

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

Shiur #26 The Vision of the Dry Bones (37:1-14)

This famous prophecy, known as the “vision of the dry bones”, reflects the nation’s sense of despair concerning its situation following the destruction of Jerusalem, and thereby complements the message of Chapters 35-36. The prophecy is divided into two main units: the first covers 37:1-14, the second covers vv. 15-28.

The prophecy begins when God’s hand carries Yechezkel out of his place in Babylon, carrying him “in the spirit of the Lord” and placing him in a valley. In the valley, God’s glory is revealed to Yechezkel in tangible form; it has been mentioned previously (3:22-23; 8:4). It is difficult to know where this valley actually is – in Babylonia or in the Land of Israel; perhaps it was a place in Babylon from which the prophet could see what was happening in the land. Radak, commenting on 3:22, explains:

“For the valley was a purer place than Tel Aviv, where people lived, and it recurred time after time, to infuse him with God’s Providence and guidance. Furthermore, in that same valley in which [the ancient tower and city of] Babylon had been built, God showed him His Providence over His creations, for there He mixed up their language and nullified their plan.”

Thus according to Radak, the valley is uninhabited, and is a place of special historical importance. Perhaps the other-worldly nature of this prophecy is amplified by the fact that the location where it is conveyed cannot be identified.

The spirit of God, by means of which Yechezkel is transported, is mentioned elsewhere in the *Sefer*:

“And the spirit of God fell upon me... for I know each of the things that come into your mind. You have multiplied your slain in this city, and you have filled the streets of it with the slain.” (11:5-6)

The prophecy in our chapter, then, perhaps represents the inverse of the prophecy in Chapter 11 as well as a complement to it. There, the spirit of God exposed the bloodshed and the slain who lay throughout the city. In our chapter, the spirit of God returns - to revive the slain, who have in the meantime become a pile of bones lying in the valley. In the prophecy, God observes the dry bones and

asks, 'Can these bones live?' (37:3). The prophet responds: 'O Lord God, You know' (ibid.)

This answer seems to encapsulate Yechezkel's prophetic message throughout the *Sefer*. God's status and His power stand at the center of his prophecy. The nation's past, present and future is clarified by its relationship with God. Indeed, for the prophet it is altogether possible that not a single survivor of the nation will remain (as he himself declares in 9:8-9, and as the nation declares in 33:10). This message is climactically conveyed through the description of the meat burning in the pot, where the bones, too, are burned (24:10). For the observer at these points in time, the outcome is not clear. The prophet therefore has no clear answer based on prior knowledge or principles such as the covenant, the merit of the forefathers, desecration of God's Name, or the like. The answer will depend only on God's own decision.¹

Now, the Divine response addresses the bones directly:

"And He said to me, Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and I will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord." (37:4-6)

The prophet has hereby received a response to God's question. But the response in no way indicates that the future and fate of the bones were or are self-evident. Moreover, in the absence of Divine intervention, the bones appeared doomed to remaining dry and dead.

Perhaps the prophecy of the nation's revival by means of God's spirit is meant as a contrast to what is happening at the same time in Jerusalem. This idea arises from a prophecy of Yirmiyahu:

"And they have built the high places of Tofet, which is in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire ... Therefore, behold, days are coming, says the Lord, it shall no more be called Tofet, nor the valley of Ben-Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they shall bury in Tofet, because there is no room. And the carcasses of this people shall be food for the birds of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth, and none shall frighten them away... At that time, says the Lord, they shall bring out the bones of the kings of Yehuda, and the bones of his princes, and the bones of the *kohanim*, and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, out of their graves. And they shall spread them

¹ R. Eliezer of Beaugency, commenting on 37:3, writes: "An artisan has an expert opinion as to whether a broken vessel can be repaired or not." See also R. Yosef Kara's interpretation of this verse.

before the sun, and the moon, and all the host of heaven, whom they have loved, and whom they have served, and after whom they have walked, and whom they have sought, and whom they have worshipped; they shall not be gathered, nor be buried; they shall be for dung upon the face of the earth. And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue of those who remain of this evil family, who remain in all the places into which I have driven them, says the Lord of hosts.” (*Yirmiyahu* 7:31-8:3)

The description of the human bones that are strewn outside of their graves expresses more than just the great number of deaths during the years of siege and destruction. The withholding of burial dishonors the dead, and the removal of bones from their burial place likewise shows contempt.

In light of this, Yechezkel’s encounter with a valley full of bones may testify to the disgrace of the people, and not necessarily to its future revival. How will the situation develop? That depends entirely on God. Even when the realization of the prophecy becomes tangible, the prophet anxiously anticipates the spirit of God, which is slow in coming:

“And as I prophesied there was a noise, and behold a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I beheld, the sinews and the flesh came up on them, and the skin covered them above, but there was no spirit in them” (37:7-8).

The comparison of the Divine promise with the reality shows that the essence is missing: the promise had started out with mention of “God’s spirit”; but in reality, all other elements are present except for that. At this point another appeal is added to the prophecy, an appeal made directly to that spirit:

“Then He said to me, prophesy to the spirit; prophesy, son of man, and say to the spirit, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O spirit, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (37:9).

Only after the prophet calls upon the spirit is the prophecy realized in full: “And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up on their feet, an exceedingly great army.” (37:10) It seems that the gradual progression of the realization of the prophecy, finding expression in the prophet’s dialogue with God, reveals something of the tension that Yechezkel felt as he waited (perhaps impatiently) for the realization of God’s promise before his eyes.

Later on, Yechezkel receives another prophecy. Here the emphasis is on the connection between the vision of the dry bones and the feeling that is prevalent amongst the nation:

“And He said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; Behold, they say, our bones are dried, and our hope is lost; we are clean

cut off. Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and have brought you up out of your graves, and I shall put My spirit in you, and you shall live, and I shall place you in your own land, then you shall know that I the Lord have spoken, and performed it, says the Lord.” (37:11-14)

A prophecy for all time

In the vision of the dry bones, as in many other prophecies in *Sefer Yechezkel* (Chapters 16, 34, and more), the allegory and the reality that it represents are interwoven throughout. It therefore seems inappropriate to try to separate them and ask what part of this prophecy actually took place, and what belongs to the allegory alone. Admittedly, there are different ways of interpreting this chapter.² One view is summed up in the words of the Rambam in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (II:46): “When [the prophet] says, ‘and He set me down in the midst of the valley’, this was in a Divine vision.” Thus, the Rambam views the entire prophecy as an allegory. However, Chazal offer a different view, suggesting a description of something tangible and real:

“Rabbi Eliezer said: The dead people whom Yechezkel revived [in his prophecy] stood up on their feet and uttered praise, and then died [again]. What praise did they utter? ‘The Lord slays with righteousness and revives with mercy’... Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yossi ha-Gelili, said: ‘The dead people whom Yechezkel revived went up to the Land of Israel, where they married wives and bore sons and daughters.’ Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira stood up and said: ‘I am among their descendants, and these are the *tefillin* that my grandfather left me from them [as an inheritance]...’.” (*Sanhedrin* 92b)

Whether the description is of an actual occurrence or an allegory, it is clear that in the Jewish national consciousness, this prophecy remains timeless. An echo of this perception is to be found in the *Sefer Ha-kuzari*, which connects the nation’s hopes for redemption with this chapter in *Sefer Yechezkel*.³ For our generation, seeing the establishment and prospering of the State of Israel after the horror of the Holocaust, this consciousness of the redemption being bound together with the vision of dry bones is greatly amplified. We see expressions of this consciousness in many different places and spheres, such as in the reading of this chapter in many of the ceremonies marking Holocaust Remembrance Day,

² See Kasher, “Appendix XII: The Nature of Prophecy and Its Significance in the Qumran Literature and in Traditional Exegesis” (Heb.), pp. 720-722.

³ “We are not like the dead, but rather like a sick and attenuated person who is given up on by the physicians, and yet hopes for a miracle or an extraordinary recovery, as it is written: ‘Can these bones live?’ (*Yechezkel* 37:3).”

or in contemporary Hebrew poetry, such as the poem “Yechezkel” by Yaakov Fichman, in which he speaks of “the dream of revival whose arrival you foresaw”.⁴

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁴ Y. Fichman, “Yechezkel”, *Arugot: Divrei Shira u-Proza*, Jerusalem 1954, pp. 51-52; see also Y. Orland’s poem, “Ha-Bik’a”, *Shirim me-Eretz Utz*, Tel Aviv, 1963, pp. 20-21.