

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU**  
**Rav David Sabato**

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In honor of the matriarch of our family, Oma Ina,  
From her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren  
The Sondheim - Adler and Distenfeld Families.  
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In Honor of Avital Nehorah'a - Birthday, 30 Kislev  
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**Shiur #08: "The Words of the Covenant" in the Prophecy of Yirmiyahu  
(11:1-14)**

**Introduction**

The "covenant" and "the words [= conditions] of the covenant" that God made with the people of Israel are at the heart of the prophecy in chapter 11. Yirmiyahu's mission to the people opens with the hope and expectation that the covenant will be kept, but it closes with bitter disappointment over its violation by the people. The essence of this prophecy is a historical overview of the relations between God and Israel and the expectation that this historic covenant will be realized in the present. The prophecy alludes to various covenants that were made in the history of the people, in the past and in the present, and connects them all together. Which covenant or covenants is the prophecy addressing? It is also necessary to clarify the historical context serving as the backdrop for the prophecy.

**The Structure of the Prophecy**

The prophecy is divided into three sections by means of prominent literary markers, the three sections containing similar elements [1-5, 6-8, 9-13]. The first section [1-5] opens with the words: "The word that came to Yirmiyahu from the Lord, saying," and includes a call to the people (the men of Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem) to hear the words of the covenant that was made with their forefathers. The second section opens with a new utterance, which is based on the previous utterance: "Then the Lord said to me." The third section opens with the same words. The elements that repeat themselves in all three sections include the references to the people of Yehuda and Jerusalem and to the covenant made with the forefathers, as well as the term "hearing," which is found three times in each section. There is a

clear parallel between the three sections, as we will see over the course of this study.

To clarify the connections and differences between the sections, we have attached an appendix that sets the three sections against each other. This will help us examine the focus of each section, as well as the development from one section to the next.

## The First Covenant

The word that came to Yirmiyahu from the Lord, saying:  
Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Yehuda and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem;  
And say to them: Thus says the Lord God of Israel:  
Cursed be the man who obeys not the words of this covenant,  
which I commanded your fathers on the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying:  
Obey My voice, and do them,  
according to all which I command you;  
so shall you be My people, and I will be your God,  
that I may perform the oath which I have sworn to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as it is this day.  
Then answered I, and said, Amen, O Lord.

The first section opens with the words: "Hear the words of this covenant" (2). To which covenant does this refer? Ostensibly, our question is answered in the verses that follow: "Which I commanded your fathers on the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt." This suggests that we are dealing here with the covenant entered into at Mount Sinai, shortly after the exodus from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Support for this explanation may be brought from the continuation of the section, which spells out the content of the covenant: **"Obey My voice, and do them, according to all which I command you; so shall you be My people, and I will be your God."** This formulation is very similar to that which prefaces the giving of the Torah in *Shemot* (19:5-6): "Now therefore, **if you will obey My voice** indeed, and keep My covenant, **then you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples;** for all the earth is mine." Similar wording is found in the section of the blessings and curses at the end of the book of *Vayikra* (chap. 26), which were pronounced in connection to the covenant made at Sinai: "If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, **and do them... I will be your God, and you shall be My people.**" The Radak writes as follows:

And the words of the covenant are written in the Torah of Moshe, blessings and curses, "If you will hearken," and "if you will not hearken." And it is written at the end (*Devarim* 28:29): "These are the

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<sup>1</sup> A similar term is repeated in 7:2, in the prophecy about a new covenant (31:31), and in the prophecy about the emancipation of slaves (34:13). There too the prophet apparently refers to the covenant made at Sinai; the words, "on the day that I took them out," means close to the time of the exodus.

words of the covenant, which the Lord commanded Moshe to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moav, besides the covenant which He made with them in Chorev.” And at Chorev it says (*Shemot* 24:7-8): “And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people: and they said, ‘All that the Lord has said will we do, and obey.’ And Moshe took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you concerning all these words.’ And the words of the covenant are that they will obey the voice of God and do His commandments, and He will be their God, and they will be His people. And when he says “this,” [he means] as it is written in the Torah.

However, further study of the wording of the prophecy suggests that there is an allusion here to another covenant. Before the detailing of the content of the covenant, it says: "And say to them: Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Cursed be the man that obeys not the words of this covenant." The words, "Cursed be the man," clearly allude to the covenant made on the plains of Moav (*Devarim* 27:9-26), which includes various curses. Our prophecy also has additional linguistic parallels to the covenant made on the plains of Moav:

Take heed, and hearken, O Israel; this day **you are become the people of the Lord your God**. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God, and do His commandments and His statutes, which I command you this day... **Cursed be the man** that makes any carved or molten idol... **Cursed be he that does not maintain all the words of this Torah to do them, and all the people shall say, Amen.**

The purpose of the covenant is also similar in the two places. In *Devarim* (27:3), it says: "That you may go into the land which the Lord your God **gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey; as the Lord God of your fathers** has promised you." And in Yirmiyahu it says: "That I may perform the oath **which I have sworn to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey**, as it is this day."

But the most interesting parallel lies in the response to the covenant in the two cases. Following the words of God in the first part of the prophecy, Yirmiyahu responds with the word "Amen." Some understand this response as a confirmation of the curse, but it is clear from an examination of the covenant made at the plains of Moav that "Amen" has a more defined meaning. The pronouncement of each curse on the list is followed by the people saying "Amen:" "And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen'" (*Devarim* 27:15). Here, "Amen" serves as an acceptance of the curse by the party entering into the covenant. We find a similar phenomenon in the law governing a woman who is suspected of adultery (*sota*); after the reading of the curses that will fall upon the woman if she is found guilty, the woman responds "Amen, Amen" (*Bamidbar* 5:22).<sup>2</sup> It appears, therefore, that we are dealing here with a sort of

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<sup>2</sup> The word "Amen" appears in the Torah only in these two places. In both cases, a person is adjured about the sanctions to be applied should a covenant be broken – the matrimonial

prophetic reenactment of the covenant made at Chorev and at the plains of Moav, but the role of the people in the heavenly court is played by the prophet Yirmiyahu,<sup>3</sup> who represents his people, and the role of the priest and the Levite who administers the oath to the people is played by God Himself.<sup>4</sup> From Yirmiyahu's historical perspective, two covenant-related events from the people's past become joined as a single process, which continues into Yirmiyahu's historical present.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Renewal of the Covenant in the Days of Yoshiyahu as the Backdrop of the Prophecy**

What is the backdrop of this unique prophecy, and why was it necessary to reconfirm the ancient covenant? The full significance of this covenant becomes apparent in light of its historical context. A similar incident involving the renewal of a covenant took place at the beginning of Yoshiyahu's reign, close to the time that Yirmiyahu began to prophesy. It began with the discovery of a Torah scroll in the Temple (II *Melakhim* 22:8-13):

(8) And Chilkiyahu the High Priest said to Shafan the scribe, "I have found a book of the Torah in the house of the Lord." And Chilkiya gave the book to Shafan and he read it. (9) And Shafan the scribe came to the king and brought back word to the king, and said, "Your servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of those that do the work, who have the oversight of the house of the Lord." (10) And Shafan the scribe told the king, saying, "Chilkiya the priest has given me a book." And Shafan read it before the king. (11) And it came to pass, when the king had

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covenant and the covenant between God and Israel. The adjuration is done through a representative of God: In the case of the adulterous wife, the priest administers the oath, whereas with the people, it is administered by the Levites. The sanction in each case is worded in terms of a curse: "the bitter (*hame'arerim*) waters," "cursed (*arur*) be the man." As stated, in both cases, the person confirms the sanction by declaring, "Amen."

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the prophecy opens with: "And speak [plural] to the men of Yehuda." It is likely that this prophecy was intended for all the true prophets who were active at that time (e.g., Uriyahu from Kiryat-Ye'arim, who is mentioned in chapter 26, Tzefanya, and others), and they were given the mission to prod the people to accept the covenant that was renewed by Yoshiyahu. Thus writes the Radak: "'And speak' – You and the other true prophets with you, for Tzefanya prophesied in the days of Yoshiyahu, and perhaps there were others. He said to him that they should speak the words of the covenant to the men of Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem."

<sup>4</sup> A critical comment on this detail is found in *Sifrei Devarim* 320: "R. Dostai ben Yehuda says: Read not: 'In whom there is no faith' (*amun*) (*Devarim* 32:20), but rather: In whom there is no Amen, for they did not want to answer Amen after the prophets when they were blessing [= cursing] them. And similarly it says: 'That I may perform the oath which I have sworn to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as it is this day.' And there was not one among them who opened his mouth and answered Amen until Yirmiyahu came and answered Amen, as it says: 'Then answered I, and said, Amen, O Lord.'" According to this *midrash*, Yirmiyahu answered Amen because he was the only one who accepted the conditions of the covenant; he does not represent anyone else of his people. As we shall see below, this follows from the end of the prophecy.

<sup>5</sup> We find this phenomenon in other historical accounts given by Yirmiyahu. Thus, for example, in his account of the years in the wilderness in chapter 2, and in his words about the sacrifices in chapter 7.

heard the words of the book of the Torah, that he rent his clothes. (12) And the king commanded Chilkiya the priest, and Achikam the son of Shafan, and Akhbor the son of Mikhaya, and Shafan the scribe, and Asaya the king's servant, saying, (13) "Go inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Yehuda, concerning the words of this book that is found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened to the words of the book, to do according to all that which is written concerning us."

According to the *midrash*, the Torah scroll was opened to the section of the curses in the book of *Devarim*. In the wake of the discovery of the Torah scroll, Yoshiyahu turns to the prophetess, Chulda:

(14) So Chilkiyahu the priest, and Achikam, and Akhbor, and Shafan, and Asaya went to Chulda the prophetess, the wife of Shalum the son of Tikva, the son of Charchas, keeper of the wardrobe (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the second quarter), and they spoke with her. (15) And she said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: Tell the man that sent you to me: (16) Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will bring evil upon this place and upon its inhabitants, even all the words of the book which the king of Yehuda has read: (17) because they have forsaken Me, and have burned incense to other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore, My wrath shall be kindled against this place and shall not be quenched.

Chulda's response does not bode well. The extended breach of the covenant in the previous generations sealed the fate of the kingdom of Yehuda for destruction. Despite the words of Chulda, Yoshiyahu does not give up the hope to change and to heal the deep rift, and he carries out a sweeping process of reform in his kingdom, culminating in the eradication of idol worship and the renewal of the covenant:

(2) And the king went up into the house of the Lord, and all the men of Yehuda and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the Lord. (3) And the king stood by a pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all their heart and all their soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people stood to the covenant.

Unlike Chulda, Yirmiyahu, who was still at beginning of his prophetic mission, supported this process and expressed hope in Yoshiyahu's ability to change God's decree. Yirmiyahu's prophecy in our chapter is not merely a reenactment of the ancient covenants. It serves as a heavenly mirror that reflects the covenant that is taking place in the earthly world. While Yoshiyahu is standing before all the people and bringing them into a covenant, with the people answering "Amen," Yirmiyahu stands as the people's representative in the heavenly court and ratifies the covenant before God Himself. The

covenant made by Yoshiyahu is perceived in Yirmiyahu's prophecy as a direct continuation of the covenants made in the distant past. As opposed to Chulda, Yirmiyahu says that the chain has not been completely severed. It is still possible to renew the ancient covenant made at Sinai and the plains of Moav, and thereby bridge the chasm of the years of Menashe and Amon.

### **The Second Stage: the Warning [6-8]**

Then the Lord said to me:

Proclaim all these words in the cities of Yehuda, and in the streets of Jerusalem, saying:

Hear the words of this covenant, and do them.

For I earnestly forewarned your fathers on the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, to this day, forewarning them from morning till night, saying: Obey My voice. Yet they obeyed not, nor inclined their ear, but walked everyone in the stubbornness of their evil heart; therefore, I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did them not.

In verses 6-8, Yirmiyahu is once again commanded to inform the inhabitants of Yehuda of the words of the covenant. However, unlike the first section, which includes an account of the making of the covenant itself ("Cursed be the man that obeys not the words of this covenant... Then answered I, and said, Amen"), here we are dealing with a later stage. For what purpose were the words of the covenant read to the people at this time?

To understand the uniqueness of this stage, let us compare the two stages: The second stage includes elements similar to those found in the first stage. It too opens with an appeal to Yehuda and Jerusalem in which Yirmiyahu calls upon the people to listen and to fulfill the words of the covenant. Then he shifts to a historical overview of the forefathers' attitude toward the covenant. But here the tone is more negative. In the first section, the past is the moment when the nation was created and the covenant was made, and the people are commanded to keep the words of the covenant so that God can fulfill the promise that He had made at that time. Here, on the other hand, the reference to the past serves as a warning about the dangers of the present. Those forefathers who had been commanded did not listen nor did they keep the covenant, despite the repeated warnings, from that time to the present day. The historical continuity from the days of the forefathers is emphasized here, but it bears a negative meaning: the concern that the new covenant will not be kept hovers here in the background. The history of intransigence and disobedience is liable to be repeated once again. Earlier, it said: "Which I commanded your fathers... saying: Obey My voice...", whereas here it says: "For I earnestly forewarned your fathers... from morning till night, saying: Obey My voice. Yet they obeyed not." Here it becomes clear why the oath made to the forefathers that was mentioned in the first section has not yet been fulfilled: "Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did them not."

Another difference is found in the opening: In the first section it says: "And speak to the men of Yehuda and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem," whereas here it says: "Proclaim all these words in the cities of Yehuda and in the streets of Jerusalem." Speaking to the people is replaced by proclaiming in the cities and streets. This change may reflect the negative result: An urgent warning must be proclaimed in the streets of the cities because the words were not heard by and did not penetrate into the hearts of the people.

It stands to reason that this prophecy was delivered at the end of the days of Yoshiyahu, against the background of the decline of Yoshiyahu's upheaval, which had started as a great hope for change and which was impressive in its scope, but did not succeed in penetrating deeply and creating an essential change in the hearts of the people of Israel. This decline is reflected in a number of Yirmiyahu's prophecies. The *midrashim* describe the gap between the superficial image and the non-fulfillment of the covenant in actual practice in the days of Yoshiyahu, and this emerges also from Yirmiyahu's prophecies in chapters 2-3. Yirmiyahu's warning, in which the negative tone dominates and the hope is muted, reflects this situation.

### **The Third Stage: Breaking the Covenant**

And the Lord said to me:

A conspiracy is found among the men of Yehuda and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear My words, and they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Yehuda have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers.

Therefore, thus says the Lord: Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry to Me, I will not hearken to them.

Then shall the cities of Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem go and cry to the gods to whom they offer incense; but they shall not save them at all in the time of their trouble.

For according to the number of the your cities are your gods, O Yehuda; and according to the number of the streets of Jerusalem have you set up altars to the shameful thing, altars to burn incense to the Ba'al.

Therefore, pray not you for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them; for I will not hear them at the time that they cry to Me for their trouble.

Verses 9-13 explicitly mention the rebuke and the punishment. God turns to the prophet and does not command him to speak to the people, because the repeated appeal to the people has failed. Note should be taken of the description of the sin in verse 9: "A conspiracy is found among the men of Yehuda and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem." Finding a conspiracy

means exposing a rebellion.<sup>6</sup> The breaching of the covenant, which in the days of Yoshiyahu took place in secret, is now being done openly and in broad daylight. This is a public declaration of a revolt.

It stands to reason that this prophecy was delivered in the days of Yehoyakim, the son of Yoshiyahu, as proposed by the Radak:

"And the Lord said to me: A conspiracy is found" – It seems... that his prophecy was stated in the days of Yehoyakim, and this is what it says: "A conspiracy is found," that is to say, they rebelled against Me after having repented in the days of Yoshiyahu, and they returned to their sins of their ancestors – Amon, Menashe, and Achaz.

The breach of the covenant in the days of Yehoyakim is also reflected in Yirmiyahu's prophecy in chapters 7 and 26, as we demonstrated in previous *shiurim*. We will point out below certain parallels between the chapters.

Like in the first section, here too continuity is drawn between the past of the days of the forefathers and the present, but here it bears a negative meaning: Just as their forefathers violated the covenant, so too do the sons.

In the continuation, a description is given of the punishment. Here too mention is made of the cities of Yehuda and the streets of Jerusalem, but in a different context, emphasizing the wide and public spread of idol worship: "For according to the number of your cities, O Yehuda; and according to the number of the streets of Jerusalem have you set up altars to the shameful thing, altars to burn incense to the Ba'al."

After describing the punishment in the third section, the prophecy closes with God's words to Yirmiyahu, preventing him from praying on behalf of the people. Similar statements appear in chapter 7 after the prophecy regarding God's Temple, which was also delivered during the reign of Yehoyakim. Here the reason is clear: Yirmiyahu wishes to serve as sort of a prayer leader for the entire nation, just as he had served as their agent to accept the covenant at the beginning of the prophecy. But this opportunity is denied him, as the people did not stand behind him. It turns out that Yirmiyahu is a prayer leader without a congregation, and he therefore can no longer pray on behalf of his people.

An analysis of the prophecy indicates that the three parts were delivered in three different periods; the fact that they were joined together in our chapter reflects the deterioration of the spiritual condition of the people – from hope and expectation for upholding the covenant and rehabilitating the

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<sup>6</sup> For the meaning of the expression, "A conspiracy (*keshet*) is found," see also II *Melakhim* 17:4: "And the king of Ashur found treachery (*keshet*) in Hoshea: for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and brought no present to the king of Ashur." "Finding a conspiracy" means exposing the plans for a rebellion that had become open and concrete, and this is the way the term should be understood here as well. Another connection between these two passages lies in the fact that the king of Ashur's finding the treachery led in the end to the exile of the kingdom of Israel.

relationship between the people and their God to absolute disappointment and the sealing of their fate, when even the right to pray and cry out to God is taken away from the prophet who wishes to intercede on behalf of his people.

### **The Difference Between Hearing and not Hearing**

In conclusion, let us consider the repetition of the root *shama*, "hear, obey," which appears nine times over the course of the prophecy and unifies it stylistically and conceptually. As stated earlier, the root appears three times in each section. In the first two sections, the hearing/obeying refers to the hearing/obeying of the words of the covenant, or the lack thereof. In the first section, God pleads with the nation to hear the words of the covenant: "Hear the words of this covenant... obey My voice," and He warns them not refuse to hear/obey: "Cursed be the man who obeys not the words of this covenant." The second section also opens with a command to hear, "Hear the words of this covenant," but it closes on a pessimistic note, with a description of the failure in the past: "For I earnestly forewarned your fathers... saying: Obey My voice. Yet they obeyed not." In the third part, all three instances appear in a negative context. He describes the failure in the present, when the people return to the stubbornness of their ancestors in the past: "They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear My words...." Corresponding to the people's refusal to hear, the punishment is presented as God's not hearing their cries, measure for measure: "And though they shall cry to Me, I will not hearken to them... for I will not hear them at the time that they cry to Me for their trouble."

## Appendix: The Three Sections of the Prophecy

<b>The covenant made at Sinai and at the plains of Moav [1-5]</b>	<b>Renewal of the covenant in the days of Yoshiyahu [6-8]</b>	<b>Breaking the covenant in the days of Yehoyakim [9-13]</b>
<p>The word that came to Yirmiyahu from the Lord, saying:  <b>Hear the words of this covenant</b>, and speak <u>to the men of Yehuda, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem</u>                      and say to them: Thus says the Lord God of Israel:                      Cursed be the man <b>that obeys not the words of this covenant</b>, which I commanded <u>your fathers on the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt</u>, from the iron furnace, saying:  <b>Obey</b> My voice and do them,                      according to all which I command you,                      so shall you be My people, and I will be your God,                      that I may perform the oath which I have sworn to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as it is this day.                      Then answered I and said, "Amen, O Lord."</p>	<p>Then the Lord said to me:                      Proclaim all these words <u>in the cities of Yehuda, and in the streets of Jerusalem</u>, saying:  <b>Hear the words of this covenant</b>, and do them. For I <u>earnestly forewarned your fathers on the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, to this day</u>, forewarning them from morning till night, saying: <b>Obey</b> My voice. Yet <b>they obeyed not</b>, nor inclined their ear, but walked everyone in the stubbornness of their evil heart.                      Therefore, I brought upon them <b>all the words of this covenant</b>, which I commanded them to do; but they did them not.</p>	<p>And the Lord said to me:                      A conspiracy is found <u>among the men of Yehuda, and among the inhabitants of Jerusalem</u>.                      They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused <b>to hear</b> My words; and they have gone after other gods to serve them; <u>the house of Israel and the house of Yehuda have broken My covenant</u> which I made <u>with their fathers</u>.                      Therefore, thus says the Lord: Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry to Me, <b>I will not hearken</b> to them.                      Then shall all the cities of Yehuda and inhabitants of Jerusalem go and cry to the gods to whom they offer incense, but they shall not save them at all in the time of their trouble. For according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Yehuda; and according to the number of the streets of Jerusalem have you set up altars to the shameful thing, altars to burn incense to the Ba'al.                      Therefore, pray not you for this people, nor lift</p>

		up a cry or prayer for them; for <b>I will not hear</b> them at the time that they cry to Me for their trouble.
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