

Sachar V'Onesh?

Addressing Suffering as We Look to the New Year

Mrs. Norma Mintz

Faculty, Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School · AGS '05

The eleventh principle [of the 13 principles of faith] is that God rewards those who keep His commandments, and punishes those who transgress them.

Rambam, Mishna Sanhedrin chapter 10

והיסוד האחד עשר שהוא יתעלה משלם גמול טוב למי שמקיים מצוות התורה, ומעניש מי שעובר על אזהרותיה, ושגמולו הגדול הוא העולם הבא, ועונשו החמור הכרת פירוש המשנה לרמב"ם סנהדרין פרק י

Each year as Rosh Hashanah approaches, we must reflect upon the previous year and consider each of our spiritual levels, striving to attain righteousness so that we may be granted sweet new years. And yet, as adults we understand that things are not nearly so black and white. While as children we can understand Rosh Hashanah by envisioning scales that concretely weigh our *mitzvot* and *aveirot*, as we encounter complex situations in the world we begin to see that things are not quite so simple. Those scales seem to have no recognition of the realities of this world in which events do not necessarily correlate with individuals' acts of good and evil.

As such, we continuously struggle to make sense of notions of righteousness and sin, reward and punishment. Theodicy stands as perhaps the most difficult theological question, but it is difficult to consider the notion of God's punishing us at all. As believing Jews, we stand before God on Rosh Hashanah in attempts to do teshuvah, at least partially so that we may avoid suffering. But to what extent can we understand how and why suffering occurs?

A study of instances of punishment and suffering in Tanach allows us to gain a sense of how certain voices have addressed this question over time. In particular, the stories of our kings, culminating in the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, give us varied perspectives on how to understand suffering, as more than one book of Tanach focuses on that critical period in our history.

Most obviously, *Sefer Melachim* discusses this time period. Chazal tell us that Yirmiyahu wrote *Sefer Melachim* after witnessing the destruction of his country and people. He was a man who lived a life of great sadness and isolation, knowing what was to come but doing everything possible to prevent it. In fact, according to Chazal, Yirmiyahu wrote three books in Tanach, and

while there is overlap among them, each has a distinct function and purpose: *Sefer Eichah* is a poem of lamentation, in which Yirmiyahu bemoans the fate Bnei Yisrael were forced to endure as a result of their abandonment of God and His ways. *Sefer Yirmiyahu* tells us Yirmiyahu's personal story, in which we encounter his attempts to save *Malchut Yehudah* as well as his hardships. *Sefer Melachim* is an account of the history of Bnei Yisrael that led to the destruction of the Mikdash, and Yirmiyahu tells it with a constant underlying question: What went wrong?

Consistently, Yirmiyahu feels that there is one primary answer to this question: Idolatry. In Yirmiyahu's own time, Hashem made clear to Yirmiyahu that *avodah zarah* was causing the collapse of the nation. We find in *Sefer Melachim* and even more so in the various prophecies by Yirmiyahu in *Sefer Yirmiyahu* that the navi beseeches his people to stop committing idolatry in order to overturn God's prescribed punishment.

And yet, in Yirmiyahu's account of history, reward and punishment do not always correspond to individuals' acts as expected. Yirmiyahu knows that God gave him the formula for reversing God's anger and setting things right, but his histories include kings who flagrantly disobey God but who avoid punishment. For instance, in *Melachim I*, 17: 23-28, the text describes Omri, a king of *Malchut Yisrael*. Omri was one of the most powerful and successful kings of *Malchut Yisrael*, establishing the area of Shomron as the capital of his kingdom and building considerably in his time. However, in Yirmiyahu's worldview, this makes no sense. Omri was not only "evil in the sight of the Lord," but he even "dealt wickedly above all that were before him" (v. 25). Omri was the worst that there had even been, and yet, God allowed him to flourish politically and even enabled him to begin a new dynasty, something that *Malchut Yisrael* had not seen consistently in some time.

By contrast, Yirmiyahu later introduces the reader to Hoshea, the final king of Yisrael. In Hoshea's time, Ashur invades Yisrael and exiles the ten tribes from the land. This calamity scatters the people of Yisrael and effects the phenomenon we call "the ten lost tribes." According to Yirmiyahu's "training," we should expect to find that Hoshea is a terrible idolater who flagrantly violates God's will, as the final straw who breaks the camel's back; however, Yirmiyahu describes the situation otherwise. In this instance, Yirmiyahu once again compares a king to his predecessors, and once again this comparison highlights a troubling issue. In *Melachim II*, *perek 17 passuk 2*, we do find that Hoshea was an evil king, "yet not as the kings of Israel that were before him." After years of evil and sin, the exile occurred during the reign of a man who was not quite as bad as those who ruled before. One may argue that Bnei Yisrael were so mired in sin that God had decided prior to Hoshea's rule that the time had come to bring the punishment, but this explanation does not resolve the issue that those of Hoshea's generation must have felt, and that Yirmiyahu must have felt when looking at the facts: Things fell apart when the king was not even as bad as those that came before.

There are many more examples of these sorts of injustices in *Sefer Melachim*. One of the most striking is that of Menashe. Menashe was king of Yehudah and the son of the great Chizkiyahu. Menashe likely could have turned the tide for *Malchut Yehudah* and saved the Beit Hamikdash had he followed in his father's footsteps, but instead, he fervently embraced idolatry and evil. As a result of his evil, God decrees that he will wipe out *Malchut Yehudah*:

Therefore thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I bring such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab; and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will cast off the remnant of Mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies; because they have done that which is evil in My sight, and have provoked Me, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day.'

Melachim II 21:12-15

לכן כה אמר ה' אלהי ישראל הנני מביא רעה על ירושלים ויהודה אשר כל [שמעיו] שמעה תצלנה שתי אזניו: ונטיתי על ירושלים את קו שמרון ואת משקלת בית אחאב ומחיתי את ירושלים כאשר ימחה את הצלחת מחה והפך על פניה: ונטשתי את שארית נחלתי ונתתים ביד איביהם והיו לבז ולמשסה לכל איביהם: יען אשר עשו את הרע בעיני ויהיו מכעסים אתי מן היום אשר יצאו אבותם ממצרים ועד היום הזה:
מלכים ב כא:יב-טו

In this account, Hashem declares that as a result of the atrocities that Menashe and his generation performed, *Malchut Yehudah* will one day be destroyed. While there is no denying that Menashe's actions deserved punishment, there is one glaring philosophical question that arises from this story: Why is Menashe left unpunished? Menashe abandoned the teachings of his righteous father, Chizkiyahu, and he violated God's precepts in an extraordinary fashion, yet he ruled for 55 years, the longest reign of any king of Yehudah, enjoying power and prosperity.

In this example and others, *Sefer Melachim* paints a picture of suffering that is at times justifiable and necessary, as a punishment for our abandonment of God and His principles, but one that is at times confusing and seemingly unjust. This tension exists throughout the *sefer*, and it seems that it exists because of the book's historical context. We must remember that *Sefer Melachim* was written by Yirmiyahu, the *navi* who lived and prophesied in the final years of the first Beit Hamikdash. He witnessed firsthand the suffering that his people were forced to endure, and this experience no doubt shaped him.⁹ This personal connection and this proximity to the event inevitably affect Yirmiyahu's perspective.

This perspective becomes even more prominent when it is compared to another *sefer* from Tanach that accounts for all of that same historical period: *Sefer Divrei Hayamim*. While *Divrei Hayamim* covers a much larger period of time than *Sefer Melachim*, the vast majority of the *sefer* discusses the same time period that is presented in *Melachim*; however, many discrepancies arise in their respective presentations.

⁹ It is no wonder, then, that the entire *sefer* is framed by the history of the Beit Hamikdash. *Sefer Melachim* opens with the story of the David Hamelech's final days, but the story really serves to set up David's successor: Shlomo, the ultimate builder of the Beit Hamikdash. The *sefer* then describes Shlomo's planning, building, and dedicating the Beit Hamikdash. After Shlomo's death, the *sefer* explains how and why the kingship split into two separate entities: the kingdom of Yehudah, under the rule of David and Shlomo's descendants, and the kingdom of Yisrael, under the rule of varied individuals who mostly did not follow any familial descent. The *sefer* then recounts hundreds of years of history leading up to the Assyrian exile of *Malchut Yisrael*, and later the Babylonian exile of *Malchut Yehudah*, coupled with the destruction of the Mikdash.

Sefer Divrei Hayamim focuses specifically on the kings of Yehudah,¹⁰ so Omri and Hoshea do not figure prominently, but the example of Menashe serves to show how very different the presentations are. In *Divrei Hayamim*, the text describes Menashe's evil deeds as it did in *Melachim*, but it also gives a reason as to why Menashe was not deserving of the horrific punishments that future generations ultimately receive:

And when [Menashe] was in distress, he besought the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And he prayed unto Him; and He was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Menashe knew that the LORD He was God. Now after this he built an outer wall to the city of David, on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entrance at the fish gate; and he compassed about Ophel, and raised it up a very great height; and he put captains of the army in all the fortified cities of Judah. And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the LORD, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he built up the altar of the LORD, and offered thereon sacrifices of peace-offerings and of thanksgiving, and commanded Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. Nevertheless the people did sacrifice still in the high places, but only unto the LORD their God.

Divrei Hayamim II 33:12-15

וכהצר לו חלה את פני ה' אלהיו
ויכנע מאד מלפני אלהי אבתיו:
ויתפלל אליו ויעתר לו וישמע תחנונו
וישיבהו ירושלם למלכותו וידע
מנשה כי ה' הוא האלהים: ואחרי כן
בנה חומה חיצונה לעיר דויד מערבה
לגיאון בנחל ולבוא בשער הדגים
וסבב לעפל ויגביהה מאד וישם שרי
חיל בכל הערים הבצרות ביהודה:
ויסר את אלהי הנכר ואת הסמל
מבית ה' וכל המזבחות אשר בנה
בהר בית ה' ובירושלם וישלך חוצה
לעיר: [ויכן] ויבן את מזבח ה' ויזבח
עליו זבחי שלמים ותודה ויאמר
ליהודה לעבוד את ה' אלהי ישראל:
אבל עוד העם זבחים בבמות רק לה'
אלהיהם:

דברי הימים ב לג:יב-יז

In *Divrei Hayamim*, we learn that Menashe underwent a dramatic process of *teshuvah*, which helps us to reconcile his great success with his earlier terrible behavior. The inclusion of this story is representative of the tendency of *Divrei Hayamim* to present history as correlating directly with people's behaviors. *Divrei Hayamim's* guiding principle is that of *Torat Hagmul*, the idea that God rewards righteousness and punishes evil. As such, the very same historical stories that seemed unjust in *Sefer Melachim* are presented in *Divrei Hayamim* so that they make sense according to this philosophical principle.

Having said that, it is very difficult to understand how such a significant detail could have been omitted from *Melachim*. If Menashe truly turned his life around and did *teshuvah*, then why did Yirmiyahu not write that information in his account?

Ultimately, we can only speculate as to the answer, but it seems likely that its omission is once again related to the book's historical context. It is difficult to appraise history when one is so close to it. People have very emotional responses to the disasters that they feel very acutely. It is quite possible that Yirmiyahu was not able to view Menashe, an extreme evildoer who caused the

¹⁰ This is a product of the *sefer's* historical perspective, as is the *sefer's* very different perspective on suffering, though it is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, this focus is due to the fact that Ezra, the author of *Divrei Hayamim*, was primarily trying to convince the remnants of Yehudah and Binyamin (*Malchut Yehudah*) to return to Yerushalayim to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash.

deaths of many, as having truly done *teshuvah*. As such, when presenting the kingship of Menashe, he presented the information that he truly believed was representative of Menashe's reign and the part that he played in the destruction of the Mikdash.

This is representative of the tension that exists between trying to understand human suffering while recognizing our limits in understanding, particularly when we find ourselves in historical proximity to the event. For example, even if we ourselves are not survivors of the Holocaust, the terrors of the Holocaust are still an open wound. Perhaps for that reason, when Harav Ovadia Yosef in 2000 stated that the victims of the Holocaust were in fact reincarnations of people who had sinned in previous lives, he faced a tremendous backlash. The pain of the Holocaust is too near and too great to tie it neatly together with a bow. The idea of characterizing the victims of the Holocaust as being in any way deserving of what they experienced was too difficult to consider. Similarly, if one tries to give a pat reason as to why September Eleventh occurred or why any of our loved ones may suffer, it is extremely difficult to accept. A person's readiness for reasons and explanations is limited when one is so close to the painful situation.

By contrast, *Divrei Hayamim* was written in a very different time period than the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Chazal explain that Ezra wrote *Sefer Divrei Hayamim* during the period of *Shivat Tzion*. During *Shivat Tzion*, the king of the Persian Empire, Koresh, gave Bnei Yisrael permission to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash. Ezra was one of the leaders of the time and it is clear that he saw this as an opportunity to correct his nation's history. Unfortunately, Ezra found that much of his nation was not interested in uprooting itself in order to rebuild Yerushalayim and the Beit Hamikdash. As such, Ezra's *Divrei Hayamim* is a consideration of the history leading up to Koresh's proclamation, in an attempt to convince Bnei Yisrael of the importance of taking hold of the moment and returning to Israel.

Perhaps for this reason, *Divrei Hayamim* is so focused on *Torat Hagmul*. While Yirmiyahu is too close to the situation to gain a real perspective on the big picture, Ezra is able to look at the broader perspective. The wound is no longer raw and he is thus able to take a larger view of history and use it as an impetus for change. He emphasizes the benefits of clinging to God and the perils of abandoning Him. He uses his nation's history as a learning tool so that it will shape Am Yisrael and motivate the nation to choose wisely.¹¹

¹¹ There are many more examples for how each of the two books follows these patterns. In one striking example in *Melachim II*, *perek* 23, the text describes Yoshiyahu's dramatic acts of *teshuvah* and his reinstatement of the *brit* with Hashem. Toward the end of the description, the text states:

כ וְכִמְהוּ לֹא-הָיָה לְפָנָיו מֶלֶךְ, אֲשֶׁר-שָׁב אֶל-יְהוָה בְּכָל-לְבָבוֹ וּבְכָל-נַפְשׁוֹ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדוֹ--כְּכֹל, תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה; וְאַתְרֵיוֹ, לֹא-קָם כְּמֹהוּ. **כו**
אֶךְ לֹא-שָׁב יְהוָה, מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ הַגָּדוֹל, אֲשֶׁר-תָּרָה אַפּוֹ, בִּיהוּדָה--עַל, כָּל-הַכְּעִסִּים, אֲשֶׁר הִכְעִיסוּ, מִנְּשָׂא.
25 And there was no king before him who was like him, that turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. **26**

However the LORD turned not from the fierceness of His great wrath, wherewith His anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations wherewith Menashe had provoked Him.

Once again, Yirmiyahu's text emphasizes the unfairness of the world, that Yoshiyahu's great and extraordinary acts were not enough to overturn the fate that was pronounced in Menashe's time. *Melachim* then continues to describe Yoshiyahu's death at the hands of Par'oh-nechoh, an unfortunate end for such a great and righteous king.

In this manner, we find a second approach to understanding suffering. With distance, one is able to reflect on the past and use it to move forward. In one famous example, we are taught that the cause of the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash was *sin'at chinam*, baseless hatred. Today we learn this and we consider it as a means of correcting our behavior so that we will not repeat the same mistakes. Among those who took this lesson to heart was Menachem Begin, former Prime Minister of Israel. When asked at the end of his life what his greatest accomplishments was, Begin stated that it was avoiding civil war in Israel twice. In the years leading up to the establishment of the State of Israel, Begin headed the Irgun, a group that believed in actively fighting the British Mandate in Palastine. The majority of Jews in Israel at that time however sided with the Haganah, which, under the leadership of David Ben Gurion, believed in defending the Yishuv against attack but generally opposed military offensives against the British. A number of times armed confrontations arose between these two groups that could have led to civil war amongst the Jewish people, and each time Begin made sure that would not happen He even commanded his fighters to go quietly when Hagana members came to arrest them and turn them over to the British. In Yehuda Avner's *Prime Ministers*, he quotes Begin as explaining his reasoning:

Twenty centuries ago we faced the bitter experience of the destruction of the Second Temple, the destruction of our capital Jerusalem. And why? Because of our senseless hatred of each other, a hatred that led to civil war and to our utter ruin: bechiya ladorot—generations of tears. And, therefore, I long ago took a solemn oath that no matter the provocation, no matter the circumstances, I would never be a party to civil war, NEVER! (80)

Begin understood that our history serves us best when it teaches us to correct our behaviors so that we may better do God's will.

Today, as we approach Rosh Hashanah and as we feel the gravity of God's judgment to come, we must take the messages of both *Melachim* and *Divrei Hayamim* to heart. First, we must recognize that we may not be able to see God's plan and things may seem unjust. As is clear from *Melachim*, we are entitled to our pain and it is not realistic for us to expect ourselves to accept all of God's decrees without question or protest. And yet, ideally, we should hope to be able to use the message of *Divrei Hayamim* as well, so that we may be able to learn lessons from pain and use experiences to help us to grow and learn from our mistakes as we move on.

Accordingly, *Divrei Hayamim* presents this story with a somewhat different emphasis. While it also acknowledges that the Korban Pesach of Yoshiyahu was unlike that of any other, it does not juxtapose this concept with God's continued decree to destroy the nation, and it even provides an explanation for why Yoshiyahu dies as he did. (*Divrei Hayamim* II 35: 21-22)

כא וישלח אליו מלֹאכִים לֵאמֹר מֵה־לִּי וְלִךָ מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה, לֹא־עָלִיךָ אִתָּהּ הַיּוֹם כִּי אֶל־בֵּית מִלְחָמָתִי, וְאֱלֹהִים, אֲמַר לְבַהֲלָנִי: תִּדְלֶךָ מֵאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר־עִמִּי, וְאֶל־יִשְׁחִיתֶךָ. **כב** וְלֹא־הִסָּב יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ פָּנָיו מִמֶּנּוּ, כִּי לְהִלָּחֵם־בּוֹ הִתְחַפֵּשׂ, וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֶל־דְּבָרֵי נְכוּ, מִפִּי אֱלֹהִים; וַיָּבֵא, לְהִלָּחֵם בְּבִקְעַת מְגִדּוֹ.

21 But [Par'oh Nechoh] sent ambassadors to him, saying: 'What have I to do with thee, thou king of Judah? I come not against thee this day, but against the house wherewith I have war; and God hath given command to speed me; forbear thee from meddling with God, who is with me, that He destroy thee not.' **22** Nevertheless Josiah would not turn his face from him, but disguised himself, that he might fight with him, and hearkened not unto the words of Neco, from the mouth of God, and came to fight in the valley of Megiddo.

According to this account, Yoshiyahu's attack of Par'oh Nechoh was actually an act of disobedience against God, and for that reason he was killed as result.