

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

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Dedicated in loving memory of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky z”l

Shiur #02: The Chariot and the Journeys of God's Glory (chapter 1)

At the beginning of his Book, Yehezkel describes how "the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God." Chapter 1, described by *Chazal* as the "*ma'aseh merkava*" ("workings of the Divine Chariot"), is one of the most difficult chapters to understand in all of Tanakh.¹ We will address the meaning of the *ma'aseh merkava* as the introduction to *Sefer Yehezkel* in a general sense, without delving into its details. At the beginning of the chapter we are told that Yehezkel receives his prophecy in Babylon, a point that Rashi and Radak note in their commentaries:

"... which I was among the exiles by the river Kevar." (1:1)

Yehezkel's vivid description of "the visions of God" in chapter 1 expresses the power of the prophet's encounter with the Divine vision. He portrays these visions in all their power ("a storm wind" [v. 4], "they went" [vv. 12-13]; "ran and returned" [v. 14]); in all their color ("a fire flaring up and a brightness was about it" [v. 4]; "they sparkled like the color of burnished brass" [v. 7]; "their appearance was like coals of fire, burning like the appearance of torches" [v. 13]; "in appearance like a sapphire stone" [v. 26 and elsewhere]); and in all their sound ("like the noise of great waters... the noise of a tumult, like the noise of a host" [v. 24]). As the prophet's description of the vision progresses, he gradually seems to lose his grasp of tangible expression. It grows increasingly difficult for him to describe what he is experiencing. See, for example, the pervasive use of the prepositional "*kaʿ*" ("like..."), and the growing number of instances in which he refers to a "*demut*" ("likeness"):

¹ The well-known teaching of *Chazal* on the mishna (*Chagiga* 2:1) makes this point: "One does not expound... on the *merkava* even alone" – "Up to this point you are entitled to speak; from this point onwards, you are not entitled to speak, for it is written in the Book of Ben-Sira: 'Do not expound on that which is too wondrous for you, and do not delve into that which is hidden from you; meditate on that which is permitted to you, you have no business with hidden matters...'" (*Chagiga* 13a). Similarly, Rashi's commentary on *Yehezkel* 1:27: "One cannot address (or 'gaze upon') this verse," and on 8:2, "it is forbidden to address (or 'gaze upon') this verse."

"And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. And I saw something like the color of electrum, like the appearance of fire found about enclosing it... I saw what appeared to be fire, and there was a brightness round about him. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about; this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God..." (1:26-28)

This Divine vision, which appears at the very outset of the Book, holds the key to understanding one of the central prophetic messages of the Book.² We will see that the recollection of this vision accompanies Yehezkel's prophecy throughout the rest of the Book.

The Divine visions throughout the chapters of the Book

Encounters with the Divine vision are recorded throughout the Book, from this first one, in 5th year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, to the vision he saw twenty years later. But to no other vision does Yehezkel devote the level of detail with which he describes the Divine vision in chapter 1.

In the fifth year Yehezkel first sees Divine visions upon the river Kevar (chapter 1). In these visions, God's glory is borne in a chariot, which indicates motion. Then the prophet is carried upon the wind and hears the sound of the Divine vision, and then arrives at "the exiles at Tel Aviv, who dwelled by the river Kevar" (3:15). After another prophecy, he sees God's glory as he goes out into the plain, like the glory which he had seen by the river Kevar (3:22-24). A year later, Yehezkel is sitting in his home and he sees a likeness that takes him in the vision of God to Jerusalem (8:2-3). There, after descriptions of the idolatry being practiced in the Temple, Yehezkel witnesses the departure of God's glory from within the Temple (chapter 10). This description ends with the glory of God "upon the mountain that is on the east side of the city" (11:22-23). The upshot of all these visions is that God's glory has departed from the Temple.

In the second part of the Book, in the twenty-fifth year (40:1), Yehezkel has a vision of the return of God's glory to the future Temple. First, there is a return to the Land of Israel (40:2); then Yehezkel experiences a Divine vision like the earlier one and sees the glory of the God of Israel returning to the Temple (43:1-5); finally, God's glory fills the House (44:4).

I will suggest that the journey of God's glory, as described in Yehezkel's visions throughout the book, contains prophetic messages that are the central

² On this Divine vision as a sort of prophetic epigraph to the Book, and its comparison with Yishayahu's prophecy, see: Rav Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Mo'adot*, Jerusalem 5746, chapter 20, "The Prophecy of Yishayahu", pp. 457-475.

axis around which his prophecies revolve. Several considerations lead me to this conclusion.

First, even in Yehezkel's pre-Destruction prophecies (between the fifth year and the twelfth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin), the glory of God has already departed from the Temple. The Divine Presence is no longer within the city of Jerusalem. Therefore, during the six first years of Yehezkel's prophecy – from the time he began to prophesy until the destruction of the Temple – there is no call to the nation as a whole to mend its ways and to repent (although there is attention to individual repentance; we will discuss this when we reach chapters 3, 14, 18, 33). The fate of Jerusalem has already been sealed; the Temple is defiled and desecrated, and the city will not be purified until God has poured out His wrath in its midst. Chapters 1-24 of the Book, in which Yehezkel establishes his status as a prophet, should be understood against this background.

Second, the description of the journey of God's glory raises the question: where is God's glory to be found during the years of the Destruction? Yehezkel describes God's glory as returning from the north of Babylon (1:4); thereafter he describes God's glory atop the mountain that is to the east of the city (11:23); finally, the glory of the God of Israel comes "from the way of the earth" (43:2), to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem in the future.³ Where, then, is God's glory during the years of Destruction and the exile of the nation? Does God's glory wander with the people to Babylon, or does it remain in the Land of Israel, outside Jerusalem, waiting for the people to return? What is meant by God's place specifically in the east? What significance should be attached to Yehezkel seeing the Divine visions specifically in the heavens? Is it possible that God's glory is exiled with the people to Babylon but does not descend to the soil of Babylon, in order not to dwell on the impure soil outside of the Land of Israel?⁴

Third, the description of the wandering of God's glory intensifies the gap between the assumption held universally by the people (expressed in the prophecies of Yehezkel and Yirmiyahu during these years) that it was impossible that God would abandon His Temple, and the prophetic message that the presence of God's glory in the Temple depends on the nation's actions: there is no guarantee. Therefore, the very fact that God's glory appears to Yehezkel in Babylon strengthens the message that God's glory has indeed departed from the Temple.

"The Divine Presence undertook ten journeys" – the departure of God's glory from the Temple (chapters 10-11)

³ The direction from which the exiles will return to Jerusalem is also mentioned by other prophets: see, for example, *Yirmiyahu* 3:18.

⁴ A comprehensive discussion of these questions is to be found in the article by M. Ben-Yashar, "Ha-Merkava be-Sefer Yehezkel u-'Mikdash Me'at," *Iyyunei Mikra u-Parshanut* 4, Ramat Gan 5757, pp. 9-28.

There are a number of sources where *Chazal* describe the process of God's glory departing from the Temple in "ten journeys," but the same stations are not listed in each case.⁵ In chapters 10-11, Yehezkel describes the process of God's glory leaving the Temple. The stages listed there explicitly include the *keruv*, the threshold of the House, the courtyard, the threshold of the House (apparently a reference to an outer doorway), [*keruvim*], the east gate of God's House, [*keruvim*, as a means of transporting the *Shekhina*], and (ascent above the city to) the mountain that is to the east of the city.⁶ *Chazal's* descriptions of the journeys of the *Shekhina* are not identical to those in *Sefer Yehezkel*, although the closest source to the journey as described in Yehezkel is to be found in *Eikha Rabba*:

"The Divine Presence undertook ten journeys – from *keruv* to *keruv*; from *keruv* to the threshold of the House; from the threshold of the House to the *keruvim*; from the *keruvim* to the eastern gate; from the eastern gate to the courtyard; from the courtyard to the roof; from the roof to the altar; from the altar to the wall; from the wall to the city; from the city to the Mount of Olives."⁷

Either way, there is no doubt that the prophetic message is that God's glory has departed from the Temple, even before its physical destruction.

The return of God's glory to the Temple (chapters 43-44)

The importance these visions throughout the Book is evidenced in the description of Yehezkel's vision of God's glory returning from the way of the east back into the Temple:

"And he brought me to the gate, the gate that looks towards the east, and behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east, and His voice was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with His glory." (43:1-2)

The next verse appears, at first glance, to be repeating itself:

"And the appearance of the vision which I saw, was like the vision that I saw when I came to destroy the city, and the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river *Kevar*..." (ibid. 3)

It seems that now, precisely the moment when God's glory returns to the Temple, in Yehezkel's future vision, that he feels a need to emphasize that this is

⁵ See: S. HaKohen, "Eser Masa'ot Nas'a Shekhina," *Sinai* 88, 3-4, 5741, pp. 104-119.

⁶ A study of the verses seems to indicate that it is the *keruvim* that carry God's glory upon their backs, and as such the repeated mention of them as "stations" in the "journey" should be understood only as the means by which this departure is effected.

⁷ *Eikha Rabba petichta* 25, Buber edition p. 29; similarly, *Rosh Ha-shana* 31a.

the same vision that accompanied him throughout the many years of his prophecy, before the Destruction of the Temple, when he was in Babylon. This emphasis is achieved by repeating each of the each of the stations where Yehezkel saw Divine visions in the first part of the Book. Thus, "and the appearance of the vision which I saw was like the vision that I saw..." refers to the vision in chapter 1, with the emphasis on the definite article – "*the* vision." Thereafter, "like the vision that I saw *when I came to destroy the city*" refers back to the vision in chapters 8-11, and matches the description of the ruin of the city in chapter 9 (verses 4-11). Finally, the prophet concludes that these visions appeared to him when he was *by the river Kevar* (chapters 1-3). In this way Yehezkel emphasizes that even though this is the first time since the Temple was built by King Shlomo that God's glory has departed – indeed the Temple lies in ruins – nevertheless the same Divine vision will return and once again dwell in the future Temple. The nation need not fear that the departure of God's glory from the Temple means the departure of His glory from the nation.

Therefore the prophet responds, "And I fell upon my face" (43:3), in describing the Temple being filled once again with God's glory:

"And the glory of God came into the House by way of the gate that faces towards the east. And a spirit took me up and brought me into the inner court, and behold, the glory of God filled the House." (43:4-5)

The beginning of chapter 43 deals with a description of the entry of God's glory into the Temple. This occasion represents the climax of Yehezkel's visions of the future, since the aim of the building of the Temple, in all its detail, is that God's glory might dwell in its midst. The uniqueness of this prophecy is also shown by its description of God's Throne and the soles of His feet:

"... Son of man, behold the place of My Throne, and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever; and the house of Israel shall no more profane My holy Name..." (v. 7)

"... they have defiled My holy Name by their abominations which they have committed..." (ibid. 8);

"... and I shall dwell in their midst forever." (ibid. 9)

From now on, the place of God's entry ("the gate that faces towards the east") will be closed, and this way will be protected against human entry, and thereby against any further defilement:

"Then God said to me: This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it, because the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered in by it; therefore it shall be shut." (44:2)

It is in this spirit that Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl explains:

"It is therefore important that the eastern gate – the main entranceway – be closed, with no practical use except as a reminder: It is through here that God will return, for it was from here that He departed, when the Divine Presence left in anticipation of the destruction. If you remember that God can also depart the Temple, perhaps He will never again have to leave..."⁸

This appears to be one of the ways in which the future Temple is protected in Yehezkel's prophecy against the possibility of God will once again abandoning His Temple, because from now on the people will behave only in accordance with God's command (36:27).

These verses at the beginning of chapter 43 describe the resting of the Divine Presence amongst the nation (verses 7, 9, and similarly in 37:26-28). The only other source in Tanakh that describes God's glory coming to rest is the Revelation at Sinai:

"And God's glory rested upon Mount Sinai." (*Shemot* 24:16)⁹

At the giving of the Torah, as in the resting of the Divine Presence in Sefer Yehezkel, there is confirmation of the unbreakable bond between God and Israel, ultimately leading to God's glory coming to rest amongst the nation. The realization of this lofty vision will come when "the House of Israel will no longer defile My holy Name." (43:7)

Furthermore, note that this is the only place in Tanakh where the expression "defiling (*t-m-a*) God's Name" appears. The rare use of this terminology makes sense since "God's name" represents holiness, the opposite of any form of impurity. The extreme contrast between God's Name and impurity – that is, God's refusal to dwell in an impure setting – has its source in the Torah. This idea is emphasized in two places:

1. In the command to send impure individuals out of the camp:
"... that they send out of the camp everyone who has *tzara'at*, and everyone who has an issue, and everyone who is defiled by the dead... so that they will not defile their camps, in the midst of which I dwell." (*Bamidbar* 5:2-3)

⁸ Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl, "Ha-Sha'ar ha-Poneh Kadim Yihyeh Sagur – Lamah?" *Sinai* 123-124, 5760, p. 369.

⁹ On the occasion of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* we find, "And God's glory appeared to all the people" (*Vayikra* 9:23), but the expression "coming to rest" in relation to God's glory is not used there.

We can further appreciate the uniqueness of this expression by noting that in *Melakhim* I, chapter 8 (as well as in the parallel account in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 6) the text describes the ceremony of inauguration of the Temple, but despite the special nature of that occasion, God's glory is not described as coming to rest in the Temple.

2. In the context of cities of refuge, where unintentional killers are sheltered:
“And you shall not defile the land which you shall inhabit, in which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell among Bnei Yisrael.” (ibid. 35:34)

We have seen that the prophetic message arising from the description of the Divine Chariot at the beginning of the *Sefer* and the journeying of God’s glory as described throughout (and especially its departure from the Temple in chapters 8-11 and its return in chapters 43-44) is that God’s Presence in the Temple cannot be assumed to be unconditional; God will not allow His Presence to dwell there if the nation causes the Temple to be defiled. But even though the nation refuses to accept the message of the prophets and fails to repent, even after the destruction of the Temple, God will never abandon His people. Still, in order to maintain His holy Presence amongst the people in the future, the conditions of access to God’s dwelling place will differ from those of the past, as we saw with regard to the closing of the entrance through which God’s glory returns to the Temple (as we shall see when we examine the chapters concerning the future Temple).

Perhaps this message, that the connection between God and His people is unbroken – both in the generation of the Destruction and afterwards – explains the selection of the first chapter of Yehezkel as the *haftara* for Shavuot, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah (*Megilla* 31a). When we read the vision of the Divine Chariot, we learn that the Torah given to Am Yisrael is eternal, and remains valid even in times of profound crisis. And, of course, Shavuot is connected to Yehezkel through the similarity between the description of God’s Revelation at Sinai, in fire and thick cloud, and Yehezkel’s description of the Divine Chariot.

Translated by Kaeren Fish