

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

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Shiur #09b: Tzidkiyahu (12:1-20; 17) (continued)

Tzidkiyahu's rebellion against Nevukhadnetzar (Chapter 17)

Chapter 17 begins with Yehezkel posing a riddle and a parable, and the death of Tzidkiyahu is part of their interpretation. Owing to the people's stubbornness – they have refused to accept the message of Yehezkel's prophecies – the prophet employs a range of devices aimed at convincing them and at this point, he adds the riddle to his earlier devices. Chapter 17 is divided into three parts: beginning with the riddle and parable (vv. 1-10); followed by the explanation (vv. 11-21); and then concluding by intertwining the riddle and its explanation (22-24).

Riddle and parable (vv. 1-10)

The parable begins by describing an impressive eagle that comes from Lebanon; it takes the top of a cedar from there and brings it to the "land of kena'an", that is, a "city of merchants." Then, it takes "from the seed of the land" which it plants in a fertile field containing plenty of water, "placing it as a willow." A low, wild vine starts to grow. Thereafter develops a fruitful relationship develops between that vine in its fertile habitat and "another great eagle." But the vine cuts then itself off from its field, even though it is well planted in the field and is flourishing and in fact has no need for the favors of this eagle. The parable concludes with Yehezkel addressing two rhetorical questions to his audience. First, can the vine, cut off from its roots, possibly flourish? Surely it will wither! Second, even while the vine is still planted in the ground, how can it flourish? It will wither when the east wind comes.

The explanation (vv. 11-21)

The parable is indeed a riddle, concealing more than it reveals. Therefore its explanation follows immediately:

"Do you not know what these things mean? Say, Behold, the king of Babylonia has come to Jerusalem, and has taken its king and its princes, and has led them with him to Babylonia; and has taken of the king's seed, and made a covenant with him, and forged a covenant with him and sworn

him to an oath, and he has taken away the mighty of the land; that the kingdom might be lowly, not raising itself high, but by keeping the covenant it might stand. But he rebelled against him by sending messengers to Egypt, that they might give him horses and many people. Shall he prosper? Shall he who does such things escape? Shall he break the covenant and yet be saved?" (17:12-15)

The prophet explains that the great eagle is the king of Babylonia (Nevukhadnetzar), who comes to Jerusalem and then exiles the top of the cedar – that is, the king (Yehoyakhin) and his ministers – to Babylonia.¹

If we assume that “the top of the cedar” is indeed a reference to the exiled Yehoyakhin, then the phrases “a land of trade (*eretz kena’an*) and “a city of merchants” must refer to Babylonia.² Indeed, during this period the Babylonian Empire flourished and was the economic hub of the Ancient East. So it is natural for it to be described as “a city of merchants.” Later in the parable, the eagle takes “of the seed of the land and planted it in a fertile field, he placed it by great waters and set it like a willow tree.” This seems to refer to Tzidkiyahu, who was of the Land of Israel’s royal seed, and was chosen by Nevukhadnetzar to be “in a fertile field” – in other words, in his place in the Land of Israel. According to this explanation, we must interpret the second part of the verse – “placed it by great waters and set it like a willow tree” – as a description of the good conditions under which Tzidkiyahu embarked on his role leading the inhabitants of the land. This explanation also fits with the continuation:

“And he took of the king’s seed and made a covenant with him, and forged a covenant with him and sworn him to an oath, and he has taken away the mighty of the land; that the kingdom might be lowly, not raising itself high, but by keeping the covenant it might stand.” (vv. 13-14)

This describes the covenant between the king of Babylonia and Tzidkiyahu, following the exile of Yehoyakhin (“the mighty of the land”), stipulating that Tzidkiyahu will keep the kingdom for which he is responsible a “lowly” subservient one. Later in the parable, the “seed of the land” becomes a vine which, instead of remaining a lowly plant with its tendrils turned inwards and its roots gathered under it, sprouts many branches and grows wild. The uncontrolled spread of this seed turned vine is explained as a reference to Tzidkiyahu’s rebellion against Nebukhadnetzar, with the aid of the king of Egypt. The king of Egypt is a great eagle, “with great wings and many feathers”, and the

¹ The difficulties with the interpretation of the parable are apparent at the outset. We shall propose an explanation for the parable as a whole, although various alternatives might be substituted for many of the details over the course of the chapter.

² The term “*eretz Kena’an*” is used in the Torah and in the Early Prophets as a reference to the Land of Israel, but the commentators suggest here that in the Later Prophets it is sometimes also used as a reference to Babylonia. In our verse, this would seem to be the case – as in Yechezkel 16:29. See also Yishayahu 23:11, where “*Kena’an*” – Babylonia – is commanded to wage war against Tzor, in the same way as in Yechezkel’s prophecy to Tzor (26:7 onwards).

vine – Tzidkiyahu – turns to it for help,³ instead of recognizing that it is planted in good soil by many waters, with the ability to “bring forth branches and bear fruit, and to be a goodly vine.” There is no justification for his rebellion.

The result of Tzidkiyahu’s actions is presented, both in the parable and in its interpretation, in the form of a rhetorical question whose outcome is inescapable. How, asks the parable, could the vine have imagined that it would flourish with the help of the eagle, when this meant cutting itself off from its roots and withering? In the interpretation, the formulation is, “Shall he prosper? Shall he who does such things escape? Shall he break the covenant and yet be saved?” (17:15). In other words, the reaching out to Egypt represents a violation of a covenant whose consequences cannot be evaded.

The parable also poses another rhetorical question, raising another important point to ponder. Even in its former situation, where the vine was planted in the ground, it had no future; if an eastern wind were to blow, the vine would dry up. Perhaps with this image Yehezkel alludes to Tzidkiyahu’s reign being temporary in any event – but his rebellion against Babylon has hastened its end.

The explanation of the parable concludes with God’s vow:

“As I live, says the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he broke, even with him in the midst of Babylonia he shall die. Neither shall Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company help him in the war, by casting up mounds, and building siege works, to cut off many persons. For he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, and behold, having given his hand and having done all these things, he shall not escape.” (17:16-18)

In other words, by rebelling against Nevukhadnetzar, Tzidkiyahu decreed his own death in Babylonia. This violation was a grave breach of trust. The reliance on the king of Egypt to aid him in fighting against Babylonia likewise led to the deaths of these partners.

Verses 19-21 go beyond the national level, which has been treated thus far, to the Divine perspective on these events, which is based on the earthly level,⁴ and which illuminates the full force of the disgrace, by comparing violation of the covenant with Nevukhadnetzar to violation of the covenant with God:

“Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely My oath that he has despised, and My covenant that he has broken, even that I will recompense upon his own head. And I will spread My net upon him, and

³ Tzidkiyahu’s reliance on Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and his army opposes the position adopted explicitly by Yirmiyahu; see *Yirmiyahu* 37:1-11.

⁴ In accordance with the understanding proposed by Kasher, pp. 346-347.

he shall be taken in My snare, and I will bring him to Babylonia, and will enter into judgment with him there for his trespass that he has trespassed against Me. And all of his fugitives of all his troops shall fall by the sword, and they who remain shall be scattered to all the winds, and you shall know that I the Lord have spoken it.” (vv. 19-21)

Conclusion (17:22-24)

So far we have seen that in Yehezkel's prophecy the Destruction is inevitable; the remnant from which salvation will spring is the group of exiles now in Babylonia, along with lone survivors from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem whose role will be to recount what happened there. To this the prophet now adds a hostile attitude towards Tzidkiyahu, in the wake of his betrayal of Nevukhadnetzar, who is the agent of God (in his actions against Israel).⁵ The parable and its explanation seem to conclude with this message. But the end of the prophecy introduces another level, imbuing God's perspective on what has happened with an echo of consolation. Concluding his prophecies in this manner is characteristic of Yehezkel, whose main message often takes a new twist in its closing verses:

“So says the Lord God: I will also take of the top of the high cedar, and will set it; I will pluck off from the top of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon a high and lofty mountain. In the mountain of the height of Israel I will plant it, and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a stately cedar, and under it shall dwell all birds of every wing; in the shadow of its branches they shall dwell. And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree, and have exalted the low tree; I have dried up the green tree and have caused the dry tree to flourish; I the Lord have spoken and have done it.” (vv. 22-24)

Now it turns out that the top of the cedar, as mentioned in the parable, which was taken to Babylonia, will in the future be brought back to a “high and lofty mountain” – the “mountain of the height of Israel.” There it is destined to grow and bring forth new branches, and even fruit. Its tendrils, which were earlier described as part of the wild branches of the vine, will once again be part of that cedar tree and will give shade to the birds. At that time it will become clear to all the other “trees of the field” (representing the other nations) that it is God Who brought down the cedar, representing His people, and that it is He Who sets the status for each of the other nations, raising them, drying them up, or causing them to flourish.

This conclusion to the prophecy indicates that the potential for renewal of the monarchy in Israel rests with Yehoyakhin, who is in exile. This conclusion

⁵ A prophecy complementing this one and clearly suggesting that the king of Babylonia is God's agent in his actions, and that Tzidkiyahu should remain subservient to him, is to be found in *Yirmiyahu* 27 and 28:14.

once again emphasizes the unique status of Yehoyakhin in *Sefer Yehezkel*;⁶ and, indeed, it is Zerubavel – the grandson of Yehoyakhin⁷ – who will eventually lead the nation at the start of the Second Temple period.

So far we have seen the main points of the criticism directed against Tzidkiyahu. Now, in order to round off Yehezkel's prophecies concerning him we must now deviate from the chronological order of the chapters and turn our attention to the lamentation in chapter 19, and the symbolic act described in the second part of Chapter 21.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁶ We have already noted that the Book shows the importance of Yehoyakhin by counting years according to the years of Yehoyakhin's exile.

⁷ From the verses it is not clear whether Zerabavel's father was Shealtiel, eldest son of Yehoyakhin (Ezra 3:2,8; Nechemia 12:1; Chaggai 1:1) or Pedaya, his third son (Divrei ha-Yamim 3:19).