

# THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF BAVEL IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

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## INTRODUCTION

TB *Bava Batra* 14b describes the book of Jeremiah, in contrast to the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, as containing "entirely destruction". Though some commentators<sup>1</sup> assume the comment to be hyperbolic, a study of the book, from beginning to end, will reveal that the comment is an apt thematic description of the entire book, with only the slightest trace of hyperbole on the part of the Talmud. We will demonstrate that even chapters 29-33, the ones that ostensibly seem most like a section of comfort, provide only minimal comfort when read in context.

The very first chapter begins with Jeremiah prophesying about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah. *And the Lord said to me: From the north shall disaster break loose upon all the inhabitants of the land, for I am summoning all the peoples of the kingdoms of the north – declares the Lord. They shall come, and shall each set up a throne before the gates of Jerusalem, against its walls roundabout, and against all the towns of Judah.* (Jer. 1:14-15).<sup>2</sup>

The final chapter of the book of Jeremiah is a historical epilogue, almost identical to the final chapter of 2 Kings, describing the very destruction predicted in the first chapter. This article will demonstrate that conveying the impending destruction in the book of Jeremiah in potentially absolute terms contributed to laying the groundwork for ultimate redemption.

## THE PERMANENT EXILE OF THE FIRST HALF OF JEREMIAH

The unrelenting message of the first half of the book of Jeremiah is one of permanent destruction and of endless exile.<sup>3</sup> The name Bavel is not mentioned even once in the first 19 chapters of the book. The reader of this part of the book is not supposed to feel that we are dealing with a particular enemy in a particular historical context. It is not just another of Israel's battles. It

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is more than the usual ups and downs of the era of the Kings. Jeremiah wants to make sure the people know that the special relationship between God and the Jewish people is potentially over. If Jews continue sinning, it will be too late to repair the relationship. The time period of God's house being in Jerusalem will come to a close.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that any of the verses in this section convey hope that a relationship with God can continue,<sup>5</sup> it is always conditioned on repentance. There is no sense of an eternal, unbreakable covenant between G-d and the Jewish people.<sup>6</sup>

The potentially permanent nature of the exile can be seen explicitly in several places within the first 19 chapters of the book of Jeremiah. It is perhaps most explicit in chapter 19, where Jeremiah is explicitly commanded:

*Thus said the Lord: go buy a jug of potter's ware. And [take] some of the elders of the people and the priests . . . Then you shall smash the jug in the sight of the men who go with you, and say to them: 'Thus said the Lord of Hosts: **So will I smash this people and this city, as one smashes a potter's vessel, which can never be mended.** And they shall bury in Topheth until no room is left for burying.'* (Jer. 19:1, 10-11).

One could be forgiven for thinking that the Ashkenazi custom of breaking a cup at a wedding to remember the destruction of Jerusalem<sup>7</sup> derives from this passage in Jeremiah. It would give a particularly morbid meaning to an already morbid ceremony. Rather than merely adding a somber note to a joyous occasion to remind us of the destruction of Jerusalem, it would be saying that the permanent nature of broken glass (or pottery) reminds us that the sounds of joy and gladness, of groom and bride, that we now celebrate in the Diaspora, shall never again be heard in our ancient homeland, in the cities of Judah and the courtyards of Jerusalem. Indeed, this point is made explicitly by Jeremiah twice in the first 19 chapters. The first time is chapter 7: *And I will silence in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the sound of joy and gladness, the voice of groom and bride for the whole land shall fall to ruin* (Jer. 7:34). The second is in chapter 16: *For thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to banish from this place, in your days and before your eyes, the sound of joy and gladness, the voice of groom and bride* (Jer. 16:9).

Further evidence of the potentially permanent nature of the exile as it is portrayed in the first half of Jeremiah can be seen in chapter 3: [*The word of the Lord came to me*] as follows: *If a man divorces his wife, and she leaves him and marries another man, can he ever go back to her? Would not such a land be defiled? Now you have whored with many lovers: can you return to Me? – says the Lord* (Jer. 3:1).

The prophet is clearly referencing the law from Deuteronomy chapter 24:

*When a man takes a woman and marries her, if she fails to please him because he discovers a lewd matter about her, and he writes her a bill of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house; and she leaves his household and becomes the wife of another man; then this latter man rejects her, writes her a bill of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house; or the man who married her last dies. Then the first husband who divorced her shall not take her to wife again, since she has been defiled – for that would be abhorrent to the Lord. You must not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage* (Deut. 24:1-4).

The implication is clear. The Jewish people's sins are akin to a woman marrying another man. Just as the first husband may never remarry her, so Israel's first husband, i.e. God, may never return to her. Lest we think that God would never break His covenant with the Jewish people, Jeremiah reminds us that it has happened before: *I noted: because Rebel Israel had committed adultery, I cast her off and handed her a bill of divorce; yet her sister, Faithless Judah, was not afraid – she too went and whored* (Jer. 3:8). This stands in stark contrast to the words of Isaiah, who challenges the people of Israel: *Thus said the Lord: where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed? And which of My creditors was it to whom I sold you off? You were only sold off for your sins, and your mother dismissed for your crimes* (Isa. 50:1). Sometime between the words of Isaiah and the words of Jeremiah, that bill of divorce to Israel seems to have been given, and now, Jeremiah warns, it shall soon be given to Judah as well.

As stated above, there are a few times when Jeremiah does try to raise a glimmer of hope, when he tries to raise the possibility that the exile might not be forever and redemption is still possible. However, it is never certain redemption. It is always conditioned on repentance. *Turn back, rebellious chil-*

*dren – declares the Lord. Since I have espoused you, I will take you, one from a town and two from a clan, and bring you to Zion (Jer. 3:14).*

*Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these [buildings]." No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt – then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time (Jer. 7:3-7).*

Redemption is theoretically possible, but first Israel must turn back. If she wants to return to the land, she must stop worshipping foreign gods. She must stop oppressing the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. She must stop shedding innocent blood. The Temple will not protect her. The prophet is clear that the only thing that will get God to renew any sort of relationship with the Jewish people is the Jewish people wholeheartedly pursuing a relationship with God.

#### THE 70 YEARS

Everything up until this point has dealt only with the first 19 chapters. What of the words of comfort in the middle chapters? What of the famous prophecy limiting the exile to a mere 70 years? Does this not indicate that the return was promised in advance and not conditioned on repentance? Jeremiah, in fact, mentions 70 years twice, in two different contexts. The first time is in chapter 25: *This whole land shall be a desolate ruin. And those nations shall serve the king of Bavel seventy years. When the seventy years are over, I will punish the king of Bavel and that nation and the land of the Chaldeans for their sins – declares the Lord – and I will make it a desolation for all time (Jer. 25:11-12).*

These verses say nothing of a Jewish redemption in 70 years. All that is said is that in 70 years, Bavel will fall and be punished for its sins. It can hardly be comforting for the Jewish people living at the time of the destruction knowing that in 70 years the nation that oppressed them is going to fall

without any word on what is going to happen to the Jewish people.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps they will be oppressed by another nation after Bavel, or perhaps they will be fully assimilated and devoid of any national identity of their own by that point. That King Cyrus of Persia would allow the Jews to return to Israel in the first year of his reign, immediately after defeating Bavel (II Chron. 36:20-23) could hardly have been anticipated based on the words of Jeremiah chapter 25.

The second time Jeremiah mentions 70 years is in chapter 29, where it actually does begin to sound comforting: *For thus said the Lord: when Babylon's seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will fulfill to you My promise of favor – to bring you back to this place* (Jer. 29:10).

For the first time, Jeremiah actually promises that after the 70 years of serving Bavel are over, the Jewish people will be restored to their land.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, though, that something major has happened between chapters 25 and 29: the exile has actually begun (even if the Temple is still standing in Jerusalem). Chapter 29 is a letter that Jeremiah sends to the exiles already in Bavel from the time of King Jeconiah, as the chapter clearly states: *This is the text of the letter which the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the priests, the prophets, the rest of the elders of the exile community, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had exiled from Jerusalem to Bavel – after King Jeconiah, the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen and smiths had left Jerusalem* (Jer. 29:1-2).

Jeremiah does not even begin to comfort until the exile is a reality. Before the exile, the people had to believe in the actual possibility of permanent exile and complete breach of the relationship with God. Anything short of this would have given the people false hope and diminished the impetus to repent. Even this small bit of comfort though, in broader context, is not very comforting. A chapter earlier Jeremiah recorded the words of the false prophet Hananiah ben Azzur:

*That year, early in the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the House of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people. He said, 'Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: I hereby break the yoke of the king of Bavel. In two years, I will restore to this place all the vessels of the*

*House of the Lord which King Nebuchadnezzar of Bavel took from this place and brought to Bavel. And I will bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the Judean exiles who went to Bavel – declares the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Bavel.*’ (Jer. 28:1-4).

Jeremiah’s 70 years must be viewed in contrast with the short 2-year exile the false prophets were predicting. In this context, Jeremiah’s words should surely not be read as, “Don’t worry, the exile will last a mere 70 years.” The thought of a 2000 year exile like the one following the destruction of the Second Temple couldn’t possibly have occurred to anyone at that time. Contrasted with the 2-year exile being predicted by the false prophets, 70 years is the longest exile anyone can possibly imagine. Jeremiah is saying, “Get comfortable. You’re going to be there a long time. Most of you will be dead by the time anyone comes back to the land of Israel.” One need not merely infer from context that Jeremiah’s words are meant to be contrasted with those of the false prophets. Immediately preceding his message about the exile lasting 70 years, Jeremiah himself states, *For thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Let not the prophets and diviners in your midst deceive you, and pay no heed to the dreams they dream. For they prophesy to you in My name falsely; I did not send them—declares the Lord* (Jer. 19:8-9). He is telling us specifically that his words are meant to be contrasted with those of the false prophets. Finally, it is clear that the exiles in Bavel understood Jeremiah’s letter in this way. Jeremiah quotes the letter that Shemaiah the Nehelamite sent from Bavel to Zephaniah ben Maaseiah, the high priest in Jerusalem.

*‘The Lord appointed you priest in place of the priest Jehoiada, to exercise authority in the House of the Lord over every madman who wants to play the prophet, to put him into the stocks and into the pillory. Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah the Anathothite, who plays the prophet among you? For he has actually sent a message to us in Babylon to this effect: It will be a long time. Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and enjoy their fruit.’* (Jer. 29:26-28)

The content of this letter shows that many of the Jews in Bavel were upset with Jeremiah precisely because he said the exile would be 70 years, “a long time,” in contrast to what the false prophets were predicting.

In the four chapters that follow his letter, Jeremiah does offer a few words of comfort. They certainly provide a modicum of hope beyond what he has conveyed until this point. Following the exile, it became necessary to convey that the idea of a Jewish nation is not completely finished. However, put in context with the words of the false prophets, they are far from being truly comforting. These chapters represent damage control and do not detract from the books overall theme of destruction.

#### LIFE IN BAVEL

The lack of comfort in Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Bavel can be seen from the remainder of the content of the letter as well.

*Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Bavel: build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper (Jer. 29:4-7).*

Contrast this message with the mood of the exiles themselves, as depicted in Psalm 137:

*By the rivers of Bavel, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion. There on the poplars we hung up our lyres, for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour. (Ps. 137:1-6).*

They want to weep. They want to mourn. They want to never feel at home so they can always maintain the hope of returning to Jerusalem. Jeremiah is telling them the exact opposite. He is telling them to settle down, to normalize life. He is telling them that they will have grandchildren before anyone from the exiles returns to Jerusalem. Taken in this context, Jeremiah's words do not comfort, they make the exile all the more tragic.

A closer look at what Jeremiah tells the exiles in Bavel reveals that he is doing far more than simply telling them to live a normal life there. His words can be divided into four basic things that he tells them to do:

1. Build houses and live in them.
2. Plant gardens and eat their fruit.
3. Take wives and beget sons and daughters.
4. Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you.

The first three of these exactly parallel the activities that the book of Deuteronomy describes as the quintessential activities of life in Israel.<sup>10</sup> We see this in two places. The first of these is in the list of those who are entitled exemptions from the military draft:

*Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: 'Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it. Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it. Is there anyone who has betrothed a wife, but who has not yet married her? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another marry her' (Deut. 20:5-7).*

The three activities so essential to building a homeland that they excuse one from serving in the army are 1) building houses, 2) planting fruit, and 3) marrying. The second instance of these three things is in the curses that the Jewish people can expect to receive if they do not keep the Torah. *You shall betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her. You shall build a house, but you shall not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not harvest it (Deut. 28:30).*

Again, the three activities that most represent the Jewish people's connection to its homeland, the ones that will be characteristically uprooted if they lose the right to that homeland are (not necessarily in this order) 1) building houses, 2) planting fruit, 3) marrying. Jeremiah is no doubt telling the Jewish people to view their current predicament as a fulfillment of the curses in Deuteronomy. He is going a step further than that, though. Not only is everything that was supposed to be true about life in Israel being overturned, but the Jewish people must do those very same things in Bavel. Life in Bavel is to be no different from life in the holy land.<sup>11</sup> This can be seen as well in the fourth



part of Jeremiah's message: seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you. Contrast that with the words of Psalm 122, *Pray for the welfare of Jerusalem, 'May those who love you be at peace'* (Ps. 122:6). Praying for the welfare of a city is what Jews characteristically do for Jerusalem<sup>12</sup>, and now they are being asked to do it for Bavel.<sup>13</sup> The religious significance of this is made clear by Jeremiah, *You will search for Me and find Me, if only you seek Me wholeheartedly* (Jer. 29:13). Seeking God is not limited to Jerusalem. The future of the Jewish nation depends on their ability to seek God in Bavel. Just as Ezekiel told the exiles in Bavel that it would need to be a *small Temple* for them (Ezek. 11:16), it is as if Jeremiah as well is saying to them, "Bavel (for the time being) is your holy land. Bavel is your new Jerusalem."

#### CONCLUSION

Jeremiah's prophetic mission is the ultimate tragedy. The minimal words of comfort he offers are all in the distant future. It will be 70 years until anyone returns to Israel and the return of the lost tribes (Jeremiah chapter 31) is still being awaited. In the present, though, the destruction is absolute. There can be no psychological clinging to life in Israel. All features of normal religious life must be transferred to Bavel. It is this tragedy, though, that enables the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy of redemption. Jeremiah knows the only way Judaism will be able to survive the long exile is for the Jewish people to wean themselves of the addiction to a Temple-centered Judaism. They need to realize that they can worship God anywhere. The only way to survive 70 years in Bavel with their religion intact is to build Torah centers<sup>14</sup> there and make it a holy city, a place where Jews can seek God. This can be seen from a passage in the Talmud as well.

At first, when Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Bavel and reestablished it. It was forgotten again, and Hillel of Bavel came up and reestablished it. It was forgotten again and Rabbi Hiya and his sons came up and reestablished it (TB *Sukkah* 20a).<sup>15</sup>

It was Jeremiah's prophetic foresight that laid the groundwork for Ezra, Hillel, and Rabbi Hiya to ultimately be able to reestablish Torah in the land of Israel. The holy status that Jeremiah seems to have conveyed on Bavel even manifests itself in *halakhah*.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: Just as it is prohibited to leave the Land of Israel to Bavel, so too it is prohibited to leave Bavel to other lands. (TB *Ketubot* 111a)

This is the ultimate legacy of Jeremiah. The prophet with the tragic task of writing the eulogy for everything the generation of the destruction of the first Temple knew as Judaism was also the prophet who ensured that authentic Judaism could never be destroyed.

#### NOTES

1. See Maharsha ad loc.
2. All Biblical translations are from the New JPS translation, 1985, with slight modifications to highlight specific points from the Hebrew.
3. God's use of the phrase "to build and to plant" in describing Jeremiah's mission in 1:10 echoes the language of comfort used in 31:28. While God may have been hinting to Jeremiah that the exile would ultimately come to an end, this message certainly does not come across in the messages Jeremiah delivers to the people in the first section of the book.
4. This point was shared with the author by Rabbi Shalom Carmy in private communication, July 2013.
5. See, for example, 7:3-7, 12:14-17, 17:21-27
6. 2:1-3 are used liturgically to convey the idea of eternal covenant, but this is not a contextual read. See the commentary of Rabbi Yosef Kara ad loc.
7. Rema, *Even Ha'ezer* 65:3
8. The oracles against the various nations that persecuted Israel found in Jeremiah chapters 46-51 follow similar pattern. With a few notable exceptions (46:27-28, 50:4-5, 17-19), there are few words of direct comfort to the Jewish people. They foretell the destruction of Israel's enemies with very little about what will happen to Israel at that time.
9. The simple read of the verses here is that Jeremiah's 70 years refer to 70 years in service of Bavel. They begin with the ascension of Nebuchadnezzar prior to the destruction of the Temple, and end with Bavel's defeat, and Cyrus allowing the Jews to return to Israel, prior to the Temple's rebuilding. See Malbim and Metzudat David on 29:10. This read is implied as well by Ezra 1:1. On the other hand, Zecharia (1:12, 7:5) also refers to a period of 70 years that clearly refers to the 70 years from the destruction of the first Temple until the building of the second one. Daniel 9:2 seems to equate these 70 years with the 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy. See Rashi, Malbim, and Metzudat David ad loc.
10. J. Hill, *Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (Leiden: Brill 1999), pp. 146-148. See also J. Hill, "'Your Exile Will Be Long': The Book of Jeremiah and the Unended Exile," in *Reading the Book of Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence*, M. Kessler, ed. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), pp. 149-150.
11. Hill, *Friend or Foe?* 149. See also Hill, "'Your Exile Will Be Long,'" p. 150.
12. In fact, several Midrashim seem so uncomfortable with the idea of a prophet telling the Jewish people to pray for the welfare of any city other than Jerusalem, that they try to reread Jeremi-

