

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

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Dedicated in memory of Tzipporah Bat R' Mosheh z"l

Shiur #03: Yehezkel's Prophetic Mission (2:1 – 3:21)

In place of a dedication

The awesome power of the Divine visions that Yehezkel beholds is clear from his reaction: “And when I saw it, I fell upon my face...” (1:28). Immediately he hears God’s voice speaking to him:

“And I heard **the voice of One Who spoke**. And He said to me, **Son of man**, stand upon your feet and **I will speak to you**. And a spirit entered into me when **He spoke to me**, and set me upon my feet, and I heard **Him Who spoke to me.**” (1:28 – 2:2)

The appellation “son of man” with which God addresses Yehezkel occurs repeatedly (the prophet is addressed this way 93 times) and is unique to this prophet. The commentators note that Yehezkel – who experiences Divine visions described in great detail in chapter 1 – is called “son of man,” in contrast to the “face of a man” which he sees in his Divine visions. This description emphasizes that seeing these visions did not change the fact that was a “son of man” in his own eyes (Rashi), or in the eyes of the reader, and perhaps even in relation to the angels (R. Eliezer of Beaugency).

Another repeated word in these verses comes to emphasize a different message. Even though Yehezkel hears “speech,” which is a human faculty, four times in just three verses, he is nonetheless able stand upon his feet only with supernatural help, with the help of the spirit: “And a spirit entered into me when He spoke to me, and set me upon my feet.”

Yehezkel is told at the outset that he is being sent to the nation to convey God’s word, for them to know that a prophet was among them before the Destruction: “that they should not say, ‘God did not warn us’” (R. Eliezer of Beaugency). But the people dwelling in Jerusalem – like those in Babylon – will not change their ways. So the role of the prophet is not to bring about repentance

but rather to convey God's word and thereby justify the imminent punishment. He has no hope that his prophetic messages will affect their behavior. Yehezkel knows that the people are likely to respond aggressively to his words (as we deduce from his being encouraged not to fear them). His appellations for the people, which are also expressions that are unique to this *Sefer*, testify to this: "rebellious tribes that have rebelled against Me;" "defiant and stiff hearted;" "a rebellious house" (2:3-5); these are repeated throughout the Book, in contrast to the prophecies that address God's relationship with the nation in a positive context, where He calls them "My people, Israel."

The eating of the scroll

Yehezkel's prophecy does not open with a "prophecy of dedication" or "inauguration," as we find in the case of other prophets (*Yishayahu* 6; *Yirmiyahu* 1). But chapters 2-3 can be seen as a sort of inaugural prophecy that both differs from the inaugural prophecies of Yishayahu and Yirmiyahu, but also resembles them in some ways. It may be that the eating of the scroll, in chapters 2-3, represents a substitute for his formal inauguration.¹

"But you, son of man – hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat that which I give you.' And when I looked, behold, a hand was sent to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And he spread it before me, and it was written inside and outside, and in it was written lamentations, and mourning, and woe. And He said to me, 'Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that scroll. And He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your belly and fill your bowels with this scroll that I give you.' Then I ate it, and it became as sweet as honey in my mouth." (2:8 – 3:2)²

The prophet's ambivalence here is clear. Despite God's thrice-repeated command to eat the scroll, all the prophet does is open his mouth. God then feeds him the scroll. Perhaps this is an expression of his difficulty in accepting his prophetic mission. The content of the scroll, too, makes it difficult to "swallow." It heralds the content of Yehezkel's prophecy to the people: just as the scroll contains lamentations, with no hint of redemption, so too Yehezkel's prophecy includes, initially, only the coming of the Destruction. Yehezkel thus receives his prophetic mission by two means: the eating of the scroll and the visions reported in chapter 1.

¹ See, for example: R. Rendtorff, "Chazon ha-Hakdasha shel Yechezkel tokh Hashva'a le-Chazonot Makbilim ba-Mikra (*perakim* 1-3)," in: Y. Avishur (ed.), *Iyyunim be-Sefer Yechezkel*, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 89-108. It would seem that the eating of the scroll joins the visions at the beginning of the Book, for it is only at the conclusion of the inaugural prophecy that Yechezkel takes leave of the Divine vision that has accompanied him, as described in detail in chapter 1 (3:12-13).

² The commentators are divided as to whether the prophet literally ate the scroll, or whether this is a prophetic description of a symbolic act.

We may assume that Yehezkel, as a Kohen, was among those who had visited the Temple in Jerusalem before the exile, and the prophetic mission at this time is not an easy one for him to accept. Note God's repeated insistence that Yehezkel is being chosen here as His emissary: "I send you," "You shall speak My words to them;" "Go and speak to the house of Israel." Perhaps an echo of Yehezkel's difficulty in accepting his mission is alluded to in God's words to him: "Do not be rebellious like that rebellious house" (2:8).

At some point the scroll "became as sweet as honey in my mouth," expressing the idea that ultimately he accepted his mission. Perhaps he did so happily – as suggested by R. Yosef Kara: "I rejoiced at going on Your mission," or perhaps out of resignation: "I saw God's will and I was not able to hold myself back; out of love I learned it and I overcame myself to perform His mission, even though the people are difficult" (R. Menachem ben Shimon).³ Just as the prophet has no discretion in eating the scroll and its contents, so too there is no room for private deliberation about his prophetic mission.

Part of Yehezkel's difficulty arises from knowing that the nation will likely reject his message. Any notions that might have set his mind at ease are explicitly rejected before he even begins to speak (verses 5-9). The nation understands quite well what the message means: "For you are not sent to a people of a strange speech and of heavy language" (3:5); the nation also knows that Yehezkel is operating as God's agent: "But the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they will not listen to Me" (3:7). Furthermore, the opposition is not from some marginal group within the nation, nor is it transient or incidental: "For all the house of Israel are defiant and hard-hearted" (*ibid.*, and also 2:6).

Thus, in contrast to the nation, which is referred to as of "hard foreheads," the prophet Yehezkel sets out on his mission strengthened, as his name suggests, by God: "I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like shamir, harder than flint, have I made your forehead" (3:8-9). All this will buttress him in confronting a nation that openly expresses its displeasure: "Do not fear them, nor be downcast at their looks, for they are a rebellious house" (3:9).

After this emphasis on the difficulties entailed in the prophetic mission, Yehezkel responds with hesitation (even reluctance), with a sense of God's strong hand supporting and guiding him, but at the same time intensively pressing God's word upon him: "And I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit, and the hand of the Lord was strong upon me" (3:14). The reader thus shares the mixed feelings with which Yehezkel approaches the exiles, to whom his prophecies are addressed: "Then I came to the exiles at Tel Aviv, who dwelled by

³ R. Menachem ben Shimon lived in the second half of the 12th century in Provence. His commentary is decidedly *peshat*-oriented. All that remains extant of his work is a commentary on two Books: *Yirmiyahu* and *Yechezkel* (see: *Yechezkel, Mikraot Gedolot ha-Keter*, p. 11).

the River Kevar, and I sat where they sat..." (3:15). After only one week, Yehezkel receives another prophecy from God detailing the nature of his task.

The prophet as "watchman" (3:16-21)

We noted earlier that in Yehezkel's prophecy, the Destruction and exile are only a matter of time, partly owing to the nation's behavior from its very beginnings before the exodus from Egypt (chapter 20) and partly because the nation is not going to change its ways now (chapter 8). Still, even though the tragic outcome is known in advance, Yehezkel is not exempt from his prophetic mission, just as no individual is exempt from personal responsibility for his own behavior. However, the response of his generation is different: if the Destruction is inevitable, they claim, then their actions are of no consequence, and even their individual fates are sealed:

"Thus you speak, saying: 'If our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?'" (33:10)

They even trace their individual fates back to the sins of their forefathers (in chapter 18).

It is this basic outlook that is challenged by the prophecies. While they do not cast any doubt on the impending Destruction, they nevertheless do not absolve the individual of responsibility for his actions. Thus, in chapter 14 (verses 12-20) the prophet emphasizes that the righteous among *Am Yisrael* will be saved – but they will save only themselves. In chapter 18, too, we are told that "the soul that sins – it shall die" (verse 4 and elsewhere). The conclusion of chapter 18 is:

"Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways... Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, so that iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, in which you have transgressed, and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit; for why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dies, says the Lord God; therefore turn, and live." (18:30-32)

This seems to be the essence of the message that the prophet addresses to each individual in his generation: the Temple is going to be destroyed, and the nation will be exiled from its land, but every person bears personal responsibility for his own fate, because even at this most bitter time there will be those who will die and those who will be saved. Every individual is responsible for his own actions.

Yehezkel must therefore carry out his mission even if the nation's fate is already sealed. The prophet's mission to each individual is in the subject of

chapters 3 and 33, in which the prophet is referred to as an observer or watchman (“*tzofeh*”), an appellation that expresses his task of announcing and warning of the approaching danger.⁴

Let us first examine the prophecy in chapter 3:

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel, and when you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me.

When I say to the wicked man, You shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life – the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but I will require his blood at your hand. But if you warn the wicked man, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity, but you have saved your soul.

And when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling-block before him, he shall die – because you have not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered, but I will require his blood at your hand. But if you warn the righteous man, that the righteous should not sin, and he does not sin, then he shall surely live, because he is warned, and you have saved your soul.” (3:17-21)

The prophet must address the wicked man and warn him to repent. If the prophet fails to warn him, then the prophet himself bears responsibility for the actions of that wicked person. Likewise, the righteous man who sins despite being warned is responsible for his actions. But if the prophet failed to warn him, then “I shall require his blood at your hand.” A righteous man who has been warned and (consequently) does not sin, will live – and the soul of the prophet is also saved.

Although a superficial review of these verses suggests that all possibilities for sin and repair are addressed, in fact only three cases are: a wicked man who continues to sin, a righteous man who changes his ways and commits a sin, and a righteous man who apparently has never sinned.⁵ But a wicked person who repents is not explicitly mentioned.

Likewise, the three cases depicted reflect only one generation. There is no discussion of children being punished for the sins of their ancestors, which is significant given the people’s justification for their behavior (that they are being

⁴ The prophet Yirmiyahu testifies: “I set watchmen over you, saying, Listen to the sound of the *shofar*. But they said, ‘We will not listen!’” (*Yirmiyahu* 6:17). There is no explicit textual evidence of any personal acquaintance between Yechezkel and Yirmiyahu, who were contemporaries but prophesied in different places and under different conditions. But in this verse Yirmiyahu seems to be referring to Yechezkel and other prophets with similar messages.

⁵ It is possible that the righteous man mentioned here is the same one who sinned, but then repented, having been warned by the prophet.

punished for the sins of their fathers and not for their own actions, which have no significance). Along with the prophetic message that every person is responsible for his own actions, Yehezkel is also describing the inhabitants of Jerusalem at the time of the Destruction: they sin and do not change their behavior. The role of the prophet is merely to warn; his mission has no effect on their actions.⁶

As noted, the prophecy in chapter 3 is complemented by another prophecy from the year of the destruction, appearing in chapter 33. This prophecy clarifies the role of the prophet after the news of the Destruction has been broken to the exiles around him:

“Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man from among them, and set him for their watchman...” (33:2)

It would seem that this prophecy, unlike the one in chapter 3, refers to a reality in which the destruction has already taken place – but even now there is still a need for a watchman. The “people of the land,” belonging to the leadership class,⁷ appointing the watchman “from among them:”

“If, when he sees the sword come upon the land, he blows the *shofar* and warns the people, then whoever hears the sound of the *shofar*, and takes no warning – if the sword comes, and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the *shofar*, and took no warning; he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming, and does not blow the *shofar*, and the people are not warned – then if the sword comes, and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity, but I will require his blood at the hand of the watchman.” (33:3-6)

This chapter begins with the watchman being called upon to warn the people. This is before the news of the Destruction is known. Later in chapter 33 a refugee who fled from Jerusalem informs Yehezkel of the Destruction. Perhaps in light of this distinction we can understand the differences between the watchman’s role as set out in these verses and his role in chapter 3, at the beginning of his path. In chapter 33, too, the prophet relates first to the wicked man (vv. 7-9) who even now – as in the past – fails to change his ways. However, in this later chapter we also see the people’s reaction:

“And you, son of man – speak to the house of Israel: Thus you speak, saying, ‘If our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away

⁶ For a different and interesting approach to the order of the prophecies in terms of the perception of Divine retribution in this *Sefer*, see the introduction to Y. Moskowitz’s commentary in *Da’at Mikra, Yechezkel*, Jerusalem 5745, pp. 14-17.

⁷ For instance, we see that the “people of the land” appear as part of the list of significant figures among the nation, in chapter 7:26-27.

in them, how then shall we live?’ Say to them: ‘As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn, turn from your evil ways, for why should you die, O house of Israel?’ ” (33:10-11)

Now, as the stench of Destruction wafts in the air, we hear clear sounds that until now we have not heard: on the one hand, the despair of the people, but also the impassioned call of the prophet, to every individual, whoever and wherever he may be, even now – as the Temple stands in ruins and the city of Jerusalem in foreign hands – to save himself from death. Therefore the prophet now speaks of a righteous person who sins (vv. 12-13) and – for the first time – of a wicked person who repents of his evil ways (vv. 14-16). It should be emphasized that the sins of which he atones here are personal sins, transgressions of the individual, with no connection to the Temple and its ceremonial ritual, nor even to the Land of Israel, its defilement, or its purification (since these are no longer relevant):

“And when I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and he turns from his sin and does that which is proper and right; if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back that which he had robbed, follows the statutes of life, without committing iniquity – he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his sins that he has committed shall be remembered for him; he has done that which is proper and right; he shall surely live.” (33:14-16)

The summing up of this prophecy emphasizes the same prophetic message once again, in order to sharpen the contrast between Divine retribution and the commonly held perception amongst the people that God surely does not differentiate between retribution meted out to the individual and the general punishment of the nation. To the contrary! The prophet insists that God judges every person in accordance with his actions:

“Yet the children of your people say, ‘The way of God is unfair;’ but they themselves – their way is unfair. When the righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, then he shall die in those. But if the wicked man turns from his wickedness, and does that which is proper and right – he shall live in those. Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is unfair.’ I shall judge you every man after his way, O house of Israel.” (vv. 17-20)

This comparison between chapter 3 and chapter 33 highlights the fact that Yehezkel’s mission is not meant to cause the people to change their ways; rather, he comes to convey God’s word to His people. Between the lines we glean something of the relationship between the individual and the collective in the generation of the Destruction. In this difficult era for the nation, even though the Destruction is now inevitable, the individual is still able to change his own behavior – a change that will lead to his own deliverance from death. Later on we will see how Yehezkel’s prophecies of rebuilding, in chapters 34-39, also sit well

with this distinction between individual behavior and the status of the nation as a whole.

Translated by Kaeren Fish