

Date: 21 Nisan 5786 (April 8, 2026)

Torah Portion: Sh'mini

Topic: The Three Watches of the Night

It is written (Dan. 7:2–3), “Daniel spoke and said, ‘I was looking in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of the heavens were stirring up the Great Sea (yam, יָם). And four great beasts came up from the sea, different from one another.’” Yeremiyahu (Jeremiah) also had a vision of the Four Kingdoms. However, in his vision the beasts that represented them emerged from the “forest” (ya’ar, יָעַר), not from the sea as in Daniel’s vision. It is written (Jer. 5:6), “Therefore a lion from the forest shall smite them, a wolf of the deserts ravage them; a leopard is watching over their cities, whoever comes out of them is torn in pieces.”

The Midrash reconciles these two visions through a profound distinction. With respect to Daniel’s vision, the prophecy intimates to Yisrael: If you are meritorious (*zakkai*, זָכַי), the Four Kingdoms will come from the sea; if not, they will come from the forest. When a sea creature emerges from the sea, it is displaced from its natural domain and is therefore lowly and subdued. However, when a land animal emerges from the forest, it acts from a place of rooted strength and is neither lowly nor submissive. Thus, the form in which the kingdoms appear reflects the spiritual condition of Yisrael. Similarly, it is written (Psa. 80:14), “The boar from the forest (miyya’ar, מִיַּעַר) will ravage it.” The Hebrew word מִיַּעַר is written with a suspended ayin in the Masoretic tradition. The Sages interpret this orthographic anomaly to teach a hidden condition (*tenai*, תְּנַי): If you are meritorious, your enemies will come “from the river” (miyye’or, מִיַּעַר), in a diminished and unstable form; if not, they will come “from the forest” (miyya’ar), with full force and dominance. Thus, even within the text itself, exile is shown to be dynamically shaped by the spiritual state of the people.

Daniel dreamed of three beasts on one night and one beast on another. The Midrash deduces from this that the fourth kingdom is equivalent to, or even greater than, the other three combined. The Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel) connects this idea to the teaching of the Gemara (Berakhot 3a), which states: “The night consists of three watches” (*shalosh mishmarot ha-laylah*, שלוש משמרות הלילה). He explains that night represents exile, specifically the concealment of the Divine Presence, known as *hester panim* (הסתרת פנים).

On Daniel’s first night of dreaming, he saw three beasts, corresponding to the three watches of the night, each watch symbolizing Yisrael’s exile under one of the three kingdoms: Babylonia, Media-Persia, and Greece. On the following night, he dreamed of a single beast—one that encompassed all three watches of the night. This indicated that the exile under Edom, the fourth kingdom, would be equal in difficulty to all the previous exiles combined, and indeed would contain elements of each.

The Gemara further relates that at every watch, the Holy One, blessed be He (*HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא), declares: “Woe is to the children, because of whose sins I destroyed My Temple, burned My Sanctuary, and exiled them among the nations of the world.” This lament is not merely theoretical; it is embedded within biblical liturgical consciousness. In *Tikkun Chatzot* (תיקון הצות), recited at midnight, one mourns the destruction through verses such as “Eikhah yashvah vadad” (אֵיכָה יֵשְׁבָה בְּדָד, Lamentations 1:1). Likewise, in the Amidah, one prays, “V’tchezenah eineinu b’shuvcha l’Tzion b’rachamim” (וְתַחְזִינָה עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבְךָ לְצִיּוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים), expressing the yearning for restoration. Thus, the “night” of Daniel is continuously relived in the rhythm of Jewish prayer.

The Four Kingdoms correspond to the four spiritual forces that constitute Man. These are the three primary levels of the soul—nefesh (נֶפֶשׁ), ruach (רוּחַ), and neshamah (נִשְׁמָה)—as well as the unifying force that binds them together, namely the faculty of speech (*dibbur*, דִּבּוּר), which defines האדם (*adam*) as a being created in the tzelem Elohim (תְּצַלְמֵם אֱלֹהִים), the image of Elohim (Gen. 1:27).

Each of the first three kingdoms was sent to subjugate a particular aspect of the human soul, as represented by the nation of Yisrael: Babylonia corresponds to domination over the physical dimension (nefesh), Media-Persia over the emotional and moral dimension (ruach), and Greece over the intellectual and philosophical dimension (neshamah). The purpose of the fourth kingdom, Edom, was to rule over Man in his totality—to subjugate the unifying force that integrates all three levels.

Accordingly, the exile under Edom includes features of all three preceding exiles; therefore, it is considered equal to, and has endured longer than, all three combined. This distinctive quality is reflected in the fact that the fourth beast, representing Edom, is the only one described as possessing speech, as it is written (Dan. 7:8, 11) that it had “a mouth speaking great things.” This alludes to Edom’s dominion over the faculty of speech itself, the very expression of the tzelem Elohim, which unifies the human being.

The Gemara further states that the three watches of the night, though primarily discerned in Heaven, can also be recognized on earth through specific signs: during the first watch, a donkey brays; during the second, dogs howl; and during the third, a mother nurses her infant and a woman speaks with her husband. On a simple level, these serve as practical indicators of the progression of the night. However, the Maharal interprets these signs on a deeper level, understanding them as symbolic expressions of the various forms of suffering experienced by Yisrael in exile.

The donkey (*chamor*, חמור) alludes to *chomer* (חומר), materiality, representing the burden and degradation of physical existence in exile. The howling of dogs (*klavim*, כלבים) reflects brazenness and accusation, symbolizing the hostility and judgment of the nations. Yet the final watch introduces a different image: a mother nurturing her child and a woman speaking with her husband. These represent continuity, intimacy, and covenantal endurance.

Thus, even in the deepest darkness of exile, the final stage contains within it the quiet persistence of life and relationship. The covenant is not extinguished; it is sustained through connection, through speech, and through the enduring presence of the tzelem Elohim within האדם.

Shalom.