

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**  
**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**  
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**Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel**  
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**In Honor of Ovadia Sutton for his love of Sefer Yehezkel**  
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**Shiur #21: The People, the Prophet, and God in Response to the  
Destruction (Chapter 33)**

We now move on to the third section of *Sefer Yehezkel*, which includes the prophecies concerning the revival of Israel. This section also includes Chapter 33, which addresses the role of the prophet and the change in his status that is brought about by the Destruction. In the prophecies that follow, Yehezkel speaks to different audiences: the Jewish leaders in the Diaspora, whom he accuses of exploiting and abandoning the people (Chapter 34); the mountains of Edom, to which he directs prophecies of fury and destruction (Chapter 35); the mountains of Israel, to whom the prophet promises that their desolation will once again bloom (Chapter 36); and finally – the exiles themselves, concerning whom he promises a return to the land (Chapter 37). Appended to this unit are two chapters describing the war of Gog from the Land of Magog (Chapters 38-39).

In our chapter, in which Yehezkel is informed of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, revisits subjects that were mentioned in the first part of the *Sefer*. Thus, vv. 1-20 deal with Yehezkel's role as observer (3,9-21), as discussed in Chapter 3; vv. 21-23 comes back to dumbness (3,25-27) which occurred in Chapter 4; and vv. 23-30 compare the status of the exiles of Yehoyakhin with the fate of those remaining in the land after the Destruction – a matter addressed at the start of the *Sefer*. In addition, the relations between the prophet and his environment is deduced from vv. 30-32 and this represents a sort of repairing of the hostile relations that had been maintained with the prophet when he set out on his prophetic mission (2:6). The concluding verse of the chapter, dealing with the purpose of Yehezkel's prophecy, complements the prophecy from 2:5. In light of all of this, we may assert that our chapter serves as a continuation of and complement to previous chapters.

**Babylonia, the Babylonian exiles, and the remnant in Jerusalem (33:21-29)**

According to the "time stamp" at the beginning of the prophecy, it was uttered "in the twelfth year [of the exile of Yehoyakhin]... in the tenth month, on the fifth of the month" (v. 21). In other words, more than a year and a half had

passed from the time of the Destruction until the escapee came to report it to Yehezkel. Some scholars have proposed that the exiles counted Yehoyakhin's reign from Nissan, while the reign of Tzidkiyahu was counted from Tishrei, such that the destruction of Jerusalem in the month of Av during the year 586 B.C.E. fell in the twelfth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin – which was the eleventh year of the reign of Tzidkiyahu. According to this calculation, only about five months separated the Destruction to the arrival of the report – a reasonable amount of time for a survivor to travel from Yehuda to Babylonia. Either way, this unit belongs to the period after the Destruction (which is described in *Melakhim* II 25:12 and in *Yirmiyahu* 52:16), in which Yehezkel must contend with the claim of the remnant left in the land that they are the ones who will eventually inherit it. Yehezkel refers to this group as “they who inhabit those waste places” (v. 24). The claim that they are quoted as directing against the exiles is that there must be some Divine significance to the fact that there is still an active Jewish center in the land, and that their status should not be dismissed just because they are few in number (v. 24). This latter claim is based on a comparison with Avraham: while he was a lone individual, they are many. And indeed, size or number is not the decisive factor; Yishayahu proceeds from a similar comparison with the forefathers in his words of encouragement and consolation: “Look to Avraham your forefather, and to Sara who bore you, for he was but one when I called him, and I blessed him and increased him. For The Lord shall comfort Tzion; He will comfort all her waste places, and HE will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody” (*Yishayahu* 51:2-3). However, the argument of “those who inhabit those waste places” is erroneous: their bitter fate is the result not of their small number, but rather their multitude of sins. Attention should be paid to the fact that the sins enumerated by the prophet are not related to violation of the sanctity of the Temple, but rather to idolatry and sins between man and his fellow; these sins are just as relevant now as they were prior to the Destruction. This being the case, it is clear that the remnant left in the land is not worthy of inheriting the land, and therefore there is no substance to their claim. Moreover, they are destined to die by the sword and by pestilence. By the end of the process the land will be desolate – but this desolation will lead to knowledge of God.

### **An echo of the events preceding the murder of Gedalia**

The claim, “But we are many; the land is given to us for an inheritance” (v. 24), which the prophet places in the mouth of those remaining in the land after the Destruction, seems to belong to the period preceding the murder of Gedalia. The fact that Gedalia was appointed over the “remnant” population (*Melakhim* II 25; *Yirmiyahu* 40:7) indicates that those remaining in the land had a defined status, a delineated area of habitation, and clearly formulated rights and obligations vis-à-vis the administration. Indirect evidence of this is to be found in the bulla engraved with the title “Gedaliahu appointed over the house”, found in Lakhish and dating back to the late 7<sup>th</sup>-early 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The generally

accepted view in the research<sup>1</sup> is that this was Gedalia ben Achikam, who was appointed by the Babylonians as head of the administration of Yehuda following the fall of the Kingdom of Yehuda – or, at the very least, as the official representative of the Jewish “remnant” before the Babylonian rulers.

The claim of the remnant in the land indicates that they assumed that exile was a matter pertaining only to those now in Babylonia, while they themselves were continuing the national survival of Am Yisrael, and were therefore deserving of possession of the land. Yehezkel rejects this view, and informs them that they are destined to join their exiled brethren in Babylonia (see also 11:16; 12:21-25). In light of this, although this is a prophecy of rebuke and punishment to the inhabitants of the land, it is in fact a prophecy of revival and continuation for the exiles. For this reason, this prophetic unit is included among the chapters of revival in *Sefer Yehezkel*.

The murder of Gedalia brought this period to an end. Although we lack documentation of numbers and status concerning the remnant after the Destruction, it would seem that so long as Gedalia was in charge, the Jews under his authority maintained a separate identity which was lost after his assassination, and the administration of the Jewish population passed to the Babylonian rulers. Thus, there was a dual turning point: the Jews in the land lost all hope of autonomy, and in addition, they ceased to view themselves as a distinct group that was separate from their brethren in Babylonia.

An understanding of the prophecy from which its historical context raises two exegetical possibilities. Since the prophecy came in the fifth month (Tevet), the prevailing assumption is that the assassination of Gedalia, which took place in *Tishrei*, preceded it. However, the words that Yehezkel places in the mouth of the remnant in the land – “but we are many; the land is given to us for an inheritance” (33:24), suggest that they see themselves as an alternative to the exiles in Babylonia, and this seems less likely after the murder. Likewise, the prophetic response to their claim (33:25-28) seems better suited to the situation prior to the murder, not following it.

According to this first possibility, the murder occurred seven weeks after the Destruction. Since it seems likely that it would take the survivor a few months to reach Babylonia, he would probably have left Jerusalem, heading off to inform Yehezkel and the exiles of Yehoyakhin of the destruction of the city, before the murder took place. The prophecy describes the situation in the land during the brief period between the Destruction and the assassination. Although we cannot reject this possibility out of hand, it seems difficult to accept: firstly, the prophet’s words are clearly polemical in nature, and this would have been unlikely at a time when all energies would more logically be directed to gathering the pieces and recovery. Secondly, the Divine response should reflect the reality in the land in

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this bulla, see S. Achituv, “Assufat Ketuvot Ivriyot mi-Yemei Bayit Rishon ve-Reshit Yemei Bayit Sheni,” Jerusalem 5753, p. 172.

real time, regardless of when the escapee left and how he perceived the situation.

The other, seemingly more likely possibility is that this prophecy describes the situation in the land at a slightly later stage – not during the weeks immediately following the Destruction. At this time there were still a good number of Jewish inhabitants in the land, and they still viewed their group as an alternative to the Babylonian exiles. This perspective rests upon the assumption that Gedalia was assassinated not in the month of *Tishrei* immediately after the Destruction, but rather a year or more later. If we accept this interpretation, then Yehezkel's prophecy assumes special significance: the purpose of the prophecy is to clarify to those remaining in the land that although they had survived the destruction of the Temple, they were not the future inheritors of the land; rather, the exiles in Babylonia were the main continuation of Am Yisrael.

This also tells us something about the connection between the exiles in Babylonia and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. We think of the Babylonian exile as the center of world Jewry, where the nation's religious and cultural life would flourish – but this status was not conferred on it right away. During the period immediately after the Destruction, the survivors in Jerusalem considered themselves the proper inheritors of the land, and viewed their exiled brethren as fated to disappear, like the ten tribes that had now assimilated among the nations. The change in consciousness was triggered by the murder of Gedalia, when the Jewish community in the land lost its power and the remaining Jews in the land began to realize that the continued national and spiritual survival of Am Yisrael would be based in Babylonia, while they themselves would remain an insignificant “remnant”. Their identity as a “remnant” remained all the way to the beginning of the Return, as evidenced in the references by Chaggai (1:12; 2:3) and Zekharia (8:6,11,12) to the “remnant of the people”.

### **Yehezkel's status following the Destruction (33:30-32)**

Our chapter concludes with the attitude of the exiles towards Yehezkel. Attention should be paid to the fact that the news of the city's desolation includes no mention of the Destruction. This is perhaps the basis for an understanding of the difference between Yehezkel's prophecy and that of Yirmiyahu during the same years. Yehezkel's prophecy declares:

“As for you, son of man – the children of your people who talk against you by the walls and in the doors of the houses, speak to one another, everyone to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what word comes from the Lord. And they come to you as the people come, and they sit before you, My people, and they hear your words, but they do not carry them out, for it has become flute music in their mouths, while their heart is set on unjust gain. And behold – you are to them like a song for flutes, by one who has a pleasant voice, and can play the instrument well, for they hear the words, but they do not carry them out. But when it comes to pass

(see, it is coming), then they shall know that a prophet has been among them.” (33:30-33)

For the audience listening to Yehezkel in Babylonia, now that his prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple have indeed come to pass, it has been shown that Yehezkel is a true prophet. Now there are more people interested in listening to him, in contrast to the period prior to the Destruction, when he would speak to the elders of Yehuda and Israel alone. The esteem in which he is now held leads to a greater closeness to and bond with the people, leading him to refer to them as “Your people” (v. 30). Rumor has it that Yehezkel is worth listening to. However, the people are not going to do what he tells them to; they listen to his words like a “song”. Therefore, there prophecy concludes with the words, “They shall know that a prophet has been among them” – just as Yehezkel was told by God at the outset of his mission (2:5). His prophecy will have no effect in real time; it will only become meaningful after his words and his warnings are realized.

The prophet does not focus on the Destruction itself; he looks to the past and to the future. The reason for this is that the exiles in Babylonian have not experienced the direct crisis, and they have already begun to internalize the new reality. The prophet first reminds them (Chapter 34) that he has already spoken in the past of the inhabitants of the land as dwelling in ruins – but from here he launches into a series of prophecies describing the revival of the nation in the future: there is an extended revisiting of his prophecies concerning the ingathering (36:22-35), as well as the message to the leader of the House of David, the vision of the dry bones, Gog and Magog, and the vision of the future Temple. These prophecies contain nothing in the way of consolation, sorrow, reconciliation or compassion over what has happened in Jerusalem. This is especially conspicuous if we compare these chapters with Yirmiyahu, who laments at length over the Destruction. According to the Gemara (*Bava Batra* 15a), Yirmiyahu authored *Eikha*, and this work contains his lamentations over the Destruction and its accompanying trauma and suffering. Yirmiyahu shares the sorrow of the people, and his lamentations resound with the pain and profound shock experienced by the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the time of the Destruction.

Translated by Kaeren Fish