

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

**Shiur #28c: Yechezkel's prophecy about Gog from the Land of Magog
(38-39) (continued): The Purification of the Land**

The end of the process – the nations will know God

The prophet now describes the purpose of the process:

“And I will set My glory among the nations, and all the nations shall see My judgment that I have executed, and My hand that I have laid upon them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord their God from that day onwards.” (39:21-22)

In his description the prophet hints to the fundamental difference between the attitude of the nations towards their deities, and the attitude of Am Yisrael towards God:

“And all the nations shall know that the House of Israel went into exile for their iniquity, because they broke faith with Me, therefore I hid My face from them, and gave them into the hand of their enemies, so they fell by the sword all of them. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions have I done to them, and I hid My face from them.” (vv. 23-24)

Note what the prophet emphasizes: that God exiled His people because of their sins, and because God's chose to hide His face. In the pagan world, by contrast, the harm inflicted on a particular nation was proof of the weakness of their god; the suffering was not interpreted as a punishment or as the hiding of a divine face. The sharply contrasting Jewish view appears at the end of a prophecy that talks about removal of pagan centers of worship.

Yechezkel's prophecy at the conclusion of the unit contains within it the purpose of all of his prophecies. And this unit is notable for serving as a conclusion for this entire section of *Sefer Yechezkel*:

“Therefore so says the Lord God: Now I will bring back the captivity of Yaakov and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel, and will be zealous for My holy Name, and they will be rid of their shame, and of all

their faithlessness in which they have been faithless to Me, when they dwell securely on their land with none to make them afraid. When I have brought them back from the peoples, and gathered them out of their enemies' lands, and am sanctified through them in the sight of many nations, then they shall know that I am the Lord their God, Who caused them to be led into exile among the nations, but I have gathered them to their own land, and have left none of them there anymore. Nor will I hide My face any more from them, for I have poured out My spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God." (vv. 25-29)

God's "holy Name" is a central motif in this prophecy (vv. 7, 25). In several places in these chapters, the purpose of God's war against Gog is mentioned, each time with additional depth and elaboration.¹ First the prophet states that at the time of this war God will bring the nation to its land, and thereby become known amongst the nations: "And I will bring you against My land, that the nations may know Me, when I am sanctified by you, O Gog, before their eyes" (38:16). Later, the prophet emphasizes that not only will God's name become known among the nations, but His name will also be magnified and sanctified. So much so that many nations will recognize Him: "Thus will I magnify Myself and sanctify Myself, and I will make Myself known in the eyes of many nations, and they shall know that I am the Lord." (v. 23) Finally, the prophet mentions, for the first time, that God's holy Name must become known among the nations because earlier it had been desecrated. This "making known" will make the nations aware that God is the Holy One of Israel:

"So will I make My holy Name known in the midst of My people, Israel, and I will not allow My holy Name to be profaned any more, and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, the Holy One in Israel." (39:7)

Note that the repeated emphasis on God's Name having been desecrated begins only from the middle of the prophecy onwards (rather than from the beginning) This is not coincidental. Moreover, the aim of the war against Gog is exposed gradually, with each verse adding to our understanding of the ramifications of this war. So it is only at this expression's third appearance that the text notes that God's holy Name will be made known amongst Israel, will no longer be desecrated, and that the nations will know that God is the Holy One in Israel. This final aim is the most lofty, and will bring the nations to the pinnacle of their understanding of God and His bond with His people. Finally, the prophecy sums up the aim of God's war against Gog and its outcomes, both regarding the nations and the house of Israel, along with the nation's knowledge that God is holy in Israel:²

¹ As Moskowitz notes, p. 311.

² These verses follow on from another prophetic unit (vv. 11-24) that "prepares the ground" for the "setting" of God's glory among the nations and the "pouring" of His spirit upon the house of Israel.

“And I will set My glory among the nations, and all the nations shall see My judgment that I have executed, and My hand that I have laid upon them” (39:21).

The “setting” of God’s glory among the nations, after they have witnessed His judgment being executed (in His war against Gog), accords with the distancing of God’s glory from the Temple (Chapters 8-11) as well as with its return in the vision of the future Temple (43:1-5). The setting of God’s glory is part of the process of the nation’s recognition of God: “So the house of Israel shall know that I am the Lord their God from that day onwards.” (39:22)

This knowledge prepares the ground for the final stage in the description of the purpose of God’s war against Gog:

“Now I will bring back the captivity of Yaakov and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel, and will be zealous for My holy Name” (v. 25).

This verse is exceptional in three respects:

- a. The expression “the captivity of Yaakov” appears only here and in *Tehillim* (85:2, according to ‘*ketiv*’), although the use of the verb “*sh-v-b*” (to return, bring back) together with the word “*shevut*” (captivity) is common, with varying meanings; it also appears elsewhere in *Yechezkel* (16:53; 29:14).³
- b. The root “*r-ch-m*” (to have mercy for, have compassion upon) appears nowhere else in *Sefer Yechezkel*;
- c. This is the only place where the expression “My holy Name” appears without any description of it having been defiled or desecrated.

So this verse, comprising all its parts, is a summary of God’s purpose in His war against Gog: firstly, the returning of “the captivity of Yaakov” to its land expresses the ingathering of the twelve tribes to their land. Perhaps this unique expression is used to convey that the people’s return to the land comes about by virtue of their having been connected to God back to the days of Yaakov as the Chosen People, rather than thanks to their deeds or behavior.

In addition, after many prophecies in which the prophet emphasizes that the motive for returning the people to its land is solely God’s wish to sanctify His Name among the nations, he now introduces an unusually reconciliatory note: “[I will]... have mercy upon the whole house of Israel.” In contrast to the harsh attitude of the prophet, the bond between God and His people is ultimately also influenced by the Divine attribute of mercy.⁴ Moreover, since this verse makes no

³ Another element making this phrase unusual is the infrequent use of the appellation “Yaakov” in *Sefer Yechezkel* where it appears only twice. In comparison, Yishayahu uses “Yaakov” no less than 39 times, while Yirmiyahu uses it 10 times.

⁴ In addition to the fact that the word “*rachamim*” (mercy) appears nowhere else in *Sefer Yechezkel*, we also noted above that other expressions of consolation always appear in a

mention of desecration of God's holy name, there is also no mention of His Name being sanctified in the eyes of the nations. It seems that instead of sanctification, the time has now come for "zealousness" for His holy name. This zealousness explains the need for God's war against Gog, and its consequences, as well as the ingathering of Am Yisrael from among all the nations, despite their sins. By the end of this zealousness God will pour His spirit upon the nation: "Nor will I hide My face any more from them, for I have poured out My spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God." (v. 29)

Despite the unique nature of these chapters, they sum up themes that have been addressed in various contexts in earlier prophecies. For example, this prophecy contains no mention of any actions carried out by the people, because the revival of the nation will not come by virtue of their actions. Likewise, the war against Gog is waged not by Israel, but rather by God alone. Furthermore, these chapters place God at the center in other ways too: the main message running through the prophecy is the nations' recognition of God's glory (39:21), and thereafter the Jewish People's recognition of its God (39:22) and return to its land (39:29).

Appendix: Gog and Magog throughout the generations⁵

These chapters are part of the nation's historical consciousness. Throughout the generations, this prophecy has been cited as describing the events that will take place directly before, or during, or directly after the coming of the Messiah. The Rambam writes:

"The simple interpretation of the prophets' words appear to imply that the war of Gog and Magog will take place at the beginning of the Messianic age. Before the war of Gog and Magog, a prophet will arise to inspire Israel to be upright and prepare their hearts... Concerning all these and other such matters, man cannot know how they will occur until they actually come about, for these matters are left undefined by the prophets...." (Laws of Kings 12:2)

Throughout the generations, Jews have anticipated the realization of this prophecy. *Chazal* teach:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, sought to make [King] Chizkiyahu the Messiah, and to make Sancheriv and his armies - Gog and Magog, but

negative context - with one other exception, in 36:21: "I had concern for My holy Name". In both of these instances the prophet notes that the motive for God's defense of His holy Name is "*chemla*," expressing the uniqueness of the bond between God and His people, and the idea that God is prompted here not only by the need to perform justice, but also by His compassion.

⁵ For more on the name "Gog and Magog" and location, see Kasher, Appendix XIV: "Gog in Post-Biblical Tradition," p. 764-769.

since he [Chizkiyahu] did not utter praise, it was concealed” (Ruth Rabba 7,3).

Thus, *Chazal* draw a connection between the war against Sancheriv and the prophecy of Yechezkel, asserting that that war could have represented the historical actualization of the prophecy about Gog and Magog, even though it took place many years before Yechezkel received this prophecy. Likewise, many years later, in the 15th-century commentary of Abravanel on these chapters, Yechezkel’s prophecy concerning Gog and Magog is interpreted as a prophecy “concerning the Christians, the children of Edom”, who are destined to come to the Land of Israel (it is possible that the Crusades, the last of which took place 200 years before Abravanel’s time, served as the background to this view). Moreover, Abravanel, who was expelled from Spain by the Christians, interprets the events described in these chapters as God’s vengeance on the Christians for their deeds, rejecting the Christian interpretation, which attributes the events to their faith.⁶ It is no coincidence that these chapters are at the center of Yechezkel’s prophecies dealing with God’s revenge on the nations. In the Jewish historical consciousness, they represent a climactic description of Divine retribution. For example, we find in the Gemara:

“Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi, who had it from Bar Kapra: Anyone who holds three festive meals on Shabbat is saved from three punishments: the suffering [preceding the arrival] of the Messiah, and the judgment of Gehennom, and the war of Gog and Magog... ‘And the war of Gog and Magog’, since it is written [Shemot 16:25] “day”, and it is written also [Yechezkel 38:18] “day.”” (Shabbat 118a)

Also:

“Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Shimon bar Yochai: A bad son in a man’s house is worse than the war of Gog and Magog.” (*Berakhot* 7b)

Thus, Yechezkel’s prophecy left an indelible impression on Jewish national consciousness. The echoes of the expression which became a concept in its own right – “Gog and Magog” – stand out prominently in the words of our Sages, commentators, and even philosophers and poets.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁶ It is interesting to compare Abravanel’s view of these chapters with the interpretation of Malbim, whose commentary echoes the events of the 19th century.