

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
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In Honor of Ovadia Sutton for his love of Sefer Yehezkel

Shiur #24: Yehezkel's description of the nation's purification (36:16-32)

The climax of the process of Israel's redemption in Sefer Yehezkel is the purification of the nation by God. This process, with all its constituent elements, appears in its most comprehensive form in Chapter 36, climaxing in the verse,

“And I shall sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols will I cleanse you.” (36:25)

The various descriptions of this redemption (in Chapters 11, 20, 28, 34, 35, 337, 39) suggest that the occurrence of the redemption is not dependent on the nation's deeds;¹ the process is carried out in its entirety by God. The non-dependence on the behavior of the nation is especially conspicuous against the background of the detailed description of its sins. The prophet states the reason for this: the ingathering of the nation into its land takes place solely because of God's desire that His Name be sanctified in the eyes of the nations (see 20:9,14,22,41; 36:20-23). The Destruction and the exile do not cause any fundamental change in the nation's attitude towards God, and therefore the desired processes – purification (36:25; 37:23) and atonement (16:63) - will take place without any preconditions (11:19; 36:26; 39:29). Since the nation is not an active partner in its own purification, Yehezkel devotes relatively little space to this process: it is discussed in just two specific chapters, contrasting with the dozens of times throughout the Sefer that he repeatedly emphasizes their defilement.

The aim of Chapter 36 is to prepare the nation to protect the future Temple, which is described in the prophetic vision in Chapters 40-48. Out of the many chapters dealing with redemption, including the nation's return to its land, the purification of the nation is mentioned only three times in Sefer Yehezkel. Two of these appearances are in Chapter 36 – a chapter that offers a detailed

¹ There is one exception, discussed above: “And they shall come there, and they shall take away all the detestable things of it, and all the abominations of it from there” (11:18).

description of the redemption, climaxing in the renewal of the covenant between God and the house of Israel. At the center of this prophecy is the stage where God sprinkles purifying water over the nation, thereby cleansing them of their defilement and their sins:

“For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” (vv. 24-25)

“... On the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities I will also cause the cities to be inhabited, and the wastes shall be rebuilt.” (v. 33)

This “ceremony” of purification of the nation as a whole is exceptional in Tanakh. The expression “clean (or “pure”) water” (*mayim tehorim*) likewise occurs only here; nowhere else in Tanakh is there any description, even metaphoric, of God purifying the entire nation, either through sprinkling water over them or by means of any other procedure.

The other appearance of the purification of the nation is to be found in Chapter 37, which offers no description of the process; the prophet declares only that “They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols... I will cleanse them, so they shall be My people, and I shall be their God.” (37:23)

R. Eliezer of Beaugency interprets the verse thus:

“The water of purification and the sprinkling are a metaphor for the removal of iniquity and the cleaning, clarifying and cleansing that they will undergo through the captivity and plundering that they will undergo for a long time, to atone for sin and remove wrongdoing, as in the verse, ‘Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean’ (Tehillim 51:9), and ‘If I wash myself with snow water...’ (Iyov 9:30). And after you have been purified of all your defilements – ‘I shall give you a new heart’ so that you will not commit such great sins that you will be punished as you are now...”.

We shall adopt this interpretation and attempt to add another layer to it.

“I shall sprinkle” (ve-zarakti)

Let us focus on a linguistic aspect of the process of purification. The prophet speaks of “sprinkling” clean water. In Tanakh, verbs based on the root “z-r-k” and the root “n-z-h” (another word used for ‘sprinkling’) usually appear in the context of religious ritual. In some instances where the blood of a sacrifice must be sprinkled on the altar, the verb ‘z-r-k’ is used; in other instances, the Torah uses the verb ‘n-z-h’. In the case of the red heifer (Bamidbar 19), both

concepts appear: the water that is mixed with the ashes of the heifer are sprinkled, and the text uses the verbs seemingly interchangeably. However, in general there seems to be a distinction between the two terms: '*zerika*' means all the blood, which must be poured on the altar; '*haza'ah*' is a symbolic gesture that uses only a small portion of the blood, effecting a cleansing and sanctification. Let us now trace this fundamental distinction through the details of the actions and their biblical sources:

“And you shall take of the blood that is upon the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it (*ve-hizeita*) upon Aharon, and upon his garments, and upon his sons, and upon the garments of his sons with him, and he shall be sanctified, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons' garments with him.” (Shemot 29:21)

“And he shall sprinkle (*ve-hizah*) of the blood of the sin offering...” (Vayikra 5:9)

“And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle (*ve-hizah*) it with his finger upon the covering eastward, and before the covering shall he sprinkle (*yazeh*) of the blood with his finger seven times.” (Vayikra 16:14)

Sprinkling (*haza'ah*) of the blood is usually performed with the finger (Vayikra 4:6,17; 14:15,27 and elsewhere), and sometimes by means of some object – for example, the hyssop (Vayikra 14; Bamidbar 19). Both the liquid itself and the object of the sprinkling (i.e., that which is sprinkled upon) change in accordance with the situation. The liquid that is sprinkled may be blood, the anointing oil, or the water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer. The objects of sprinkling include the kohanim, leviim, the veil, the covering over the Ark, and/or the altar, as well as an impure house, vessel, or person. Common to all of these situations is the conceptual context of cleansing, purification and sanctification. In each instance, the sprinkling is part of a ceremony that symbolically expresses transcendence, progress, and perhaps a transition to a higher status or plane.

In contrast to this sprinkling, the purpose of '*zerika*' is to have the blood upon the altar (Vayikra 1:3,8,9,17),² and this is achieved, one way or another, using all the blood. For this reason, the Torah instructs the sprinkling of “the blood”, rather than “of the blood”: “And you shall sprinkle the blood...” (Shemot 29:20); “And the sons of Aharon, the kohanim, sprinkled its blood (Vayikra 1:11), and more. This sprinkling is part of the normative process of offering sacrifices, which comprises several stages (leaning of hands, slaughter, sprinkling of blood and offering on the altar). In contrast to “*haza'ah*”, where the symbolism of the act is related to the conceptual world of purification or sanctity, “*zerika*” is part of

² There are two exceptions to this rule, which appear in Shemot 24 (the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant) and Bamidbar 18 (the waters of the red heifer); they will be discussed below.

the sacrificial ceremony only. The reason for the pouring of the blood on the altar may be induced, *inter alia*, from the verse,

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes an atonement for the soul.” (Vayikra 17:11)

This indicates that this pouring of the blood upon the altar is an important part of the sacrificial service, since this act brings atonement.³

However, we encounter a problem with the mixture of both roots “z-r-k” and “n-z-h” in Bamidbar 19. In order to solve this difficulty, we propose that the main verb in this context is “haza’ah” and not “zerika”. The central verses of this unit – the actual command – use the verb “n-z-h” (vv. 18-19) and the individual who performs the action is referred to as “mazeh” (v. 21). The verb “z-r-k”, in contrast, appears in passive form (vv. 13,20), as part of a description of the punishment of one who enters the Sanctuary in a state of ritual impurity. Further support for the view of the root “n-z-h” as more central to this description of purification is to be found in the chapter dealing with the purification of the leviim, which speaks of a sprinkling (*haza’ah*) of the waters mixed with ashes.

The reason that the two verses in the unit on the red heifer include the verb “z-r-k”, in its various forms, would seem to be that along with the connection that exists between “zerika” and the sacrifices, as discussed above, this verb can also serve in a more general sense, without specific reference (as opposed to “haza’ah”, which has a clear and precise meaning). Therefore, when the text speaks of sprinkling the waters within a different legal context, such as the punishment of someone who is ritually impure and enters the Sanctuary, it uses the more general and neutral term “z-r-k”, in passive form, without invoking the more specific “haza’ah”.

“Clean water”

The cleansing of the nation in *Sefer Yehezkel*, achieved by the sprinkling of purifying water upon them, parallels the process required for someone who has become ritually impure through contact with a corpse (*Bamidbar* 19), using “waters of ritual impurity” (*mei nidda*). Some scholars have also pointed out the similarity between the sprinkling of water in *Sefer Yehezkel* and the purification of the *leviim* in preparation for their service in the Sanctuary (*Bamidbar* 8:7), using “waters of sin offering” (*mei chatat*). Nevertheless, it should be noted that in contrast to the *mei nidda* and the *mei chatat* that are used for purification in *Sefer Bamidbar*, *Yehezkel* adopts a new and unique definition - “*mayim tehorim*” – for

³ Further clarification of the distinction between the two types of “sprinkling” in light of the details of the laws involved, lies beyond the scope of the present discussion. We have therefore focused on the fundamental distinction as arising from a plain reading of the biblical text.

the water that will cleanse the nation. Since this expression appears nowhere else in Tanakh, we must try to understand and interpret it.

The description of the water as “*tehorim*” – pure, or clean – may be meant to emphasize the idea that this water does not contract impurity, in the same way that we find, “But a fountain or pit, in which there is a collection of water, shall be clean” (*Vayikra* 11:36). If so, it is reasonable to assume that the expression “*mayim tehorim*” is based on the expression “*mei nidda*,” but expands on and applies it. On the other hand, it may be that the water is referred to here as “clean” because it plays a role in a ceremony of cleansing. The language that Yehezkel uses here sits well with the general theme of the chapter, which describes a unique process of purification. From this perspective, the appearance of the expression “*mayim tehorim*” appears to be a deliberate departure from the more familiar “*mei nidda*” and “*mei chata*”.⁴

Bamidbar 19

The purification of the nation of all its defilement in *Sefer Yehezkel* may be better understood against the background of the ceremony of purification set forth in *Bamidbar* 19. The sins of the nation that are described in *Sefer Yehezkel*, such as the “*gilulim*,” are compared to the uncleanness contracted through contact with a dead body, and God’s sprinkling of water is likened to the purifying sprinkling that is performed by the Kohen. The importance of this metaphor lies in its highlighting of the fact that the impurity of the nation is so grave that it is compared to one of the central, major types of impurity treated in the Torah, requiring a lengthy and thorough process of purification. Both of these situations of purification are notable for the fact that the individual/nation cannot undertake the purification process independently; someone else is needed for it to happen.

Despite the similarity, however, there is an important difference between the two cases when it comes to the causes of impurity. Whereas in *Sefer Yehezkel* the sins that have brought about the nation’s impurity involve idolatry, including worship of the abominations and passing children through fire, the individual’s state of impurity is the result of contact with death. The description of the nation’s impurity resulting from idolatry is unique to *Sefer Yehezkel*. In addition, a distinction should be drawn in the way in which the purification is described. Both in *Sefer Bamidbar* (Chapters 8 and 19) and in *Yehezkel*, the purification ceremony involves water, but the verb used to describe the action is different in each instance: in *Bamidbar*, there is a sprinkling – *haza’ah* – of water, while in *Yehezkel* the verb *zerika* is employed.

⁴ Support for the distinction between the expressions “*mayim tehorim*” and “*mei nidda*” is to be found in the Community Rule scroll (1QS), among the Dead Sea Scrolls; see Y. Licht, *Megillat ha-Serakhot mi-Megilot Midbar Yehuda*, Jerusalem 5756, pp. 78-79, column 3, lines 4-5, and also p. 80, line 9. The text indicates that its author assumes that the purification process includes both the sprinkling of ‘*mei nidda*’ and sanctification using ‘*mayim tehorim*.’

Shemot 24

The fact that Yehezkel chooses to use the root “z-r-k” points in the direction of another biblical parallel which offers a fascinating perspective on Yehezkel’s prophecy. There are two places in Tanakh where the verb “z-r-k” does not involve the altar. One is our chapter in *Yehezkel*, and the other is Chapter 24 of *Sefer Shemot*, where the blood of the covenant is sprinkled over the nation. Both instances involve the sprinkling of a liquid over Am Yisrael in order to purify them. In *Sefer Shemot*, the ceremony marks the forging of a covenant between the nation and God, and the substance that is sprinkled is blood:

“And Moshe took half of the blood and placed it in basins, and half of the blood he sprinkled (*zarak*) upon the altar. And he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, ‘All that God has said – we shall do and we shall hear.’ And Moshe took the blood and he sprinkled (*va-yizrok*) upon the people, and he said, ‘Behold, the blood of the covenant which God has forged with you concerning all of these things.’” (*Shemot* 24:6-8)

It would seem that the verb “z-r-k” is used here in relation to the second half of the blood (the portion sprinkled over the nation) because of its use in relation to the first half (the portion sprinkled upon the altar), and the use of the same verb emphasizes the connection between them. A comparison of this scene to Yehezkel’s prophecy illuminates the reason for the choice of this verb in our context. In *Sefer Shemot*, the focus of the ceremony was the moment when Moshe divided the blood of the peace offering in half: one half was then sprinkled upon the altar, representing God’s side of the covenant (see Seforno on this verse), while the other half is sprinkled upon the nation, in a most unusual departure. This blood is then referred to as the “blood of the covenant”.

In various places in Tanakh we see that the forging of a covenant is accompanied by a ceremony in which the partnership between the two sides finds expression. In the Covenant Between the Parts, in the time of Avraham, the animals are cut in half and a smoking furnace and burning torch pass between them (*Bereishit* 15:10). In the time of Tzidkiyahu, mention is made of a covenant to liberate the slaves which included the cutting of a calf in two and passing between the parts (*Yirmiyahu* 34:17-22). The description in *Sefer Shemot* is certainly similar: in this ceremony the blood is divided in half, with one half sprinkled towards God, as it were (represented by the altar), and the other sprinkled upon the nation.⁵ In each of these ceremonies there is something that is divided in half, but while only one of the parties to the covenant passes in between the halves of the animals in the first two instances, in the third instance the blood is sprinkled over both parties to the covenant, thereby reinforcing the

⁵ It is difficult to imagine how the blood was actually sprinkled over the entire nation. Ibn Ezra proposes that the “elders represented all of Israel.”

symbolism of the partnership between them. In light of this we can now better understand the use of the root “z-r-k” in relation to the nation. As we have seen, the sprinkling of the blood is part of a sacrificial process, but here the emphasis is on reciprocity: just as the blood of the sacrifice is sprinkled on the altar, which represents God, so it is sprinkled also upon the nation – the other party to the covenant. Now it turns out that the sprinkling of a substance upon the nation within the framework of the covenant served as the model for our chapter in *Yehezkel*, in which clean water is sprinkled upon the people within the framework of the renewal of the bond with God.

However, these two covenantal ceremonies are not identical. The main difference is that in *Yehezkel* it is water that is sprinkled, while *Sefer Shemot* describes a sprinkling of blood. There are many possible reasons for this difference. Firstly, it would seem that *Sefer Shemot* involves blood because on the practical level, the covenant in *Shemot* involved burnt offerings and peace offerings, and the ceremony came after the sprinkling of the blood upon the altar; this preceding setup does not exist in *Yehezkel*. In addition, the sprinkling in *Sefer Shemot* does not include any element of purification, since that had already been a necessary precondition for the sacrifices. Beyond all of this, however, sacrifices are not an ideal or typical means of purification. In *Sefer Yehezkel*, the people are sprinkled with water, which is perhaps the most obvious purifying substance. In addition, there may be a rather technical reason for the difference: the chapter in *Yehezkel* is dealing with a situation in which there is no Temple, such that the offering of sacrifices and the use of blood are not a relevant option.⁶

A review of *Sefer Yehezkel* as a whole suggests another significant possible reason for the difference between the ceremony described in *Sefer Shemot* and the purification described here. In *Sefer Yehezkel*, blood is generally representative of the deeds that lead to the destruction of the Temple and to exile,⁷ and this applies to our chapter, too: “So I poured My fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land...” (36:18). Thus, it is reasonable to posit that, in the absence of the Temple, the purification of the people will be carried out with water alone, which the prophet declares to be absolutely pure, such that the deeds of the nation – as severe as they are – cannot contaminate them.

Thus, a comparison between the ceremony of purification in *Sefer Yehezkel* and the ceremony of the forging of the covenant in *Sefer Shemot* shows that despite the difference with regard to the substance that is sprinkled over the nation, there is considerable similarity. In both instances the entire nation is present: in *Sefer Shemot* it is the entire generation that has just left

⁶ It is no coincidence that in a chapter in which the description of the process of redemption is extremely detailed, elements related to the Temple are absent. Their time will come only later (especially in Chapters 40-48), after the purification of the nation is complete. This is one of the ways in which *Yehezkel* “protects” the future Temple that he describes from recontamination.

⁷ 7:23; 9:9; 16:38; 22:2-6, 27; 33:25, and more.

Egypt, while Yehezkel is talking about the nation that has been gathered together from all the lands (36:24). In addition, both instances involve a covenant-forging ceremony: in *Sefer Shemot* there is explicit use of the word “covenant,” while in *Yehezkel* we find a different formulation which is commonly used in the context of reciprocal relations between God and the nation: “... and you shall be My people, and I will be your God” (36:28).

We might therefore sum up by saying that the essence of the ceremony of purification is the verse, “And I shall sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleanness’s and from all your idols will I cleanse you” (36:25).

We have seen that in Chapter 36 we find the most detailed prophecy of redemption in *Sefer Yehezkel*. The prophetic units that speak of revival include common elements: God’s bringing the people out from among the nations; His gathering them in; sanctification of God’s Name in the eyes of the nations as a result of this gathering; God’s bringing the people back to their land; and their knowledge of God in the future. However, an overall view of the content of Yehezkel’s prophecies shows that they lack some classic elements: salvation and flourishing, on one hand, and expressions of sorrow, reconciliation, or consolation, on the other.

In closing, we note that this prophecy is read as the *haftara* for *Parshat Para*, to which it is connected both through its linguistic similarity to the expressions of redemption that appear in *Sefer Shemot* (Chapter 6),⁸ and through the conclusion with its description of Jerusalem: “Like the flock of sacrifices, like the flock of Jerusalem in her appointed times...”. Targum Yonatan translates, “Like the holy nation, like the nation that is purified and comes to Jerusalem at the time of the Pesach holiday....”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁸ The expressions of redemption share a common introduction: “Therefore say to Bnei Yisrael... I am the Lord” (36:22), and a similar conclusion: “And you shall be My people, and I shall be your God, and they shall know that I am the Lord” (ibid., 38). However, it should be noted that the expressions of redemption themselves are not identical: In *Shemot* 6 we find “I shall bring out” (*ve-hotzeiti*) (v. 6); “and I shall deliver” (*ve-hitzalti*) (v. 6), “and I shall redeem” (*ve-gaalti*) (v. 6), “and I shall take” (*ve-lakachti*) (v. 7). In *Yehezkel* 36 we find, “I shall take” (v. 24), “I shall gather” (*ve-kibatzi*) (v. 24); “I shall bring” (*ve-heveiti*) (v. 24), and “I shall sprinkle” (*ve-zarakti*) (v. 25). These differences would seem to emphasize the difference between the Exodus from Egypt and the return of the nation to its land in the future.