

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

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

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Dedicated to Liora & Ari Tuchman  
In honor of the Bat Mitzvah of Danelle Sophia  
and in honor of the birth of their son, Adin Emanuel

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This week's *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Hershey Hawk z"l  
by Dr. Jerry Hawk

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**Shiur #04c: The Meaning of the Metaphor: God's Actions (5:5-17)**

Assuming the chapters in *Sefer Yehezkel* follow in chronological order, then Yehezkel's symbolic actions actually represent the first encounter between the prophet, in his Divinely-appointed role, and the nation. These actions, which introduce his prophecies, serve to focus the aim of his prophecy at the very outset; they leave no room for hope. Indeed, immediately after he performs these actions (which conclude with the haunting message of the fire spreading throughout the House of Israel), we learn of the first verbal message conveyed by the prophet to the people, in which he explains the meaning of the actions:

“Thus says the Lord: This is Jerusalem; I have set it in the midst of the nations, and countries are round about her. And she has rebelled against My judgments more wickedly than the nations, and against My statutes more than the countries that are round her, for they have refused My judgments, and as for My statutes, they have not followed them.” (5:5-6)

These verses appear to explain that the main cause of the Destruction is the state of Jerusalem compared with the surrounding cities and countries. However, the comparison not only involves the status of the city, but seems to be about how God Himself is perceived by the pagan nations. Over the hundreds of years preceding the Destruction of the Temple, the Assyrian Empire ruled over Mesopotamia. Thereafter, nearer the time of the Destruction, there arose the new Babylonian Empire. Both kingdoms had “temple cities,” namely, sacred sites at whose center was the “home” of the local deity, that is, a functioning temple

(which also controlled a significant portion of the city's assets).<sup>1</sup> For the surrounding nations, Jerusalem – and the Temple in its midst – represented, until the Destruction, just another temple city. It was one of many in Mesopotamia.

Once again, the prophet emphasizes that nation's actions – that is, rebelling against God's commandments – have brought about catastrophic results. The consequences are enumerated in the following verses introduced by the word, "*lakhen*" (therefore):

"Therefore, thus says the Lord God: Because you have been more turbulent than the nations that are round about you, and have not walked in My statutes, nor have you kept My judgments, nor have you [even] done according to the practices of the nations that are round about you..." (ibid. 7)

The prophet begins by defining and illuminating the severity of the actions of the people. Not only have they not fulfilled God's commandments; they have even been less loyal to God than the surrounding nations have been towards their own deities.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the consequences will also play out in the sight of the nations:

"Therefore, thus says the Lord God: Behold I – even I – am against you, and will execute judgments in the midst of you in the sight of the nations. And I will do in you that which I have not done, and like which I will not do again, because of all your abominations." (ibid. 8-9)

This prophecy signals to the nation the severity of "all their abominations," by highlighting the unprecedented actions that God would take in response. This appears to be a reference to the Destruction of the Temple, which had stood since the time it was built by King Shlomo.<sup>3</sup>

In light of the above, perhaps we can understand why the nation had not internalized the idea that God might destroy His Temple. They knew that the Destruction of the Temple would be perceived by the nations as weakness on the part of God, reflecting, as it were, God's inability to defend His Temple and ward off its enemies. Thus, the Destruction of the Temple would entail a desecration of God's Name among the nations. The nations would assume that God had lost

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these temples, see: C. Tadmor, *Ashur, Bavel vi-Yehuda: Mechkarim be-Toldot ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum*, Jerusalem 5766, pp. 95-121. Models of such temples are on display at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem; some very impressive models are also in the British Museum in London.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the word "*mishpat*" ("judgments," rather than "*mitzvot*" – commandments, or "*chukkim*" – statutes) is interesting, given that the most popular deity among the Babylonians was the sun-god, their god of justice, whose temple was at Sippar; see Tadmor, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> The prophetic message that the imminent Divine action is something unrepeatable, is understandable, based on the understanding that the destruction of the Second Temple (as traumatic as it was) was less terrible than the destruction of the First Temple.

His power and might, so much so that He could not even prevent the downfall of His Temple. The nations surrounding Jerusalem would have considered the deliberate divine Destruction of Jerusalem so strange that the people of Jerusalem were lulled into believing that this would be enough to prevent the Temple being destroyed despite their severe sins.

The nation also carried the historical memory of the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem in the year 701, about a century earlier, during the campaign of Sancheriv. It was then, against all odds and after a prolonged siege of the city, that the situation was reversed overnight (*Melakhim* II 19:35; *Yishayahu* 37:36; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:21-22). In light of this memory, whose thrice-repeated evocation testifies to its tremendous impact on the national consciousness, the inhabitants of Jerusalem held on to their belief that some miracle would occur and the Babylonian army would be defeated. This belief held sway even during the most difficult days of the Babylonian siege, until its final moments. They were aware as well that the power of the Babylonian Empire was still being consolidated, and that it was far weaker than the Assyrian Empire had been in the days of Sancheriv.<sup>4</sup> So anticipating salvation seemed eminently reasonable to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This faith, it seems, was shared by the exiles in Babylonia to whom Yehezkel prophesied. Given this assumption of invincibility, it is even more understandable why Yehezkel's prophecy depicts the events of the Destruction in Jerusalem in a painful and piercing way:

“Therefore the fathers shall eat the sons in the midst of you, and the sons shall eat their fathers; and I will execute judgments in you, and I will scatter the whole remnant of you to all the winds.” (ibid. 10)

The city's situation is more dire than it has ever been before, or will ever be again: this is the clear message of this portion of the prophecy, and it is made by emphasizing that the Biblical warnings – “And you shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall you eat”<sup>5</sup> – will be fulfilled. The situation now, in fact, is even worse; not only will parents eat the flesh of their children, but the opposite too: children will eat the flesh of their parents. This description is unparalleled anywhere in Tanakh.

### **The destruction of the land**

What actions of the people that have brought about this terrible situation? These are stated briefly but harshly:

“Therefore, as I live, says the Lord God, Surely, because you have defiled My Sanctuary with all your detestable things, and with all your

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<sup>4</sup> The gap in status between the two empires is clear, inter alia, from the multitude of tablets still extant today describing the might of the kings of Assyria, compared with a dearth of corresponding testimonies from the Babylonian Empire.

<sup>5</sup> *Vayikra* 26:29; see also *Devarim* 28:53-57.

abominations, therefore I will likewise diminish you, neither shall My eyes spare, neither will I have any pity.” (5:11)

The terse expression “detestable things and abominations” refers to the range of sins that the people have committed which are detailed by the prophet in the coming chapters. A similar description is found later on:

“But as for those who heart follows after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations...” (11:21).

The concise double phrase “detestable things and abominations” demands some explanation. Appearing more than eighty times (!) over the course of his prophecies, Yehezkel protests the existence of pagan worship amongst the nation, referring to this idolatry by different terms and names. But until this verse in chapter 5, the actions of the people that caused the Destruction have not been enumerated; they will appear only in chapter 6. Let us try to pinpoint the special meaning of each of these terms. Then we will examine their context in the Torah, looking first at *Sefer Vayikra* and then at *Sefer Devarim*. This will, I believe, reveal the profound significance of the prophet’s descriptions of idolatry.

To this end, we must first devote some attention to the different connotations of the terms that Yehezkel uses for the idolatry practiced by the people. Some might explain away the range of terms as an attempt at stylistic variety, breaking the monotony of repetition. But to me, such an explanation prevents us from appreciating the precision of the prophetic language. In fact, some terminological (and even some etymological) analysis will demonstrate that the particular semantic field<sup>6</sup> employed in a prophecy is important to fully understand the differences between Yehezkel’s various prophecies of rebuke.

Let us start with a look at the terms “detestable things” (*shikkutzim*) and “abominations” (*to’evot*) which appear in Chapter 5.

### **‘Shikkutzim’ (detestable things)**

The root “*sh-k-tz*” is commonly used in *Sefer Vayikra* in reference to impure creatures that are forbidden as food:

“You shall not make yourselves detestable (*teshaketzu*) with any creeping thing that creeps, nor shall you make yourselves unclean with them.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Pollak notes that apart from a key word, the *semantic field* can also serve as an organizing feature. While Polack refers specifically to Biblical narratives, the same principle applies to the prophecy under discussion. See F. Pollak, *Ha-Sippur ba-Mikra*, Jerusalem 5754, pp. 91-97.

<sup>7</sup> *Vayikra* 11:43; similarly also *Vayikra* 20:25.

In contrast, in *Yehezkel* this root appears eight times in reference to idolatry, in a manner similar to its use in *Sefer Devarim*:

“And you have seen their detestable things (*shikkutzeihem*) and their idols – wood and stone, silver and gold, which were among them.”<sup>8</sup>

The common term makes it reasonable to assume that the connection between the “detestable thing” that is forbidden as food and the “detestable thing” that is idolatrous expresses the element that they share in common: they both cause impurity. The eating of creeping things brings impurity upon the soul, and perhaps the same result befalls one who loses himself in the pagan worship of the nations.

### “*To’evot*” (abominations)

The term “*to’eva*” is used far more extensively in *Sefer Yehezkel* than by any other prophet.<sup>9</sup> A “*to’eva*” is a general term for something that is hateful, disgusting, worthy of condemnation, etc. It does not allude to any particular type of sin, but rather encompasses and includes many different transgressions and forms of unacceptable behavior. Thus, expressions such as “an abomination unto God” denote the complete opposite of that which is considered as being “finding favor” in God’s eyes.<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, in *Sefer Yehezkel*, this term encompasses the broadest possible range of actions unacceptable to God. These acts ultimately brought about the Destruction of the Temple and the exile of the people from its land.

Thus, in chapter 22 alone we find no less than twelve transgressions appearing under the heading, “Make known to her all her abominations...” In addition, *Sefer Yehezkel* features unique combinations including this term, which are not to be found elsewhere in Tanakh: “*to’avot ra’ot*” (evil abominations, 6:11; 8:9); “*to’evot gedolot*” (great abominations, 8:13, 15); “*tzalmei to’avotam*” (the images of their abominations, 7:20). The prophet apparently employs these new combinations in order to upset his listeners and even to shock them. The term “*to’evot*” thus becomes a catchphrase for the lowly, despicable actions that have defiled all that is holy: the bond between husband and wife (22:11); the land (11:18); the Temple (5:11); Shabbat (23:36-38); and God’s Name (43:8). Evidence of the power and special significance of this harsh term is the fact that *Yehezkel* only directs it toward his own people. Although the term is used liberally throughout the *Sefer*, it is absent from chapters 24-32 where the prophet addresses other nations.

Given the above discussion about the meaning of the terms “*shikkutzim*” and “*to’evot*,” we can now approach a better understanding of the meaning of the

<sup>8</sup> *Devarim* 29:16; similarly also *Devarim* 7:26.

<sup>9</sup> The word appears 117 times in the Tanakh, with 45 appearances in *Sefer Yechezkel* alone.

<sup>10</sup> According to B. Schwartz, *Torat ha-Kedusha*, Jerusalem 5759, p. 219.

symbolic actions which we discussed earlier. The first verse, which defines the sins that brought about the defilement and the destruction of the Temple – “Because you have defiled My Sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations” (5:11) – should be read as a cry. By means of this combination of terms, Yehezkel cries out, as it were, “You have perpetrated the most despicable actions, a mixture of the worst transgressions, and these have caused the Temple to be defiled!”

This same cry seems to echo in the second part of the verse: “Therefore I will also diminish you, neither shall My eye spare, neither will I have any pity.” Along with the explicit negation – there will no “sparing” or “pity” – there is a further layer here: the fierceness of the Divine response corresponds to the foulness of the deeds perpetrated by the nation.

The prophet concludes by interpreting the symbolic act as foretelling annihilation of most of the nation:

“A third part of you shall die with the pestilence, and with famine shall they be consumed in the midst of you; and a third part shall fall by the sword round about you; and I will scatter a third part to all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them. Thus shall My anger spend itself, and I will relieve My fury upon them, and I will be comforted, and they shall know that I the Lord have spoken it in My zeal, when I have spent My fury in them.” (5:12-13)

This language is especially harsh because nowhere else in *Sefer Yehezkel* – not even in the prophecies dating to the years after the destruction of the Temple – do we find the same terms used as consolation. The expressions “My eye sparing,” “having pity” and “I will be comforted” appear here solely in the negative sense. Perhaps, if there were a complementary prophecy which used the same vocabulary but served as a prophecy of consolation, this would have softened the message of this prophecy. But the absence of any prophecies in *Sefer Yehezkel* in which God “has pity” on His people, in which “His eye spares” them, or in which He “comforts” them, starkly illustrates the unprecedented, irreversible reality of the Destruction of the Temple. And the consequences will follow shortly, changing the status of the city of Jerusalem in the eyes of the nations:

“And I will make you a desolation and a reproach among the nations that are round about you, in the sight of all that pass by. So it shall be a reproach and a taunt, an instruction and an astonishment to the nations that are round about you, when I shall execute judgments on you, in anger and in fury and in furious rebuke; I, the Lord, have spoken it.” (5:14-15)

Until now Jerusalem had been seen as one of the region’s “sacred cities.” Its destruction naturally results – in view of the nations’ polytheistic understanding

– in a downgrading of God’s status, as it were. In the past, God was perceived as the Deity of the Jewish people in its land. Now, God seems to be sanctifying His Name which has been defiled and desecrated in the eyes of the nations; He establishes His status as God, elevated above all other deities, without any dependence on the current state of Judea (see 39:23-24). Moreover, in the eyes of the nations, the converse is now true: the fact that the nation that is supposed to represent God in the world has reached such a nadir, means that the nations must be brought to understand the new reality in a different light. They must see that God rules the entire world; it is His will that “pulls the strings,” controlling even other nations and their gods. Thus the nations will come to understand how God inflicts such devastating damage on His people, as described in the closing verses of this chapter:

“When I shall send upon them the evil arrows of famine, which shall be for destruction, which I will send to destroy you, and I will increase the famine upon you, and will break your staff of bread, so will I send upon you famine and evil beasts, and they shall bereave you, and pestilence and blood shall pass through you, and I will bring the sword upon you; I, the Lord, have spoken.” (5:16-17)

In these verses, the meaning of the starvation in the symbolic act discussed earlier becomes fully clear. The starvation, described as “arrows of famine” sent by God, is accompanied by wild beasts, pestilence, and blood. These verses are somewhat reminiscent of *parashat Haazinu*:

“I will heap troubles upon them; I will spend My arrows on them. They shall be sucked empty by hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction; I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of crawling things of the dust.” (*Devarim* 32:23-24)

Here, too, we find God’s “arrows” sowing destruction amongst the people, as well as famine and the “teeth of beasts” (like the “evil beasts” in *Yehezkel*). Moshe introduces *parashat Haazinu* with the following declaration:

“For I know that after my death you will surely become corrupted, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you, and evil will befall you in the latter days, because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands.” (*ibid.* 31:29)

This comparison with the verses from *Haazinu* is underlined by the fact that *Yehezkel*’s prophecy of these years is actually the realization of Moshe’s warnings to the people prior to his death.

This prophetic unit (*Yehezkel* 5:5-17) is one of the harshest that is delivered to the nation anywhere in Tanakh. It remains difficult to read even at a distance of so many generations. The horror it arouses is highlighted by the fact

that seven times (over the course of these 13 verses) the prophet emphasizes that his prophecy comes entirely from God. Verse 5 begins with the expression, “So says the Lord God,” and likewise verses 7 and 8. In verse 11, God’s Name is mentioned in the context of an oath: “as I live, says the Lord God.” Then, in verse 13, we find, “and they shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it in My zeal”; likewise in verse 15: “I, the Lord, have spoken it.” It is not for nothing that this dreadful prophecy needs to resound – both at the time it is conveyed and for all generations – with the explicit, repeated insistence that it all comes from God. And so, perhaps, some slight consolation can be found in God’s command to Yehezkel that he “set his face against it” (the brick representing Yerushalayim) – as if to say, the suffering will be unbearable, but it is not ignored. God watches His people always, even at this most dire time.

Translated by Kaeren Fish