

Bellows Family

MATAN AL HAPEREK

The Six-Year Online Weekly | Tanakh Learning Program

Sefer Nachum opens with the words “*the burden of Nineveh*”, and in fact, the fate of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, is the central topic of the book. The time period is not mentioned in the book, but from the prophecies we can see the historical background. The prophet foresees the decline of the Assyrian empire and the destruction of its capital city, Nineveh (612 BCE). He compares it to the fall of No Amon (Thebes), the capital city of Egypt (663 BCE). In the prophecies of Nachum, the fall of Assyria is entwined with the salvation of Judah. However, unlike the other prophets, Nachum does not rebuke the people. Of note in this book are the spectacular descriptions of battle and the use of many different images.

Perek 1

Sefer Nachum opens with a psalm of praise which focuses on the power of God to avenge His enemies. It begins with descriptions of the attribute of justice and of the disaster (2-3). In the continuation (4-14), the fall of Assyria is described. Three pesukim (7, 12 and 13) which describe the redemption of Israel are interspersed in the description of the fall.

1.

In the opening section of the perek (2-3), God's name appears five times along with a description of His attributes in a style similar to that which appears at the revelation of God to Moshe at Sinai (Shemot 34:6-7). Compare the two lists and see which attributes from the list in Shemot are mentioned here. Which attribute does not follow the general trend of the other attributes, and how can it be explained? Use **Rashi** to help understand:

The Lord is slow to anger and great in power: He is great in power, and He has the ability to wreak vengeance. The reason He did not hasten His revenge is that He is slow to anger, but, in any case, He will not acquit.

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2.

Note the verbal similarity (his indignation – *za'amo* and a stronghold - *l'maoz*) and the contrast in content between pesukim 6 and 7 and between pesukim 12 and 14. See how the verbal imagery helps us to understand the meaning of the prophecy. What is the source of the destruction of Nineveh according to the two parts of the perek?

Perek 2

After the general description in perek 1, perek 2 is dedicated to a detailed description of the downfall of Assyria. The perek opens with the news of the victory and the salvation of Judah (1-3). The middle of the perek consists of a detailed description of the sights and sounds from the conquest of Nineveh (4-11). The last section describes the fall of Assyria using an image of the lion as the king of the beasts who is removed from his greatness (12-14).

3.

In our perek two opposing pictures are drawn from the imagery of war.

a | “Behold on the mountains the feet of a herald announcing peace” (1) In order to help you to understand the meaning of the image of the herald, see Shmuel II 18:19, 28.

b | Follow the stages of the war and the conquest of Nineveh – examine the contrast between the sights and sounds in the second half (4-11) and the sights and sounds in the first half (1-3). Pay special attention to the mention of feet/knees and loins in pesukim 1-2,11.

4.

“Where is the lions’ den? And it is pasture for young lions” (12)


The perek ends with a metaphor which compares Assyria to a lion. The lion was chosen by the prophet because it was the symbol of Assyria and its kings.

a | The section begins with a rhetorical question which is ironic. How does the metaphor contribute to the understanding of the fate of Assyria? What are the characteristics of Nineveh – “the lions’ den” - at its height of greatness (12-13), and what is its end?

b | The language “and none made them afraid” (12) generally appears in the context of protection from wild animals, see for example Vayikra 26:6. What is the meaning of the phrase in our perek? Pay attention to the reason for the destruction of Nineveh according to this prophecy.

Perek 3

This perek tells of the sins of Nineveh which caused their downfall. In the beginning, Nachum presents the reader with rapidly changing images and sounds from the conquest of Nineveh (2-3). In pesukim 4-7 we have a new image of Nineveh as a harlot and in the continuation (8-10) the prophet compares the fate of Nineveh to the fate of No Amon which was recently

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destroyed. He continues to mock Nineveh and compares Assyria to a swarm of locusts (11-17). The perek ends with the world gloating over the defeat of the king of Assyria (18-19).

5.

“Woe to the city of blood; it is all lies, full of robbery; the prey departs not.” (1)

Explain the contrast between the description of Nineveh in pasuk 1 and the punishment in pesukim 2-3. What is Nineveh full of in each of them, and how does the punishment come?

6.

A different image is found in pesukim 4-7. What is the sin of Nineveh according to these pesukim and how does this influence its punishment?

APPENDIX – The City of Nineveh and the Motif of the Lion in the Assyrian Culture

The great city of Nineveh, which was the capital of the kingdom of Assyria, sat on a large hill one and a half kilometers from the Tigris River. The river divided between Nineveh and the large city on the western side of the river, which is known today as Mosul. Nineveh was built by the Assyrians in the days of Nimrod (Bereshit 10:11) and it grew to be a very large city.


“Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left” (Yonah 4:11)

The kings of Assyria built glorious palaces and houses of idolatry in abundance. This was done especially by Sancheriv, who rebuilt the city, dug ditches, paved streets, planted avenues of trees and brought water into the city using aqueducts. He built a huge wall (16 kilometers long!) around the city.

The royal library of Ashurbanipal was unearthed in an archaeological dig in the ruins of one of the palaces in Nineveh. It had a vast number of cuneiform clay tablets. (Cuneiform was the writing prevalent in the Assyrian kingdom at the time.) Most of these tablets were brought to England, to the British Museum in London, and this collection serves as the main resource for research about Assyrian and Babylonian literature and science today.

Nineveh was destroyed about 26 years before the destruction of the First Temple, as predicted by the prophecy of Nachum the Elkoshite. The city was never rebuilt. Only in the period of the Romans, a small city was founded there, which lasted for about one thousand years.

(Freely translated from the Daat site)

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► An image of how Nineveh must have looked in its glory



► The walls of the city of Nineveh today

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The Lion in Assyrian Culture

When the palaces of the Assyrian kings were uncovered in the middle of the 19th century, an image of the Assyrian king fighting lions was discovered. In addition, writings were found in which the Assyrian kings declared themselves to be kings – “I am a lion and I am a hero” (Ashurbanipal II).



► **The Assyrian Royal Seal** - The seal shows the Assyrian king in single combat with a rampant lion.

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