

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

**YEchezkel: THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL
By Dr. Tova Ganzel**

This week's shiurim are dedicated in memory of
Moshe Eliezer Maier Stillman z"l
by Isaac Ely Stillman

01: Introduction

The Book of Yechezkel covers a fateful period of some 22 years in the history of the Jewish People: beginning with year five of the exile of King Yehoyakhin (593 B.C.E.), and ending fifteen years after the Destruction of the First Temple (571 B.C.E.). It was a momentous age, unprecedented in many ways. The Jewish nation was split between two centers – Judah and Babylon – with each group maintaining a separate identity. The Destruction of the Temple and the exile that followed created the unprecedented challenge of preserving the nation's identity in the absence of a Temple and cut off from its land.

Yechezkel's words are the only clear example of prophecy conveyed in Babylon after the Destruction and prior to Cyrus's declaration and the return to the Land around 35 years later. The independent status of the Jewish community in Babylon during this time is discernible in the king of Babylon's treatment of Yehoyakhin (Melakhim II 25:27-30; Yirmiyahu 52:31-34), and the Jews apparently maintained this status throughout the Second Temple Period (Esther 2:5-6). The period between the Destruction of the Temple and the Return is also addressed by prophecies in Yirmiyahu, Eikha, Yishayahu, and perhaps even Yoel and Ovadia. But these prophecies respond to the events of the Destruction from a Land of Israel perspective, as distinct from Yechezkel's prophecies, which are conveyed in Babylon and grapple with the contemporaneous crisis in the Land from a Diaspora vantage point. Moreover, the prophet Yechezkel possesses a clear and unique ideological perspective. All these factors make the Book of Yechezkel essential in understanding both the Destruction and Exile and their lasting influence on the Diaspora Jewish identity to this day.

The Book of Yechezkel is organized chronologically, with chapters 1-24 dating before the Destruction and chapters 33-48 to the years after it. At its center is a collection of prophecies directed towards other nations; these are placed together because of their content, rather than out of chronological considerations.¹ The prophecies conveyed after the Destruction complement

¹ The last explicit date is found in the prophecy to Egypt in 29:17; it comes in the 27th year of the exile of Yehoyakhin.

those dating from before the Destruction. Thus, Yechezkel's prophecies may be studied both in order of their appearance and by subject. Besides our chapter-by-chapter analysis of the Book, we shall address a number of more general questions arising from a study of the prophecies, such as the connection between Sefer Yechezkel and Sefer Vayikra and a comparison of Sefer Yechezkel to Sefer Yirmiyahu.

"And the King of Babylon brought them captive to Babylon" – historical background

The prophet Yechezkel is not mentioned by name in the other Books of Tanakh. Nevertheless, the account provided in Sefer Melakhim supplies us with the historical context within which Sefer Yechezkel was written:

"At that time, the servants of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. And Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, came against the city, and his servants besieged it. Yehoyakhin, king of Yehuda, went out to the king of Babylon – he, and his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his officers, and the king of Babylon took him in the eighth year of his reign. He carried out from there all the treasures of the house of God, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Shelomo, king of Israel, had made in the Temple of God, as God had said. He carried away all of Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty warriors – ten thousand exiles, and all the craftsmen and the smiths: none remained, except for the poorest of the people of the land. He carried away Yehoyakhin to Babylon, and the king's mother, and the king' wives, and his officers, and the mighty of the land, these he took away into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. And all the men of might – seven thousand, and craftsmen and smiths a thousand, all who were strong and apt for war, even them the king of Babylon took into exile to Babylon. And the king of Babylon made Matanya, his father's brother, king in his stead, and changed his name to Tzidkiyahu." (Melakhim II 24:10-17)²

In the year 597 B.C.E., King Nevukhadnetzar of Babylonia exiled the elite of the population of Yehuda. These exiles included Yechezkel son of Buzi, a Kohen and a prophet. Yehoyakhin's exile was a pivotal event for Yechezkel. The entire chronology of the Book is counted according to the years of the exile of Yehoyakhin (1:2; 8:1; 20:1; 24:1; 26:1; 30:20; 31:1), as is the date of the prophecy foretelling the Destruction of the Temple (33:41), as well as the prophecies that were revealed post-Destruction (29:17; 32:1,17; 40:1). This exile dealt a heavy national blow to the lifestyle and status of the inhabitants of Judah. Without the king and his family, the men of valor, the craftsmen, and all the treasures of God's House and of the king's house, the land was left destitute.

² See also: Divrei Ha-yamim II 36:9-10; Yirmiyahu 27:19-20, 29.

Nevukhadnetzar probably considered this exile, in which he removed one king (Yehoyakhin) and replaced him with another (Tzidkiyahu), to be more significant in asserting Babylonia's authority over Judah than the exile that followed the Destruction of the Temple eleven years later. The appointment of Gedalia after the conquest of Jerusalem and the Destruction of the Temple indicates that, in Nevukhadnetzar's eyes, the fate of the inhabitants of Jerusalem had been sealed earlier. But the locals saw things differently. To them, as long as the Temple was standing nothing had really changed. The events of the past, in particular the campaign of Sancheriv, still echoed in their ears. They expected that another miracle would save them in the final moments of the siege, and firmly believed that the Temple was indestructible.

The "people of Your redemption" vs. "the inhabitants of Jerusalem"

Yechezkel addressed his prophecy to the exiles who had been carried away with him in the exile of Yehoyakhin to Babylon. Its full significance can be appreciated only if we consider the historical context.³ The purpose of Yechezkel's prophecies – in the years preceding the Destruction – was to inform the people that God had departed from His Temple in Jerusalem. He therefore describes in detail the Divine chariot and the journeys of God's glory outside the Temple (especially in chapter 1 and chapters 10-11). Moreover, Yechezkel emphasizes that the destruction of the Temple is only a matter of time; even in the years leading up to this event, Jerusalem is defiled and God's Presence is not within the city (1:28–3:15; 24:15-27). The essence of the prophet's role is to be a "*tzofeh*" (an observer or watchman) of what is happening (3:17-21; 33:1-9), along with conveying his prophecies to those who visit his house (8:1; 14:1; 20:1). Yechezkel's symbolic acts (especially in chapters 4-5) reinforce this message, which climaxes in the description of the sins of the people and the corruption of the city (especially in chapters 8-11, 15, 23).

The Destruction of the Temple and the exile of the people from the land raise other dilemmas which Yechezkel addresses in his prophecies: how does Divine retribution relate to the individual (chapters 14, 18, 33)? What is the proper attitude towards Babylonia (chapter 17)? What is the status of the covenant between the nation of Israel and God, now that it has been violated by the nation and the Temple is destroyed (especially chapters 20, 36)? The prophetic response to these questions lays the foundation for understanding the future redemption of Israel (chapters 34-39), the vision of the future Temple (chapters 40-48), and the prophecies to the nations (chapters 25-32).

Although most of the prophecies to the exiles of Yehoyakhin relate to what is happening in the Land in those years, some of the prophecies in the Book paint a picture of God's view of the Babylonian exiles, in particular how their identity is distinct from that of the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the same years. In chapter 11 Yechezkel quotes the "inhabitants of Jerusalem,"

³ See A. Bustenai, *Galut Yisrael ve-Yehuda be-Ashur u-be-Bavel (8th-6th centuries B.C.E.)*, Haifa, 5770.

who say that the exiles have distanced themselves from God and from His Land, and that they are not counted among the inheritors of the land and those close to God:

"The word of God came to me, saying: Son of man, your brethren, your brothers, your next of kin, and all the house of Israel in its entirety – to them the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Distance yourselves from God; it is to us that this land is given as a possession." (11:14-15)

God's response, however, conveyed through the prophet, is that while those taken in captivity are currently in exile, God is with them there, as a "miniature Temple":

"Therefore say, So says the Lord God: Although I have cast them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, I have been to them a little sanctuary in the countries to which they have come." (ibid. 16)

This dialogue – featuring both the claim of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and reassurance to the exiles – demonstrates the exiles' uncertainty regarding their identity in relation to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and their questioning of God's place in their midst. Their concern is unsurprising considering that the ten tribes who had been exiled some 150 years previously (some already in the year 732 B.C.E., and the majority in the years 722-720 B.C.E.) had lost their Jewish identity. Thus, Yechezkel's prophetic message (like that of Yirmiyahu in chapter 29:1-9) to the exiles is a new one and requires a change of historical perspective. For the first time, the prophets affirm the Jewish identity of the exiles: they remain part of God's nation, even though the Jews still living in their homeland have a different view, and maintain that God's place is still in the Temple in their midst.

Surprisingly, this view of the inhabitants of the land does not change even after the Destruction, as we learn from a different dialogue that Yechezkel quotes in his prophecies:

"Then the word of God came to me, saying: Son of man, those who inhabit those waste places of the land of Israel speak, saying: Avraham was one man, yet he inherited the land, but we are many; the land is given to us for an inheritance." (33:23-24)

That is, even after the burning of the Temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the captivity led away by Nevuzaradan (Melakhim II 25), when only a tiny number of the "poor of the land" are left in Jerusalem, they maintain their view that they are numerous in comparison with the solitary Avraham. Therefore those who remain in the land will inherit the land, they claim, not those who have been taken into captivity to Babylon. The prophet dismisses this view:

"Therefore say to them: Thus says the Lord God: You eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood – and

shall you possess the land? You stand upon your sword, you carry out an abomination, and you defile each man his neighbor's wife – and shall you possess the land?" (ibid. 25-26)

Those who have remained in the land have not learned the lessons of the Destruction, points out the prophet. They continue to sin. The sins Yechezkel lists here are unconnected to the Temple, which is destroyed. He goes on to reject the claim of those remaining in the land; not only are they not destined to inherit the land, but it will instead become completely desolate (which indeed is what happened after the murder of Gedalia):

"Thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and he who is in the open field will I give to the beasts for food, and those who are in the strongholds and in the caves shall die of the pestilence. For I will make the land most desolate, and the pride of her strength shall cease, and the mountains of Israel shall be blighted so that none shall pass through. Then shall they know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a total blight because of their abominations which they have committed." (ibid. 27-29)

The dwelling places of those remaining in the land described here is typical of a population left after the destruction of the city: they live in the open fields, in strongholds, and in caves. But if this prophecy brought some comfort to the captives in Babylonia, Yechezkel concludes that it is not only the remnants in the land who have not changed their deeds following the Destruction, but also those exiled with Yehoyakhin:

"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 one to another, everyone to his brother, saying: Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that 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 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." (ibid. 30-33)

The Destruction establishes Yechezkel's authenticity as a prophet who bears God's word. But even though the people come to hear God's word from him, their behavior remains unchanged even after they find out that the Temple has been burned and Jerusalem destroyed.

Both groups, the inhabitants in the land and those exiled to Babylonia, despite their differences, have this in common: neither changed its behavior during these years. Perhaps, then, we can suggest that Yechezkel's prophetic mission during these years was not to call upon the people to mend their ways and repent, but rather to explain the significance of the events in Jerusalem, and thereby to prepare the ground for the prophecies of rebuilding which came after the Destruction, as well as the vision of the future Temple.

"The language of this prophet is exceedingly wondrous and esoteric, and brief"

A literalist ("*peshat*") reading of the prophecies of Yechezkel raises many difficulties, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency notes this from his Introduction to the Book until his commentary on the concluding chapters dealing with the Temple (40-48).⁴ In this series we shall try to understand the plain meaning of Sefer Yechezkel, and we will walk in the footsteps of this important work. Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency's Introduction to Sefer Yechezkel begins with the difficulty of interpreting the words of the prophet:

"Son of man, see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears and set your heart to the language of this prophet, for it is wondrous, esoteric, and brief. Even to our Sages, of blessed memory, his words appeared to contradict teachings of the Torah, so esoteric and concise were they..."

After pointing out the difficulty of studying Sefer Yechezkel in general, R. Eliezer of Beaugency then goes on to address the first specific problem that arises (as addressed also by the other commentaries), namely the date with which the Book begins:

"And it was in the thirtieth year, in the fourth [month], on the fifth of the month..." (1:1)

First, there is no indication of the point from which the prophet counts these thirty years. Second, the next verse gives a different date, counting from the exile of Yehoyakhin, but the relationship between the two counts is unclear:

"On the fifth of the month, which was in the fifth year of the exile of king Yehoyakhin..." (ibid. 2)

R. Eliezer of Beaugency writes, in his introduction:

"Note that that at the start his words, he does not explain how he calculates 'thirty years.' And although the words of Targum [Yonatan] are straightforward, explaining that this is [thirty years] since Chilkiyahu the Kohen found the Sefer Torah, nevertheless this is not the [customary] way of the Scriptures [to count]. Nevertheless, we have no other way of explaining it, although we do not know why he saw fit to count from that point. Looking at the Book as a whole, we might suggest the following: we find no prophet rebuking his own generation about Torah and the commandments the way that he does. Most of

⁴ R. Eliezer of Beaugency lived in the 12th century, and belonged to the second generation of Tosafists. Of his commentary on Tanakh the sections on Yishayahu, Yechezkel and the Twelve Minor Prophets are still extant. In his commentary he represents the extreme *peshat* school in France, emerging from the school of Rashbam. One of the distinguishing features of this school is the almost complete avoidance of reliance on midrash (see: M. Cohen [ed.], *Yechezkel, Mikraot Gedolot – HaKeter*, Jerusalem 5760, p. 10).

what he says is like Torah speech, he almost repeats the entire Torah for them. Note that this is true in many matters. Since the Book of Torah was revealed to them in his days, and he was in the exile where there were no kohanim or prophets as there were in the Land, he told them off in accordance with the Sefer Torah that had been found. It was as though he was teaching them a new Torah, for it had been forgotten in the days of Menashe. And since his prophecies and his words concerned the words of the Sefer Torah that had been found, therefore he counted [the years] from the time of its discovery, for the whole essence of his Book is dependent upon it."

In his Introduction, R. Eliezer of Beaugency accepts the solution proposed by the Targun Yonatan – that the prophet refers in the first verse to the thirty years that had passed since the discovery of the Sefer Torah, during the reign of Yoshiyahu – even while acknowledging that “this is not the [customary] way of the Writings [to count].” It would seem that there is more to the reason for his acceptance of this explanation of the counting of the years. In this way he emphasizes that in his generation Yechezkel was a unique prophet, insofar as he rebukes the people "with regard to Torah and the commandments," and "repeats for them the entire Torah" which had been forgotten.

It would seem that in proposing this interpretation, R. Eliezer of Beaugency seeks to solve two fundamental difficulties that arise in the study of Sefer Yechezkel in general. First, how is it possible that during such fateful years for the Jewish People, Yechezkel almost entirely avoids any call to the people to repent? Second, we know of no prophet other than Yechezkel who gives the people statutes and laws. Moreover, the statutes that he sees in his Divine visions appear to contradict laws of the Torah. How can this be? By adopting the explanation of "the thirtieth year" as referring to the discovery of the Sefer Torah in the days of Yoshiyahu, R. Eliezer of Beaugency emphasizes that most of Yechezkel's speech “is like Torah speech,” and although it might seem at times that he is "teaching them a new Torah," in fact "the whole essence of his Book is dependent upon it." In other words, despite the discrepancies between the perceptions familiar to us from the Torah and those arising from a study of Sefer Yechezkel, we need not entertain any doubt or fear: the prophecy of Yechezkel in its entirety rests upon the Torah, as emphasized at the very outset in the noting of the date of the prophecy in relation to the discovery of the Sefer Torah in the days of Yoshiyahu.

In contrast to the commentary of R. Eliezer of Beaugency, R. Menachem ben Shimon views the date as an indication of Yechezkel's age, while Rashi (commenting on verse 2), along with Radak, R. Yosef Kara⁵ and

⁵ R. Yosef Kara (1055-1125) was one of the great molders of *peshat* exegesis in his time. He was a disciple and colleague of Rashi. His commentaries are based on Rashi's commentaries on Tanakh. He devoted his main energies to teaching Tanakh and its commentary; this would appear to be the reason for his being known as "kara" (see: *Yechezkel, Mikraot Gedolot – HaKeter*, pp. 9-10). His extant commentaries cover only some of the Books of Tanakh; he may have written commentaries on all the Books (see: A. Grossman, *Chakhmei Tzarfat ha-Rishonim*, Jerusalem 5761, p. 289).

other commentaries, in light of Seder Olam Rabba 24, regard the "thirty years" as referring back to the beginning of the Yovel (Jubilee) cycle. Although this view is not supported by the plain text, it does offer another significant message to the inhabitants of Babylon of that time – and perhaps even for all future generations. Through counting the years in accordance with the Yovel in the Land of Israel, in the introduction to a prophetic book conveyed in Babylonia, a direct connection is created between the conveying of the prophecy outside the Land and what is going on in the Land. Likewise, through noting the date of the Yovel, the Book alludes, right from the outset, to the fact that Yechezkel's prophecy in its entirety is "for the sake of the Land of Israel," as Rabbi Yehuda ha-Levi notes:

"Whoever prophesied did so either in the Land or for its sake... and Yechezkel and Daniel prophesied for its sake." (*Sefer ha-Kuzari*, II:14)

Admittedly, this view, too, is far removed from the plain meaning of the text, and perhaps Moshe Greenberg is correct in proposing that the reference is to the thirtieth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, and that the aim of this introduction is to make note of the date of the last prophecy of the Book (after the prophecy in the 27th year, as recorded in 29:17).⁶

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁶ See: M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, The Anchor Bible, New York, 1983, p. 39.