistic characteristics of the false prophets. Rashi explains:

"That steal My words every one from his neighbor" – They have spies by the true prophets, who hear the style in which they prophesy, and the false prophets speak in that language. Just as Chananya the son of Azur did; he heard Yirmiyahu prophesy in the upper market: "Behold, I will break the bow of Elam" (49:35), and he prophesied in the lower market: "I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylonia" (28:2)... "That use their tongues" – that teach their tongues to speak their lies in the style of "says the Lord," like the true prophets, so that they should believe them.

According to Rashi, the false prophets would steal prophecies from the true prophets and adapt them for their own needs and lies. Using the formulations of the true prophets and weaving their own words into them, they succeeded in causing the people to err. This explanation is supported by the fact that the verse speaks of those "that steal My words." This explanation is difficult, however, since the verse continues, "That steal My words **every one from his neighbor,**" and it difficult to assume that "his neighbor" refers here to a true prophet.

Another explanation can be offered in light of the account of the false prophets in the story of the confrontation between Mikhayahu the son of Yimla and Tzidkiyahu the son of Kena'ana, which is the first account of a conflict between a true and a false prophet (I *Melakhim* 22:6-7, 12-14):

(6) Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred men, and said to them, "Shall I go against Ramot-Gil'ad to battle, or shall I forbear?" And they said, "Go up, for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king." (7) And Yehoshafat said, "Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might inquire of him..."

(11) And Tzidkiya the son of Kena'ana made him horns of iron, and he said, "Thus says the Lord: With these shall you push Aram, until you have consumed them." (12) And all the prophets prophesied so, saying, "Go up to Ramot-Gil'ad and prosper; and may the Lord deliver it into the king's hand." (13) And the messenger that was gone to call Mikhayahu spoke to him, saying, "Behold now, the words of the prophets declare good to the king with one mouth; let your word, I pray you, be like the word of one of them, and speak that which is good." (14) And Mikhayahu said, "As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that will I speak."

The false prophets in this account are described as a homogeneous group, speaking in one language and using the same words: "Go up, and may the Lord deliver it into the king's hand." This is likely to have aroused Yehoshafat's suspicions concerning the prophets, and therefore he sent for "a prophet of the Lord." The messenger who was sent to Mikhayahu warns him not to veer from the prophetic consensus, to speak "good to the king **with one mouth.**" The *gemara* comments about this (*Sanhedrin* 89a):

"And Yehoshafat said: Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides"? [Achav] said to him: Surely there are all these. He said to him: I have a tradition from my grandfather's house that the same communication is revealed to many prophets, but no two prophets use the identical phraseology.

Proof to this may be brought from the continuation of the story. When Mikhayahu first mimics the wording of the other prophets, as the messenger had admonished him to do, the king, apparently Achav, responds by adjuring him to speak in the name of the Lord. That is to say, he recognizes the element of fraud in his prophecy:

(15) So he came to the king. And the king said to him, "Mikhayahu, shall we go against Ramot-Gil'ad to battle, or shall we forbear?" And he answered him, "Go, and prosper, and may the Lord deliver it into the hand of the king." (16) And the king said to him, "How many times shall I adjure you that you tell me **nothing but that which is true** in the name of the Lord?"

What is the meaning of this feature of true prophecy as opposed to false prophecy? The authenticity of a prophecy is reflected in the unique style of the prophet who delivers it. A prophet is not just a hollow tube that transmits the word of God. Rather, he receives the word of God and then formulates it in his own words and his own personal style. This accounts for the significant differences between the various prophets. The uniform style of the false prophets indicates that the prophecy stems from collective ecstasy. This prophecy is sort of a common motto proclaimed by all the prophets, which testifies to its inauthenticity and the absence of inner connection to the prophet himself.

THE EXPERIENCE OF PROPHECY

In addition to these three criteria, which are subject to external measure, our chapter has a fourth criterion that is different from the other three in its very essence. In verses 28-29, Yirmiyahu turns to the false prophets, who are convinced that they have attained prophecy, and sets an internal criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophecy, one that is connected to the nature of the prophetic experience.

Here, the most striking feature of false prophecy is the "dream." Indeed, the dream appears in Scripture as a common means of receiving prophecy, as we find with Yaakov in Bet-El, Shlomo in Giv'on, and others.

God says to Aharon and Miriam (*Bamidbar* 12:6): "If there be a prophet among you... I speak to him in a dream." But this involves a certain danger, as the realm of dreams is by its very nature a place where the boundary between reality and imagination becomes blurred; a person is liable to think that he received a prophecy from above, when in fact he merely had a dream and imagined fantasies in his mind. Moreover, in the complex and problematic reality which marked the kingdom of Yehuda during that period, it is likely that people who were deeply troubled and concerned about the situation would dream and imagine different solutions to the problem that would comfort them and those around them and provide them with hope.

Against the perception of prophecy as a dream, Yirmiyahu sets two metaphors that characterize true prophecy: fire and a hammer. The word of God is likened to fire several times in the book, and it is one of the strongest metaphors for prophecy, which, as may be recalled, also causes Yirmiyahu powerful internal suffering. The image of a hammer is also exceedingly strong, like a hammer that shatters a rock.⁴ Yirmiyahu means to say that the experience of prophecy is unequivocal; a prophet who experiences the intensity of prophecy – "like a burning fire shut up in my bones" (20:9) – cannot be mistaken about it.⁵ The inner distinction between imagination and prophecy is sharp and clear, and anyone can distinguish between the two in himself – "what is the chaff to the wheat."

In light of this internal criterion, we can understand also the meaning of the first criterion, which relates to the personality of the prophet. Only when prophecy is vague and imaginary and marked by the boundaries of a dream can a person make such a distinction and live his personal life as an ordinary person, and even come to serious sin. When, however, prophecy fills the prophet's soul with such intense power, one cannot separate his life as a prophet from his personal life. True prophecy demands of a person to devote himself to his mission with every fiber of his body and at every moment in his life.

THE BURDEN OF THE LORD

At the end of the prophecies concerning the false prophets, there appears a prophecy (33-40) that relates to the term "the burden of the Lord" as a designation for prophecy, and vehemently negates it. In contrast, a different term is proposed: "what the Lord has spoken":

(33) And when this people, or the prophet, or priest, shall ask you, saying: What is the burden of the Lord? you shall then say to them: What burden? I will forsake you, says the Lord. (34) And as for the prophet,

⁴ Another meaning of these metaphors is that prophecy does not ordinarily offer easy comfort, but rather makes demands and deals with dangers that are likely to come, and, thus is likened to fire and a hammer that consume and destroy. See, for example, 5:14: "Behold, I will make My words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them."

⁵ Another expression of the experience of prophecy appears at the beginning of the collection in verse 9, where prophecy is described as a deep ecstatic experience in which a person loses control of his senses.

and the priest, and the people that shall say: The burden of the Lord, I will even punish that man and his house. (35) Thus shall you say every one to his neighbor, and every one to his brother: What has the Lord answered? and: What has the Lord spoken? (36) And the burden of the Lord shall you mention no more, for the burden shall belong to the man of his word; but you have perverted the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts our God. (37) Thus shall you say to the prophet: What has the Lord answered you? and: What has the Lord spoken? (38) But if you say: The burden of the Lord, then thus says the Lord: Because you say this thing, The burden of the Lord, and I have sent to you, saying: You shall not say: The burden of the Lord; (39) therefore, behold, I Myself will utterly forget you, and I will forsake you, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, and cast you out of My presence. (40) And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten.

What is the meaning of the deep and stormy opposition to this formula, "the burden of the Lord," and how is it different from "what the Lord has spoken"? The question is sharpened by the fact that in several places, we find the term "burden" used in reference to prophecy.

The commentators have suggested several solutions. Rashi writes: "'What is the burden of the Lord' is wording of mockery, as His prophecy is a burden for them." In other words, this reflects a mocking attitude toward prophecy, which uses the double meaning of the word "burden" to express opposition to the demand that is latent in the prophecy. In line with this explanation, the *Metzudat David* suggests interpreting the continuation of the prophecy as another play on the word "burden," this time as a punishment measure for measure:

"You shall say" – What is fitting to do as punishment, I will do to you. And then He explains: "I will forsake you," like a person who leaves and casts off a burden that is too heavy for him. "I will punish" – In the previous verse He says that the prophet will answer them in a hurtful way that God will forsake Israel because of their sins and cast them off like a person who casts off a heavy burden, and here He says that He will remember to especially punish the man who spoke, along with his household.

Another interpretation, which delves more deeply into the meaning of the prophecy and connects it to the distinctions that were discussed above between true and false prophecy, was suggested by R. Mordechai Breuer.⁶ We will cite his words:

Three terms are used to describe a prophecy from three [different] perspectives: Prophecy is the "word" that issues forth from the mouth of God, it is a "burden" stated with respect to a nation or kingdom, and it is a "vision" revealed before the eyes of the prophet. Scripture is always

⁶ Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Yeshayahu* (Alon Shevut, 5770), pp. 66-67.

careful to refer to a prophecy by the fitting term: "Word" is always attached to the name of God, "burden" to a nation, and "vision" to a prophet. Anyone who changes the order and alters the formula coined by the prophets perverts "the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts our God" (*Yirmiyahu* 23:36).

Initially, prophecy is the word of God – not the word of the prophet – and the word of God stands forever. Before it is revealed in a prophetic vision, it already issued forth from God's mouth with His holy speech, and before it becomes a burden on a nation, it is the word of God that will not return empty-handed. The prophet does not speak the vision of his heart; rather, the vision is from the mouth of God. A nation does not bear its fated decree; rather, the burden is the "burden of the word of the Lord." The word of God is the source of the burden and the vision. Just as "word" relates to God, "burden" relates to a nation. The word issues forth from the mouth of God and becomes a burden on a nation. A nation that sinned will bear its sin; its sins will weigh down like a heavy burden. However, the burden is the burden of the nation, and not of God. It is not God whom they provoke to anger, but rather themselves, "provoking themselves to their own disgrace" (7:19). The burden of God does not bring the decree; rather, the decree of God casts the burden. The word of the people is not a burden for God, but rather the word of God is a burden for the people. For sin does not force its punishment upon God, but rather God sentences a sinner to punishment.

Only the false prophets, who cause the name of God to be forgotten, mention "the burden of the Lord." God did not send them or command them, and in His name they prophesy falsehood. From the burden of the people they learn about the burden of the Lord, and in that way they mix the chaff with the grain. "They speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord" (23:16). From their hearts they understand what is the burden of the Lord that forces a word upon God. They understand on their own the laws of the burden, which govern the heavenly retinue, because for them the burden is everything. And even God who gives prophecy to the false prophets is subject to the law of His burden. Thus, "the burden shall belong to the man of his word," and thus are perverted "the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts our God." But the living God is the king of the universe, and His word is above the weight of the burden. And where the word of God is inscribed, there coercion is nullified and there is no subjugation. Therefore, one who needs a prophet will say to him: "What has the Lord answered? and, What has the Lord spoken?" And only a prophet who stands in the counsel of the Lord will "perceive and hear His word"... "Burden" is never attached to God.

(Translated by David Strauss)