

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
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Shiur #17: The Destruction of the City (22-24:14)

After God's sword is described as approaching Jerusalem held by the king of Babylonia, the next chapters prophesy what happens in the city during the siege and the destruction: Chapter 22 addresses the sins of Jerusalem and its punishments; Chapter 23 describes the treachery of the sisters Ahola (Shomron) and Aholiva (Jerusalem) against their husband (God)¹. Then, at the start of Chapter 24 (vv. 1-14) Yehezkel returns to the parable of the pot.

Chapter 24 opens with a date: the tenth of Tevet, in the ninth year of the reign of Tzidkiyahu. This was the day the siege was laid on Jerusalem (*Melakhim* II 25:1; *Yirmiyahu* 39:1; 52:4). Highlighting the date at the start of the chapter indicates that these prophecies – about events taking place in Jerusalem – were uttered by Yehezkel in Babylon. Once the news of the destruction spreads, his listeners (who still doubt the veracity of his words) will know that he spoke prophetically about what was happening in “real time” in Jerusalem. The doubters will thus conclude that “a prophet was in their midst” (2:5; 33:33).

These chapters bring different circles to completion and sharpen the prophetic messages that have been conveyed so far. For instance, the emphasis on the time having come (22:3) is a further development of the prophecy in Chapter 7. So while on one hand these chapters share common features with earlier ones (especially in the imagery of the fate of the city in Chapters 4-5, and the description of the sins of its inhabitants in Chapters 16,20), still, the prophecy here is conveyed with unusually powerful expressions, both in context and in substance. The prophet emphasizes the primary motifs of his prophecies in order to describe what is now happening in the defiled city.

The sins of Jerusalem and its punishments (Chapter 22)

Chapter 22 is divided into three units: vv. 1-16, vv. 17-22, and vv. 23-31. The first and third units deal with the sins of the people, while the second

¹ In Chapter 23, as in Chapter 16, the parable about the adulterous sisters and its interpretation mingle. The severity of their actions is made all the more deplorable in that they betray not only their husband but also their lovers. This leads to the conclusion that disloyalty is imbedded in the character of the nation from even before it became a nation in Egypt. We shall not analyze Chapter 23 in great detail in the framework of this series.

discusses mainly the punishment. What is common to all three units is the status of Jerusalem. The prophecy concerning the imminent fate of the city resembles the destruction that Yehezkel had prophesied in the past (Chapters 8-11), but he no longer reacts with cries of surprise or distress, as he had earlier (9:8-9); now he is apathetic. From now on, his pre-destruction prophetic mission is limited to describing the situation in the city.

The description begins presenting a city that is full of bloodshed: “a city that sheds blood in the midst of it” (v. 3); “You have become guilty for the blood that you have shed” (v. 4); “for shedding blood” (vv. 6, 9; “at the blood that has been in the midst of you” (v. 13); and above all – the expression “bloody city” (v. 2), an appellation that appears again only in Chapter 24 (vv. 6,9). (This description recurs in only one other place in Tanakh: Nachum 3:1.)

Yehezkel’s accusation is against all of Jerusalem’s inhabitants – all classes and positions (vv. 25-30). This seems to be why the prophet repeats again and again that the actions were perpetrated within Jerusalem.²

Apart from bloodshed, Yehezkel mentions a broad spectrum of sins (vv. 6-12) including idolatry, sexual immorality, ritual transgressions, as well as moral and social corruption. The prophetic message is further amplified by the biblical warnings that echo in the background: verse 9 should be read against the background of Vayikra 19:16, and may be an instance of intra-biblical exegesis, alluding to the connection between gossip-mongering and standing by the blood of the innocent. That is, one who goes about spreading gossip will end up spilling blood.³

Comparing Yehezkel’s images with those of other prophets also amplifies the severity of his rebuke. For instance, in v. 18, the entire nation is compared to dross,⁴ and the prophetic message is that the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be killed in their own city, and will not be saved. Using the same imagery, *Yishayahu* (1:22) expresses the opposite message: removing the dross will leave the righteous and the pursuers of justice alive in Jerusalem. Similarly, the gathering of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the city in order to kill them (vv. 19-21) is an image that recalls Yehu, who gathered the prophets of Ba’al in order to annihilate them (*Melakhim* II 10). The chapter thus serves as a summary of Jerusalem’s disgrace in the eyes of the nations (vv. 4, 16) and also summarizes the ramifications that the destruction will have on God’s status in the eyes of the nations.

Jerusalem

² The word “*bah*” (in it) occurs eight times in the chapter, along with two variations (*betokha*, *betokhekh*).

³ See also Rashi’s interpretation of v. 7: “All the abominations that the Torah warns about in *Parashat Kedoshim* are listed here.”

⁴ Dross is removed from precious metals in a melting pot (i.e., through fire).

To examine the status of Jerusalem in *Sefer Yehezkel*, let us briefly review the various appellations the prophet uses to refer to the city, along with the occasions when he mentions it by name.⁵ Admittedly, God's anger was already apparent earlier; both in the prophet's cry, "in the pouring of Your fury upon Jerusalem" (9:8), and in his declaration that its fate will be the opposite of that foretold by the false prophets: "...who prophesied concerning Jerusalem and saw visions of peace concerning it, when there was no peace" (13:16).

Nevertheless, God's anger seems to reach a climax in Chapter 22 (vv. 2-5), where Yehezkel speaks of "a bloody city... a city that sheds blood". Likewise, he describes the worship of abominations as defiling the name of the city, such that Jerusalem is called "of defiled name," and by the same token, in v. 24, "a land that is not cleansed". And because the name of Jerusalem has been defiled, the city will no longer be referred to by name, but rather by negative appellations. For instance, in Chapter 24, Jerusalem is referred to again as a city of blood:

"Woe to the bloody city... For its blood is in the midst of it... Woe to the bloody city..." (24:6-9).

In the chapters of rebuilding, Yehezkel mentions Jerusalem by name only once:

"Like the flock of sacrifices, like the flock of Jerusalem in its appointed times, so shall the waste cities be filled with flocks of men, and they shall know that I am the Lord." (36:38)

However, the reader should note that although Yehezkel mentions the name "Jerusalem," he is not referring to the city of the future, but rather using the name as a way of describing the "holy flock" that filled the city *in the past*. In all of his other prophecies in the chapters of revival (34-39) and in the vision of the future Temple (40-48)⁶, Yehezkel refers to the city by other names.

Avoiding the name "Jerusalem" in their prophecies for the future is one example of the differences between Yehezkel, Yirmiyahu and Yishayahu. The name "Jerusalem" is ubiquitous in Yishayahu's prophecies of redemption (41:27; 51:22; 52:1-2,9; 62:1). But it appears only rarely in Yirmiyahu's prophecies of consolation (appearing mainly in 3:14-17 and Chapters 30-33). In contrast, as we have noted, Yehezkel avoids using the name altogether. Perhaps this is that the actions of the nation have not only led to the defiling of the name, but have also

⁵ The name "Jerusalem" appears in many other contexts in these chapters. In our context, there is a significant difference between the prophecies preceding the destruction, in which Jerusalem is mentioned by name some twenty times, and those following the destruction, where it is not mentioned again (with one exception, discussed below).

⁶ See: 40:1-4; 43:12; 48:35.

caused a rupture in God's attitude towards the eternity of the city.⁷

“This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat” (11:2-10; 24:3-14)

Radak offers an eloquent explanation of the prophetic message behind Yehezkel's parable of the pot:

“This is what a person does with a pot: first he places it upon his lips, then fills it with water, and then places meat in it and lights a fire under it, until the meat is cooked. The placing of the pot upon the lips symbolizes the proximity of the king of Babylonia to Jerusalem, for this is the first thing he did there. The pouring of the water into it foretells that the fire will not burn it quickly, for water prevents the meat from cooking quickly: when it is without water, the fire causes it quickly to be roasted, but if there is water in it, the meat will cook slowly. Likewise, the siege lasted from the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu until his twelfth year, with the inhabitants of the city slowly dying off from hunger and the plague and the sword.”

In addition, in his description of the pot in Chapter 24 the prophet emphasizes that “no lot has fallen upon it” (v. 6) – meaning, there was no lot separating the fate of those killed from those to be saved. Apparently, no-one will survive.

Jerusalem is described as a city whose “blood in its midst” (24:7) has been poured upon the rock and has not been covered – recalling that covering the blood after slaughter is even a basic requirement for the blood of animals and fowl. This blood, symbolizing the bloodshed committed by the people quite openly and without shame, represents, in this chapter, the expression of the fate of this “city of blood” upon which God will pour His fury.

Loss (24:15-27)

Chapter 24 contains two accounts of loss: the loss of Yehezkel's wife,⁸ and the loss of the Temple. To these the prophet adds another loss – “of your sons and of your daughters” (further to their mention in Chapter 14). The connection between Yehezkel's private loss and the nation's loss of the Temple echoes in the words of the Gemara:

“Rabbi Yochanan also said: If a man's first wife dies, it is as if the destruction of the Temple had taken place in his days, as it is written: ‘Son

⁷ Some scholars maintain that the city that Yechezkel refers to (and even mentions explicitly in 45:6, 48:15, 30-35) is not Jerusalem, and that the Temple will not be located in it. For a review see Ben-Yashar, p. 22 onwards.

⁸ R. Menachem Ben-Shimon addresses the question of how God could put the prophet's wife to death for the sake of conveying a prophetic message. His conclusion is that “God did not shorten her life; rather, it was her time to die, so she died.”

of man, behold, I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes at a stroke, yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor shall your tears run down' (*Yehezkel* 24:16). And it is further written, 'So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died...' (v. 18). And it is also written, 'Behold, I will profane My Sanctuary, the pride of your strength, the delight of your eyes' (v. 21)." (*Sanhedrin* 22a)

However, the verses also indicate clearly the difference between the two partings: while the prophet's wife is *taken* ('I am about to take away [*lokeach*] from you...' 24:16, using the same expression that is used to describe the deaths of Chanokh and of Eliyahu⁹), the Temple is *profaned* ('Behold, I will profane My Sanctuary...' – 24:18). This comparison indicates that the profaning of the Temple is irreversible: in other words, the Temples that will be built after the destruction of the First Temple represent a new creation, not a recreation of the Temple that existed.

Yehezkel is commanded not to mourn for his wife, just as Aharon is commanded not to mourn after the death of his sons (*Vayikra* 10:6-7; similarly, *Vayikra* 21:10-12). In both instances, the verses speak not of the impurity of the dead, but rather of mourning. In both instances the close relative of the deceased is forbidden to mourn by virtue of his public position. In *Sefer Vayikra*, mourning violates the sanctity of the *kohanim*; if they mourn, they are not able to serve in the Sanctuary. In Yehezkel's case, mourning is forbidden because his role is to "be a sign to them" (24:17).¹⁰

Why, then, is Am Yisrael commanded not to mourn over the Temple? Perhaps it is difficult to bear the thought that the party directly responsible for the catastrophe will mourn over it when it happens. But the withholding of mourning may also represent a sort of Divine punishment – or, alternatively, an act of acceptance of God's will. Rashi offers two other interpretations, and these are instructive as to the essence of mourning. In the first explanation Rashi says the people must not mourn "because there are none to comfort you... And there is only mourning where there are comforters."

The message here is that giving comfort is itself the essence of mourning.

⁹ In Tanakh, the verb *l-k-ch* is used in the sense of 'being taken (by death)' only in relation to righteous individuals: Chanokh (*Bereishit* 5:24), Eliyahu (*Melakhim* II 2:3) and the children of Iyov – "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away" (*Iyov* 1:21).

¹⁰ The impression arising from a review of the mourners described in Tanakh is that there is no clear obligation to mourn. Yaakov tears his garments when he believes that his son has been torn apart by wild beasts (*Bereishit* 37:34); Bnei Yisrael weep over the death of Aharon (*Bamidbar* 20:29) and over the death of Moshe (*Devarim* 34:8). In *Shmuel* II (3:31) David instructs the people to mourn for Avner: "Rend your garments and gird yourselves with sackcloth and mourn [eulogize] before Avner." These descriptions suggest that the mourning is a spontaneous act that also represents local custom. Nevertheless, Chazal (*Mo'ed Katan* 15a-b) derive many of the laws of mourning from the verses of our chapter, through negative induction. In other words, the actions that Yechezkel is commanded to refrain from performing become, for *Chazal*, laws that are incumbent upon the mourner.

The mourning customs exist to highlight that state as one that is different and exceptional, which thereby draws comforters. In a large-scale catastrophe, (according to this view) there is no room for mourning, since there is no-one who can offer comfort.

Rashi's second explanation is, "You should fear to weep before the Kasdim in whose midst you are." According to this view, the essence of mourning is weeping and the outward display of emotion – which can sometimes express a lack of acceptance of the situation as it is. The problem is that such a display might be interpreted by the Babylonians as a revolt against their supremacy.

This prophecy concludes Yehezkel's prophecies of rebuke uttered before the destruction. This brings the first part of the Sefer to an end. At the same time, with the period of muteness ending, a gateway is opened to his prophecies after the destruction:

"Also, son of man, shall it not be in the day when I take from them their strength, the joy of their glory, the desire of their eyes, and that upon which they set their minds, their sons and their daughters – that on that day he that escapes shall come to you, to cause you to hear it with your ears? On that day your mouth shall be opened to the fugitive, and you shall speak, and be no more dumb, and you shall be a sign to them, and they shall know that I am the Lord." (24:25-27)

These verses are a fitting summary of this series of prophecies. Through them, the prophet now binds the past with the future; and his role as "a sign for them" with the death of his wife is bound up with the destruction of Jerusalem, but also, in his words, with the prophecies of the revival.

Appendix: The personal touch / Dov Kimche¹¹

Yehezkel son of Buzi, the Kohen-prophet, tells us nothing about himself. This stems from a profound awareness that his own individual concerns are infinitesimally small in relation to the mission of eternity that he has taken upon himself, or which has been placed upon him by God.

He shies away from autobiography. What was his life like in exile? What were his sources of joy and pain? There is not a word about any of this. It is all to the point, focusing on the great political question of the time – the young Babylonian empire, and the most critical question of all: the future of his people within the tide of current events. That is all.

And yet here, all of a sudden... the prophet has a wife, and she is dear to him. She is "the delight of his eyes," a beloved, precious soul of whom the

¹¹ The passage from Kimche's book, *Bein Ha-Shittin shel ha-Tanakh*, Jerusalem 1941, pp. 51-53, appears here in abbreviated form.

prophet has made not the slightest mention, up until this last moment. Now a plague breaks out in his city, in Babylonia, and she, too, dies. And since she was dear to him, he notes the date: “In the tenth month, on the tenth of the month” – the 10th of Tevet, a fateful day of national punishment, and his short phrase is an aside almost swallowed up: ‘And at evening my wife died.’ And although she is for him “the delight of the eyes” and a “longing of the soul,” this cataclysm is merely conveyed by the prophet as a symbol. What is important here is that which is to follow: Jerusalem will die in a plague.

Nevertheless, we are touched by this intimate revelation of the human emotion behind the prophetic mask....”

Translated by Kaeren Fish