

Bellows Family

## MATAN AL HAPEREK

The Six-Year Online Weekly | Tanakh Learning Program

Tzefaniah prophesied in the days of Yoshiyahu, apparently before the land was purified of idolatry in the eighteenth year of Yoshiyahu's reign. He lived before the rise of the Babylonian Empire, and prophesied the downfall of the Assyrian Empire and other regional kingdoms, which are described in his prophecies in vivid colors. Tzefaniah ties the fate of Judah to the fate of the other kingdoms in the area, as a result of its having been immersed in sin since the time of Menashe. Similarly to Yishayahu, who prophesied at the beginning of the Assyrian period, Tzefaniah, who prophesied at the end of the Assyrian period, prophesies a universal vision about the end of idolatry.

The book is divided into three prophecies which correspond to the three perakim.

### Perek 1

Sefer Tzefaniah opens with a description of the complete destruction which will come to the land (1-3). Immediately after the opening pesukim there is a list of the sins of Judah (4-9) and a description of the sounds of crying and wailing which will be heard from Jerusalem (10-13). The perek ends with a description of the day of the Lord (14-18). The perek wavers between descriptions of world destruction and descriptions of the national sins and destruction.

#### 1.

One of the notable stylistic measures in the perek, which is characteristic of the book of Tzefaniah, is the repetition of a specific word a symbolic number of times. This repetition is apparent in all three sections of the perek and highlights the main points in each section.

**a |** The word "et" (an untranslatable preposition) repeats six times in the description of "cutting off" in the beginning of the perek (3-6). The seventh time the word "et" is replaced with the word "asher". Follow the list which appears in these pesukim (pay attention to the division into pairs) and discuss the development which is apparent here.

## Tzefaniah 1-3

3. ...I will cut off **(et)** man from the face of the earth, says the Lord.
4. ...And I will cut off from this place **(et)** the remnant of Baal, **(et)** the name of the idolatrous priests with the ancillary priests,
5. and **(et)** those who prostrate themselves on the roofs to the host of the heavens, and **(et)** those who prostrate themselves who swear by the Lord and swear by their king,
6. and **(et)** those who turn away from following the Lord, and **(asher)** those who did not seek the Lord nor inquire after Him.

**b** | The word “*al*” (alternately translated here as upon or against) is used seven times in connection with God’s punishment: four times in pesukim 8-9 and three more times in pesukim 12 and 16. Who are the sinners and what are their sins?


8. And it shall be on the day of the Lord's slaughter that I will visit **upon** the princes, and **upon** the king's sons, and **upon** all those who wear gentile garb.
9. And I will visit **upon** everyone who leaps over the threshold [a Philistine idolatrous practice], [and] those who fill the houses of their masters with violence and deceit.
- ...12. And it shall come to pass on that day, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and I will visit **upon** the men who are settled on their lees, who say in their heart, "The Lord shall do neither good nor harm."
- ...16. a day of shofar and alarm **against** the fortified cities and **against** the high towers.

Try to understand the spiritual state prevailing in Judah as it is characterized in Tzefaniah’s rebuke in this perek. Read the following by Y. Kaufmann:

The break-down was mainly among the upper classes. The entire city was godless... The princes and the king’s children filled their master’s house with violence and fraud; the nation was doing wrong... There is a class of moneyed people whose gods are silver and gold. The moral evil comes from the religious evil. Tzefaniah demonstrates in his complaint that there are people in Israel who are stagnant, who say in their hearts that God does not do good or evil. They worship Baal and the Heavens, swear by God’s name and by their king – but in their hearts there is no meaning. In the generation of Hoshea they would say “God will not see us, and what can the king do to us?” Hoshea describes the cynical arrogance of those who are desperate – a type of “let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die”. In contrast, Tzefaniah does not speak of cynical speech and hopeless debauchery. He laments the stagnation. “Faith” exists only among those with money, but their faith is only in their money. This made Tzefaniah’s job more difficult than the jobs of the prophets before him... The days of Tzefaniah were days of stagnation. Assyria had begun to crumble, but... the masses did not see what was happening. There was religious complacency and Epicurean morality.

**c** | The word “*yom*” (day) repeats ten times in pesukim 14-18, describing the day of the Lord. What are the characteristics which we see from these descriptions?

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## Tzefaniah 1-3

14. The great **day** of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens greatly, the sound of the **day** of the Lord, wherein the mighty man cries bitterly.

15. That **day** is a **day** of wrath; a **day** of trouble and distress; a **day** of ruin and desolation; a **day** of darkness and gloom; a **day** of clouds and thick darkness;

16. a **day** of shofar and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers.

18. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the **day** of the Lord's wrath. And with the fire of His passion the entire land shall be consumed; for an end, yea, a sudden end, He shall make of all the inhabitants of the land.

### Perek 2

At the beginning of perek 2, Tzefaniah calls to Judah to repent (1-3), and then he goes from nation to nation and kingdom to kingdom: he foresees the desolation of the land of the Philistines (4-7), Moab and Ammon (8-11) and the Kushites (12). The perek ends with a prophecy about the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (13-15).

#### 2.

Twice in the perek we find the current situation in a city which is developed and happy contrasted with its future punishment. We see this with the desolation of the cities of the Philistines (4-5) as contrasted with the “lying down” of the remnant of Judah (7) and the desolation of Nineveh (13-15) as contrasted with the “lying down” of the animals (15). What does the “lying down” symbolize in pasuk 15? Compare this to the prophecy in 3:11-13. What is the additional meaning which we see there for “rejoicing” and “lying down”?


### Perek 3

In perek 3 the prophet goes back and forth between prophecies about Israel and prophecies about the nations. At the beginning of the perek Tzefaniah details the distorted moral situation of the “dove-like city” *ha'ir hayonah* (1-4), which apparently alludes to Jerusalem, and its judgment (5-7). After this there is a description of the judgment of the nations and their repentance in the future (8-10), and then he returns to the repentance of Jerusalem and the remnant which will (11-13) be left in it. The perek ends with a prophecy of consolation for Jerusalem (14-20).

#### 3.

The list of the sins of the city opens with four “did nots” (2) and then goes on to the negative actions of the four groups in the nation: compare the list of sins and sinners here and in perek 1 – what is new about the character of the sin in our perek?

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## Tzefaniah 1-3

2. She **did not** obey,  
she **did not** accept reproof.  
She **did not** trust in the Lord.  
She **did not** draw near to her God.

### 4.

*“For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language”* (9)

The prophecy in pesukim 9-10 alludes to the story of the Tower of Babel in Bereshit 11:1-9. Pay attention to the shared words - language, confound (from the root b.l.l.), pure (from the root b.r.r.), scatter (*foztz*), name - and to their different roles in the two places. What is the role of language in each of them? How is it connected to the sin and the repentance which is described here?

### 5.

*“Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and jubilate wholeheartedly, O daughter of Jerusalem!”* (14)

The prophecy of consolation is filled with descriptions of happiness – the “rejoicing” (in Hebrew: *alizut*) which is mentioned here is mentioned an additional two times (in 2:15 and 3:11) in the prophecy of Tzefaniah with the opposite connotation. Note the deep contrast between the two types of rejoicing – what is the source in each of the texts?

### APPENDIX – The Land of the Philistines in the Prophecy of Tzefaniah / Yehudah Elitzur

This prophecy (about the Philistines) opens a window to the vision of Tzefaniah...We are in the period after Menashe and Amon. The prophetic literature condemns the period of Menashe and Amon because of the wickedness of Menashe, but the historian deals with this period differently. This is a long period; Menashe was king for many years. These two kings were faithful vassals to the Assyrian empire, aside from one short episode mentioned in Divrei HaYamim. This was a period of relative calm. This calmness created a number of effects which worried Tzefaniah. He says in 1:4-6

*And I will stretch out My hand over Judah and over all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal, the name of the idolatrous priests with the ancillary priests, and those who prostrate themselves on the roofs to the host of the heavens, and those who prostrate themselves who swear by the Lord and swear by their king, and those who turn away from following the Lord, and those who did not seek the Lord nor inquire after Him.*

This appears to have been said in the beginning of Yoshiyahu’s reign. This was before the repentance began and the influence of Menashe’s period was still very evident. A description

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## Tzefaniah 1-3

of the second result of this period of calm is seen at the end of pasuk 9. All those people who followed after the foreign holidays and the early eastern fashions which were prevalent among foreigners in those days filled their master's house with violence and deceit. The period of prosperity in the time of Menashe raised a class of aristocrats, who not only followed the foreign fashions and holidays, but were also rich merchants who gained their fortunes by foul means. The prophet speaks of "violence and deceit"...

To what does this wealth and the easy life of those who became rich and brought violence and deceit to the house of their master lead? In 1:12 it says:

*And it shall come to pass on that day, that I will search Jerusalem with candles, and I will visit upon the men who are settled on their lees, who say in their heart, "The Lord shall do neither good nor harm."*

That is to say, the apathy and cynicism of the rich enables them to deduce from Menashe's time period that "The Lord shall do neither good nor harm" - a person can follow his whims, like Menashe did, and succeed.

Tzefaniah is rooted in the reality of the period of and the period after Menashe. He saw the defects and deficiencies, the results of becoming wealthy, the debauchery, the life without values, the yearning to be like the nations. He prophesied that when the influence of the good and the humble in the nation of Israel would overcome the influence of the bad, then the twisted would be made straight, and that this repair would be connected with the destruction of the land of the Philistines. This land, the land of debauchery and wantonness, would be transferred to Judah. In Judah lies the strength of those righteous people who do not speak falsely.

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**מאן**

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