

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

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Shiur #07b: The Deeds of the People in the Temple (Chapter 8)

Violence (8:17-18)

“Then He said to me, Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it not enough for the house of Yehuda that they commit the abominations which they commit here? But they also have filled the land with violence (*chamas*), and have provoked Me even further to anger; and lo, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I too will deal in fury; My eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity, and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”

The meaning of the word “*chamas*” in these verses is very significant. Most commentators fail to note the meaning here, but Rimon Kasher explains:

“None of the abominations viewed by Yehezkel in the Temple and its courtyards approaches the severity of the abominations carried out throughout Yehuda. ‘*Chamas*’ is violent social injustice... the expression occurs in the story of the Flood, so what we have here is more than merely a hint of the punishment that awaits Yehuda. What the verse means is that God’s anger towards Israel arises not only from their religious abominations, but also from their sins in the moral and social sphere.¹

While this is one possible explanation, it seems that “*chamas*” in this verse is still related to religious sins. The end of the verse, for example, describes those who “put the branch to their nose,” which appears to be a form of pagan worship.² This being so, we must view this chapter in its entirety as an introduction to Chapters 9-11, where Yehezkel sees God’s glory leaving the Temple.

Results of idolatry: defilement of the people

¹ Kasher, pp. 253-254.

² “Their nose” (*apam*) is one of the 18 instances of “*kina ha-katuv*” (see, for example, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, massekhta de-shira Beshalach 6, Horowitz-Rabin edition, p. 135). For the literal interpretation of the expression, see Rashi, Radak, R. Yosef Kara, R. Eliezer of Beaugency, R. Yosef Ibn Kaspi, R. Menachem ben Shimon, and modern scholars ad loc.

The consequence foretold in *Sefer Devarim* for idolatry is exile. This, then, is another way in which the prophecy highlights for the exiles the reason for their plight. Along with this message, Yehezkel's prophecy again emphasizes that these acts by the people have caused the defilement of the nation, the land, and the Temple – a result not mentioned in *Sefer Devarim*.³ In *Sefer Vayikra*, though, we do find two different contexts where defilement is caused by engaging in idolatry. The first is:

“You shall not turn to mediums or wizards, nor seek to be defiled by them; I am the Lord your God.” (*Vayikra* 19:31)

In other words, consulting mediums and wizards has the effect of defiling the nation. In the next chapter we read:

“I will set My face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given his seed to Molekh, to defile My Sanctuary and to profane My holy Name.” (*Vayikra* 20:3)

In other words, sacrificing to Molekh defiles the Sanctuary.

As in the above verses, Yehezkel also states that the nation and the Temple have been defiled. But he adds the element of the defilement of the land (not mentioned explicitly in the Torah) as a direct result of idolatry. There is also a quantitative difference: in *Vayikra*, only two verses speak of idolatry as causing defilement of the people and of the Temple,⁴ while in *Sefer Yehezkel* this issue appears in no less than thirty verses.⁵

The necessity of repeatedly emphasizing this matter during Yehezkel's time is understandable: bear in mind the constant presence of false prophets, who continued to insist that the Temple would not be destroyed. The false prophets also claimed that the Temple vessels that had been carried into captivity would be returned to the Temple in Jerusalem (*Yirmiyahu* 27:16), and that within a short time the exiles, too, would return to their land (*Yirmiyahu* 28:3-4).

³ In comparison, it is worth noting that in *Sefer Devarim*, “defilement” (or “impurity” – *tum'a*) is associated with the following situations: ritually impure meat, animals, *bi'ur ma'asrot* (disposal of tithes), reuniting with an ex-wife who was married in the meantime to someone else, and delay in burying a corpse.

⁴ This is in addition to many other verses in *Vayikra* which mention defilement other contexts (menstruation, seminal issue, *tzara'at*, etc.) that are unrelated to idolatry.

⁵ The defilement of the Temple is mentioned for the first time in 5:11, and then in 9:7; and 23:38. Defilement of the people first occurs in 4:13-14 (in the prophet's symbolic act); then in 14:11, and afterwards mainly in Chapters 20 and 23. Defilement of the land is mentioned for the first time in Chapter 22. This defilement also has its own special purification, as we shall see in Chapters 36-39.

Appendix: A comparison of the descriptions of idolatry in *Yehezkel* and in *Devarim*

Since our focus here is on Chapter 8, let us broaden our discussion surrounding the descriptions of idolatry in *Yehezkel* in order to summarize this central topic in this *Sefer*. Along with our assertion that Yehezkel, in his prophecy in Chapter 8, deliberately alludes to the prophecy in *Devarim* 4 to describe the idolatry in which the people are engaged, we can also point to some other terms used by Yehezkel to describe idolatry, which are also found only in *Sefer Devarim*. Yehezkel seems to have had these terms, and the contexts in which they appear, in mind when speaking of idolatry as a cause of the Destruction.

1. “*Shekletz*,” “*shikkutzim*”: These appear in *Sefer Devarim* in the framework of the covenant on the plains of Moav (*Devarim* 29:16). Moshe emphasizes that the covenant between God and the nation – as well as its conditions, and the penalties for violation – applies to the future generations as well. Here, too, Yehezkel emphasizes that it is the sins of the people which have brought about the punishment set down in *Sefer Devarim*, including Destruction and exile.
2. The warning not to pass children through fire also appears in *Sefer Devarim*:

“There shall not be found among you one who passes his son or his daughter through fire, or who uses divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a witch...” (*Devarim* 18:10)

This warning appears as one of the prohibitions on adopting the abominations of the other nations, and includes the emphasis:

“For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord, and it is owing to these abominations that the Lord your God drives them out from before you.” (18:12)

Therefore, the consequence of these actions, as described by Yehezkel – “For when you offer your gifts and cause your sons to pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols, to this day” (20:31) – is, once again, inevitable.

3. The location of the *bamot*: The Torah mentions “upon every tall mountain/hill and under every leafy tree” only once in *Sefer Devarim*, as part of the command that the *bamot* be destroyed:

“You shall utterly destroy all the places in which the nations whom you are to dispossess, served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every leafy tree...” (*Devarim* 12:2)

In Yehezkel, these sites are places where God will carry out His verdict upon all those who have not only failed to destroy such places (as they were commanded to, in *Sefer Devarim*), but went so far as to engage in the idolatrous worship there themselves:

“Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain men shall be among their idols round about their altars, upon every high hill, at all the tops of the mountains, and under every leafy tree, and under every thick oak, the place where they offered sweet savor to all their idols.” (6:13)

4. Like the command concerning destruction of the places and altars where the nations served their gods, the command to uproot idolatry is likewise common to both Books. Yehezkel describes the future destruction:

“In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate, that your altars may be laid waste and made desolate, and your idols may be broken and cease, and your sun images may be cut down, and your works may be wiped out.” (6:6)

With these words he hints that the Destruction might have been avoided, had the nation observed the command appearing in *Sefer Devarim*, which uses the same terms:

“But thus shall you deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their *asherim*, and burn their carved idols with fire” (*Devarim* 7:5)

“And you shall overthrow their altar, and break their pillars, and burn their *asherim* with fire, and you shall hew down the carvings of their gods, and destroy their name out of that place.” (*Devarim* 12:3)

It seems that Yehezkel’s descriptions of the varieties of idolatry committed by the people deliberately follows the style employed in *Sefer Devarim* in the commands and warnings not to follow the deeds of the nations and not to serve their gods. This technique lends additional validity to Yehezkel’s prophecies about the sins – particularly about the punishment that God will bring. In addition, the nation’s sin is amplified through a broad generalization of all the different types of idolatry and their enumeration together in Chapter 8. In this way the prophet underlines the prophetic message that he is conveying: the sins of the

people have included idolatry, and this represents justification for the imminent Destruction and exile.⁶

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁶ These terms appear along with the “*maskit*” (a form of sculpted idol) in 8:12 (mentioned in the Torah in *Vayikra* 26:1 and in *Bamidbar* 33:52), and the “*tzelem*” (image). Yechezkel mentions three kinds of “*tzelem*”: “... the images of their abominations” (7:20), “male images” (16:17), and “the images of the Kasim” (23:14); cf. also *Bamidbar* 33:52.

The root “*n-t-tz*” (to destroy, overthrow) appears in *Vayikra* 11:35; 14:45; *Devarim* 7:5; 12:3; and also in Yechezkel (16:39) in reference to Jerusalem (as well as later on in chapter 26:9,12 in relation to Tyre). The command not to eat meat with its blood appears several times in *Vayikra* and in *Devarim*, and Yechezkel emphasizes that in this matter the people also have sinned – see 33:25 and 36:13-14.