

Bellows Family

MATAN AL HAPEREK

The Six-Year Online Weekly | Tanakh Learning Program

The book of Yoel is the second of the books of Trei Asar, found between Hoshea and Amos. There is no mention of the historical context of the prophecies within the book. According to the "Midrash Seder Olam", Yoel prophesied in the time of Menashe. However according to most of the commentators, it is estimated that the book was written in the time of the second Temple. This is based on the fact that the prophet uses the name "Yehudah" to describe all of the land of Israel, and he does not mention the idolatrous sins which were common in the first Temple but absent in the second.

The book is divided into two main units: the first unit, perakim 1-2, describes the plague of locusts and the horrible drought which occurred in Israel, and the cries of the prophet to fast and wear sackcloth. The second unit, perakim 3-4, prophesies the coming of the day of the Lord, describes the bestowing of the spirit of God on every person in Israel, the coming of the day of the Lord to the gentiles and the good which is promised to Israel in the future

Perek 1

The book opens with a description of a harsh plague of locusts in Israel which destroys the entire crop. The prophet calls to the people to mourn the great calamity. At first he turns to the elders and those living in the land (2-4), afterward to the drunks, the priests, the farmers and the vineyard workers. In the second half of the perek (13-20) the prophet turns again to the priests and asks them to announce a public day of mourning.

1.

"Hear this, you elders...Did this come about in your days or in the days of your forefathers?" (2)

The book of Yoel opens with a description of the historical uniqueness of the plague of locusts which is about to come. What is unique about this plague of locusts?

Yoel 1-2

Read **Y. Felix**:

The description of the locusts by Yoel is realistic and exact while at the same time it is poetic. Similar descriptions of locusts are found in the books of the prophets of the first Temple, Nachum and Chavakuk, but there is no other prophet like Yoel whose whole prophecy is marked by the plague of locusts which he described in such a vibrant and dramatic way. When the plague of locusts struck the land it left man helpless to fight it. They attempted to fight it by making noise with various implements, but that wasn't effective. Yoel describes the serious damage of the locusts on all the crops – grapes, figs, olives, pomegranates, dates, apples, wheat and barley. The locust plague in Yoel's time was accompanied by an extreme drought, *"for the springs of water have dried up, and fire has consumed the dwellings of the wilderness."*


Yoel was familiar with the stages of development of the locusts. He describes the stages in specific terms: the locust is the adult insect, winged with a yellow body. The female locust lays a pod of eggs in a hole which she has made in the ground. The eggs hatch into black, wingless, crawling nymphs, like ants. In Hebrew this is called the *Yalek*, a name which is connected to the word *Yalok* and means to lick. The nymph (or *Yalek*) licks at the sprouts and delicate greens. It grows quickly, and since its outer shell cannot grow, it must shed the shell at each stage. After each shedding, the color of the nymph changes. In the second stage it turns pink. At this stage it is called a *"chasil"* probably because it destroys (*mechasel*) and depletes the grass in the field. At this stage it grows rapidly and eats enormous amounts of green material...The *chasil* sheds twice more and then reaches adult size. Now it grows wings and is called *"gazam"* (cutting). At this point all the green in the fields has been eaten and the *gazam* uses its strong jaws to eat the trees and bark, as the prophet says about the fig tree: *"he has peeled it and cast it off, its branches have become white."*(7)

2.

In pesukim 5-11 the varied responses of the different groups to the disaster of the locusts are described – the drunks and the wine drinkers (5-7), the priests (9), the farmers and the vineyard workers (11-12). How does each group respond to the locusts (note the connection between the response and the nature of the group), and which aspect of the disaster is stressed in each response?

3.

In pesukim 13-14 the prophet turns to the priests again, this time with a call to announce a day of fasting and suffering because of the dire situation.

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Yoel 1-2

a | Why does the prophet turn specifically to the priests? Note the repeated references to the house of God throughout the section (13, 14, 16).

b | In pesukim 15-20 the prayer which the priests will say is given. Who is the focus of the prayer and why (18-20)? Use the description of the people of Nineveh (Yonah 3:8) and the reaction of God at the end of the book (4:11) to help you understand.

Perek 2

Perek 2 opens with a warning to the people about the calamity which will befall the land as the day of the Lord approaches. The perek is divided into three units: the calamity which will happen on the day of the Lord - a calamity which is described in vivid images from war and the battlefield (1-11), a call to the people to repent and return to God and declare a public fast day (12-17), and finally, the response from God to the people's repentance and a description of the salvation and joy, showing a complete reversal of the harsh calamity (18-27).

4.


The commentators are divided about the question if perek 2 is a description of the locusts that are described as fierce fighters or if what is described here is a human war which is compared to a swarm of locusts. Explain the rationale for each side of the argument. What are the ideological implications of each of the options?

5.

At the beginning of perek 2 the arrival of the locusts/fighters is described in a series of three visual images (2, 3 and 4-9). Examine the three images and discuss which aspects of the calamity are emphasized in each image.

6.

In the wake of the calamity the prophet calls to the people to return to God (12-14). The description of the fast day in the book of Yoel is one of the most detailed descriptions of this event in Tanakh. What does the prophet require of the people and how does he direct them in his call for repentance?

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Yoel 1-2

7. The descriptions of the public fasts in Yoel are a basis for learning the laws of public fast days. Throughout perakim 1-2 three public fast days are described. Compare the three fast days and follow their development and how they become progressively more stringent. This progression is characteristic of public fast days as well.

a | On whom is the first fast day focused (1:13-14), and what does it include?

b | What is added in the second fast day (2:12-14)?


c | Who is included in the third fast day (16)? Compare to the dispensation for a groom during war in Devarim 20:7. Despite this, why are the bride and groom still included in this fast?

8.

In the final section of the perek the salvation and God's response to the people are described as being measure for measure. Compare the description of the salvation to the description of the disaster. Does the description of the salvation only "fix" the disaster or is the situation after the disaster better than it was before? What is the purpose of the salvation and the material abundance which is given to the people?

APPENDIX – Y Aharoni, The Locusts, Yaffo 5680 (1920) – free translation

The locusts came to the settlement four times in 1915...When they came they filled the air in only a few minutes, like white snowflakes. They seemed like that because their light-colored, clear wings reflected the light of the sun. The whole light-winged camp didn't make noise like a storm, but rather, they glided in silently, boding evil. A few went to the courtyard, but the vast majority went to the vegetable gardens, especially to those which were seeded with tightly packed legumes, such as lentils and beans. After that they chose the potatoes and the tomatoes. Many descended on the olive and eucalyptus trees. The first sign that they were cunning was seen in the fact it was impossible to chase them out of the vegetable gardens in any way that we tried – making noise, striking with sticks etc. - for they crawled and slipped between the stalks of the vegetables... All the members of the settlement who tried to prevent the locusts from settling on the land were struck with fear. Not everyone had enough flammable material to keep producing smoke, which was the one thing which managed to keep the destroyers away. They grabbed anything that came their way – branches, sticks, kitchen tools - and tied rags to them and waved them in the air. Many used wooden sticks to bang on metal barrels and other metal implements so that the whole settlement echoed with the sound of the banging and yelling, but it was all for naught. As the sun set, the people gave up and the locusts which had been flying in the air came down and settled on the fruit trees. Only the Arabs, who had experience with plagues such as this called out to the workers, "Fear not

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Yoel 1-2

the adults, it is the young ones you must fear". And to our distress, they were correct in this wise saying, for the damage caused by the locusts was nothing compared to the destruction caused by their young.



▶ A Locust



▶ A plague of locusts in Egypt

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מִן מֵן

מכון תורני לנשים ע"ש שרה בת יצחק יעקב רעננערט
The Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies

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