

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

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Shiur #04a: Symbolic Actions and Their Meaning (3:22 – 5:17)

Yehezkel is commanded to perform many symbolic actions throughout the Book: eating the scroll (chapter 3), shutting himself in his house, bound with cords (chapter 3), limiting his movement and his food for an extended period (chapter 4), shaving his head (chapter 5), wearing chains (7:23), and finally, refraining from mourning the death of his wife (chapter 24). The prophecy we are about to examine contains a number of these symbolic actions.

A thundering silence (3:22-27)

“And the hand of the Lord was upon me there, and He said to me, Arise, go out into the plain, and I will talk with you there. So I arose and went out into the plain, and behold, the glory of God stood there, as the glory which I saw by the river Kevar, and I fell on my face. Then a spirit entered into me, and set me upon my feet, and He spoke with me, and said to me, Go, shut yourself inside your house. But you, O son of man, behold, they shall put cords upon you, and shall bind you with them, and you shall not go out among them. And I will make your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth, that you shall be dumb, and shall not be a reproving figure to them, for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God: He who hears, let him hear; and he that refuses to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.” (3:22-27)¹

This prophecy raises several questions. Up until now the prophet has been commanded to go and prophesy to the people. Now it seems that before he has a chance to say anything, he receives another prophecy that contradicts everything that has come before: he must shut himself in his house and refrain from reproving the nation, until he is instructed otherwise. Some indication of how long Yehezkel must remain silent is found in chapter 24:

¹ Yechezkel is not the only prophet whose prophecy entails personal suffering. Several commentators (such as Abravanel at the beginning of *Sefer Hoshea*) address this issue both conceptually and in each specific case. The Rambam understands these actions as “a prophetic vision in which he sees himself performing the actions that he is commanded to do” (*Guide of the Perplexed*, II:46). We will address only one aspect of these symbolic actions, namely, their role in conveying the prophetic messages.

“On that day, he who escapes shall come to you, to cause you to hear it with your ears. On that day your mouth shall be opened to the survivor, and you shall speak, and no longer be mute, and you shall be a sign to them, and they shall know that I am the Lord.” (24:26-27)

This suggests that this silence will end only on the day that a survivor comes from Jerusalem bringing news of the Destruction. And indeed, we see a prophecy ending his term of silence in chapter 33, when the news of the Destruction reaches Babylonia:

“And it came to pass in the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, that one who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me, saying, The city has been struck. Now the hand of the Lord was upon me in the evening, before the survivor came, and he opened my mouth, by the time he came to me in the morning, and my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.” (33:21-22)

Between our chapter, where the prophet is commanded to be silent, and the end of his silence, Yehezkel receives many prophecies which seem to be directed towards the people. If he was actually shut inside his house throughout this period, to whom were these prophecies conveyed throughout these years? And why, at the end of this period, will Yehezkel be “a sign” to them? And why is it specifically the news of the Destruction, conveyed specifically by word of the survivor from Jerusalem, that concludes Yehezkel’s period of silence? These questions can be answered in one of the following ways.

The first possibility involves interpreting the prophecy about silence in a symbolic or metaphoric manner, like the eating of the scroll in chapter 3 and the symbolic acts described in chapters 4-5. Thereby, this prophecy is integrated into the series of prophetic units which surround it. This possibility is supported by the command given to the prophet after being told to shut himself in the house: “Behold, they shall put cords upon you, and shall bind you with them.” If indeed the whole image is symbolic, we might assume that the prophet’s silence and his symbolic binding are meant to illustrate that although a prophet is living in their midst, his mission has no practical effect while his period of silence has not finished – which will happen only with the Destruction of the city. Perhaps this is another way in which the prophet emphasizes the severed relationship between God and His people at this time.

Alternatively, the silence might symbolize God’s expected silence over the siege on the city and the Destruction of the Temple. Yehezkel’s prophecies uttered upon receiving news of the Destruction continue this message since his prophecies begin to have practical implications from that moment onwards. In this case, the prophecies in the coming chapters were probably conveyed to the people dwelling with Yehezkel in Babylonia during these years. The prophet was

symbolically silent only for a very short time – perhaps only while he was also bound with cords – and that he afterwards explained the message that his silence was meant to convey.

A second possibility is that there was an actual period during which Yehezkel was actually shut in his house and did not prophesy. There are different views as to how long his silence lasted, ranging from six years (from the date appearing at the beginning of chapter 1 until the Destruction), to more moderate estimates regarding a portion of this period.²

There is another possibility: the prophet's silence represents the fact that his prophecies are only spoken to the elders who come to his house, seeking to hear his words. This interpretation has support in the testimony recorded at the beginning of chapter 8: "... as I sat in my house, with the elders of Yehuda sitting before me" (8:1), and at the beginning of chapter 14: "And men came to me, of the elders of Israel, and sat before me." (14,1)

A further possibility, raised by R. Eliezer of Beaugency, also limits the period of silence, but does so in a different manner. He proposes that the imposition of silence on Yehezkel pertains to his role as rebuker: "That you are silenced from rebuking them on your own initiative" – in contrast to the prophecies in which the prophet conveys only God's word: "You shall not rebuke them of your own mind, but concerning My words to you [you shall say to them,] 'So says the Lord God' – and thereby fulfill your prophetic mission." We may explain this on the basis of R. Menachem ben Shimon's explanation that the silence is the outcome of the nation lacking belief in the prophet's words:

"I shall prevent you, at that time, from prophesying to them, because they do not believe in your prophecy'... The exiles thought that they would soon be returning to Jerusalem, and did not believe that the remnant of the people that was still in Jerusalem would be exiled, since this is what their false prophets had prophesied for them."

Perhaps this distinction between a prophet's messages in God's Name and those that he gives on his own is especially relevant with regard to Yehezkel, since the fate of Jerusalem had already been sealed, and would not be changed regardless. Thus, the prophet is spared the task of calling upon the people – a

² The commentators who adopt this approach raise different possibilities about the period of silence in this six-year timeframe. See, for example, Radak (3:24), who attaches the prophet's silence to the prophecies in chapters 8-11, "So that he would not rebuke them until He had finished conveying all the prophecies to him, up until the verse, 'Then a spirit lifted me and brought me in a vision by the spirit of God into Kasdim...' (11:24)." Since the next verse explicitly states, "Then I related to the exiles all the things that the Lord had shown me," it is difficult for Radak to accept the interpretation that Yechezkel remained silent until news of the Destruction arrived. A different possibility, raised in Abravanel's commentary, is that the command to the prophet to shut himself in his house was to prepare for the symbolic actions that he would undertake.

“rebellious house” – to change their ways in order to bring about a change in God’s plan, or expressing hope that the Destruction of the Temple might be prevented. The emphasis on the idea that “you shall not be a reproving figure (*ish mokhiach*) to them” is amplified in this case because it goes against the explicit biblical command:

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke (*hokheach tokhiach*) your neighbor, and not suffer sin on his account.”
(*Vayikra* 19:17)

The people’s lack of confidence in Yehezkel changes when the news of the Destruction of the city arrives. His prophecies now verified, he has turned into “a sign,” thereby laying the foundation for the prophecies of revival that he has yet to bring.

Finally, another possibility is that because of his Divinely-imposed silence, Yehezkel is forced to write down his prophecies, and his messages are conveyed in the form of written texts. Support for this idea is to be found in the “scroll of the book” that is sent to him (2:9-10) and the ink well carried by the “man dressed in linen” (9:11). Indeed, the dissemination of written prophecies is particularly relevant for Yehezkel, who prophesied in exile, since the exiles are likely to be dispersed in areas distant from each other.

In many of Yehezkel’s prophecies it is difficult to distinguish between actual action and prophetic vision. This is the case here, regarding the silence of the prophet, but also in many of his other prophecies, in which he adopts metaphorical language and parables. The parable and the message being symbolized are sometimes intertwined in a way that it is not correct – nor is it possible – to distinguish between them (we will discuss this in *shiur* 16). So too here: the line between God’s message to the prophet, and the concrete reality that accompanies it, is deliberately blurred.

So in the end, each of the possibilities described above might be correct. Bear in mind too Rimon Kasher’s suggestion that the episode of the silence serves as a kind of re-dedication of Yehezkel as an emissary of God, since it represents a sort of linking unit between the chapters of dedication and the symbolic actions. In other words, the episode of silence is connected both to the dedication chapters (via the shared motifs and the structure) and to the symbolic acts (especially by means of shared motifs).³

³ For a comprehensive discussion in this regard, see: R. Kasher, “Parashat ha-Elem be-Sefer Yechezkel (unit 3:22-27),” *Beit Mikra* 43, 3-4, 5758, pp. 227-244. In his article, Kasher adds another and significant layer which we have not addressed here, namely, a formal comparison (similarity and contrast) between Yechezkel’s prophecy of dedication and the command to be silent.

All of the possibilities set out above give rise to the same message: despite the skepticism of the exiles dwelling with Yehezkel (“And go, come to the exiles, to the children of your people...” – 3:11), the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem is imminent, and the prophet’s message will have no effect on the people. The mark of the conclusion of this prophetic unit at this point, with this message, is the “enclosure” (*inclusio*) within which it appears: “He that hears, let him hear, and he that refuses to hear, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house” – the same statement appears at the beginning of this unit (2:5), in its middle (3:11), and at its conclusion (3:27).

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish