

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

\*\*\*\*\*

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

**Shiur #4b: – Symbolic Actions and their Meaning (3:22 – 5:17) (continued)**

The Latter Prophets, unlike the Earlier Prophets, do not perform miracles (with a single exception, in *Yishayahu* 37:7). Therefore, in order to convey their messages effectively, they must employ both elevated speech and symbolic acts. Perhaps for this reason Yehezkel only conveys his prophecies after a series of symbolic actions performed at the beginning of his prophetic career. Indeed, the difficulty of convincing the nation of the authenticity and reliability of God's prophets is clearly demonstrated in Yirmiyahu's struggle against the false prophets who deny his "credentials" (see, for example, *Yirmiyahu* 26). In *Sefer Yehezkel* too – even in the prophecies that follow the Destruction – the prophet's audience treats his words as mere poetry: "And behold, you are to them like a song for flutes by one who has a pleasant voice, and can play the instrument well" (33:32) – and they go on sinning.

This motivation is shared by all prophets; but in Yehezkel's case there is a further reason for performing symbolic acts: he is prevented by Divine command from speaking. Silent by Divine mandate, Yehezkel, more than other prophets, needs actions to convey his prophetic messages. These, then, are the substance of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5.

Although there are different ways to enumerate the actions in this unit, we have divided them formally, on the assumption that each symbol is distinguished from its predecessor by the use of the introductory expression "ve-ata" (and you).

- a. The brick as an introductory action:  
"And you, son of man, take for yourself a brick, and lay it before you, and trace upon it a city – Jerusalem. And lay siege against it, and a siege wall against it, and cast a mound against it; set camps also against it, and set battering rams against it round about." (4:1-2)<sup>1</sup>

The first act with independent significance is the engraving of the shape of the city of Jerusalem upon a brick that is under siege.

---

<sup>1</sup> A good illustration of this symbolic act of Yechezkel may be seen in the clay brick (engraved and then burned in a kiln), upon which is engraved, in cuneiform, a plan of the city of Nippur, which was likewise located on the bank of the River Kevar in those times. See S. Yaivin, "Tokh Kedai Keria be-Sefer Yechezkel", *Beit Mikra* 18, 5733, pp. 164-175.

b. Along with the representation of a city under siege comes a harsh message, likewise involving the brick: that at this desperate time it is futile to turn to God for help. The prophet, in this prophecy, symbolizes God, and the iron pan between him and the brick represents an impenetrable barrier between God's representative and the besieged city. God's face is not only turned away from His people, but hidden from them:<sup>2</sup>

“And take yourself an iron pan, and set it for a wall of iron between you and the city, and set your face towards it, and it shall be besieged, and you shall lay siege against it. This shall be a sign to the house of Israel.” (4:3)

c. The siege that Jerusalem contends with is represented by the limits placed on Yehezkel's movements. Beyond this, because the nation of Israel persist in their sins, they bear their unbearably heavy iniquity. This is symbolized by Yehezkel who lies on his side:

“And you – lie on your left side, and lay the iniquity of the House of Israel upon it; according to the number of the days that you shall lie upon it, you shall bear their iniquity. For I have laid upon you the years of their iniquity, by an equivalent number of days – three hundred and ninety days, so shall you bear the iniquity of the House of Israel. And when you have completed these, lie again on your right side, and you shall bear the iniquity of the House of Yehuda; I have appointed you forty days, each day for a year. Therefore you shall set your face towards the siege of Jerusalem, and your arm shall be uncovered, and you shall prophesy against it. And behold, I will lay cords upon you, so that you shall not be able to turn yourself from one side to another, until you have completed the days of your siege.” (ibid. 4-8)

The significance of the period of time that Yehezkel must lie on each side – symbolizing 390 years and then 40 years – is debated by the commentators, who offer various explanations.<sup>3</sup> One understanding of the 390 days that Yehezkel bears the iniquity of the house of Israel is found in *Seder Olam Rabba* 26:

“This teaches that Israel sinned for three hundred and ninety years, from the time they entered the land until the ten tribes were exiled from it.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, the opposite may also be true: although the siege looks like a physical act that is carried out by another nation, Yechezkel seeks to emphasize (as God's emissary) that it is God who is laying siege to Jerusalem: “And you (Yechezkel, God's representative) shall lay siege to it.”

<sup>3</sup> See the commentaries of Rashi, Radak, R. Menachem ben Shimon, Abravanel, and Malbim.

Furthermore, and in contrast to the references to the nation elsewhere in the *Sefer*, there seems to be a distinction here between the expression “House of Israel” and “House of Yehuda.”<sup>4</sup> Thus the 390 days that Yehezkel lies on his left side symbolizes that the sins of the nation (the “House of Israel” as a whole, not only the inhabitants of Yehuda, who remained after the exile of the ten tribes) have weighed it down.<sup>5</sup>

But the number of years may refer to the sins of the nation since its very inception, in Egypt (and indeed, Abravanel understands the total of 430 days as corresponding to the years of bondage in Egypt), rather than to the period since the entry into the land. This is because in chapter 20 Yehezkel’s prophecy emphasizes the sins of the nation since its formation in Egypt, whereas nowhere in the *Sefer* is there any explicit mention made of a change in the nation’s behavior since entering the land.

Other possibilities include attributing the sins of the House of Israel to the period from the building of the Temple in the days of Shlomo, up until the Destruction; or, alternatively, the period extending from the kingdom of Shaul (or David) until the exile of the Kingdom of Israel. But there does not seem to be any clear or exact correlation between these proposed periods and the 390 years.

On the other hand, the period that is devoted to the House of Yehuda does have some Biblical background. See Moshe’s words to the spies after their sin:

“And your children will wander in the wilderness for forty years, and bear your goings astray, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness. According to the number of days that you spied out the land – forty days, a day for each year – shall you bear your iniquities – forty years...”  
(*Bamidbar* 14:33-34)

Just as the punishment for the sin of the spies is a year for each day, so too Yehezkel bears the iniquity of Yehuda for “forty days, a day for each year.” The numerical link to the sin of the spies does, possibly, point to a more substantial connection. In *Sefer Bamidbar*, forty years is the period of time necessary to repair the sin of the spies, following which *Bnei Yisrael* enter the land. Here, the days that Yehezkel lies on his side represent the period extended to Yehuda to change and mend its ways. With this period over and with nothing

---

<sup>4</sup> The most common reference to the nation in *Sefer Yechezkel* is “Israel” (186 appearances), which is almost always as part of the expression “House of Israel,” while the name “Yehuda” appears infrequently (fifteen times). In *Sefer Yechezkel* the name “Yehuda” generally seems to refer to the nation as a whole, while elsewhere in Tanakh, the reference is usually to the land (although in many cases it is difficult to distinguish one from the other).

<sup>5</sup> Here, the meaning of the expression “*nasa avon*” (to bear iniquity) is that the sinners bear (i.e., they are burdened with) their own iniquity, not a transfer of the iniquity to the prophet. See B. Schwartz, “Mah Bein Munach le-Metafora? Nasa avon/pasha/chet ba-Mikra,” *Tarbitz* 63, 5754, pp. 149-171, especially p. 169.

having changed, now in contrast to its Biblical past, Bnei Yisrael will be removed from their land.

So far we have examined three of the symbolic actions that Yehezkel undertakes: the engraving of the brick, symbolizing the siege itself; the iron pan, symbolizing the barrier between God's emissary and the people of the city; and lying on his side, symbolizing the sins of *Bnei Yisrael* prior to the Destruction. Next, the prophet is commanded to perform an action more difficult than its predecessors, which fits in with the general trend of the symbolic acts which express, in gradually intensifying steps, the extent of the crisis with which the inhabitants of Jerusalem will face at the time of the Destruction.

d. The famine during the siege is illustrated by a reduction of Yehezkel's intake of food to the bare minimum:

"And you – take for yourself wheat and barley and beans and lentils and millet and spelt, and put them in one vessel, and make yourself bread from them, for the number of days that you shall lie upon your side – three hundred and ninety days shall you eat it. And your food which you shall eat shall be by weight: twenty shekels a day; once a day shall you eat it. And water shall you drink by measure: a sixth of a *hin*; once a day shall you drink. And you shall eat it like barley cakes..." (4:9-12)

We began our discussion of Yehezkel's symbolic acts by noting that not every action could necessarily be assigned a concrete meaning. But the precise quantities enumerated in this prophecy demand our attention. Was it at all possible that Yehezkel could subsist on the rations described in these verses? Yehuda Feliks addresses this question:

"With regard to drink, the daily ration of a sixth of a *hin* works out, by our calculations, to 650g of water. This is a very small amount – especially in the hot climate of Babylonia, but for someone who is not moving about, it is enough to survive on, and indeed, Yehezkel was lying down throughout that time. The prophet's daily portion of bread, however, is much smaller... For more than a year, the prophet ate less than a thousand calories per day... And none of this saved the prophet from the suffering that comes with feeling hungry and thirsty. Lying on one side for three hundred and ninety days likewise entails discomfort. The prophet certainly identified, in body and soul, with the city of Jerusalem, under siege, hungry and thirsty."<sup>6</sup>

Concerning the bread that is to be eaten "like barley cakes," the prophet is commanded, "You shall bake it with human excrement, in their sight." Rashi explains, "You shall bake it over coals of dried and burned dung." In other words,

---

<sup>6</sup> Y. Feliks, *Teva va-Aretz ba-Tanakh*, Jerusalem 5752, pp. 217-218.

the barley cake had to first be baked over human dung that would serve as fuel for the fire. God Himself explains the situation as follows:

“So shall the children of Israel eat their bread – unclean, among the nations to where I will drive them.” (4:13)

But Yehezkel protests, arguing that he has never eaten unclean food:

“Then I said, Ah, Lord God, behold – my soul has never been polluted, for from my youth until now I have not eaten that which dies of itself (*nevela*), or is torn by beasts (*terefa*), nor did loathsome meat ever come into my mouth.” (ibid. 14)

Radak explains:

“For *kohanim* are warned concerning *nevela* and *terefa* even more strictly than are Israel, owing to their impurity, as it is written (concerning the *kohanim*), ‘That which dies of itself, or is torn with beasts, he shall not eat to defile himself with it’ (*Vayikra* 22:8).”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Yehezkel’s response to the command arises from his identity as a Kohen, with a special prohibition against eating foods that bring impurity. God acquiesces and permits him instead to bake the cakes upon animal dung:

“Then He said to me, Behold, I have given you cow’s dung instead of human dung, and you shall prepare your bread upon it.” (4:15)

The need to bake with dung fuel seems to reflect the food that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were forced to eat under siege conditions,<sup>8</sup> and illustrates the impurity of the people and of the land in a manner that can be appreciated even in the absence of the Temple, and even in exile.

The significance of this act, describing the hunger in the city, is explained at the end of the command:

“And He said to me, Son of man, behold, I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they shall eat bread by weight, and with anxiety, and shall drink water by measure, and in appallment; that they may lack bread and water, and be appalled with one another, and waste away (*ve-namoku*) for their iniquity.” (ibid. 16-17)

---

<sup>7</sup> Further on in the prophecy this limitation on the *kohanim* reappears (44:31). The status of the *kohanim* in Yechezkel’s prophecy is covered in chapters 40-48.

<sup>8</sup> Among Bedouins and impoverished fellahin it is still acceptable to use dried animal dung for baking. See Feliks, p. 217.

In other words, the warnings set forth explicitly in *parashat Bechukotai* will be fulfilled:

“And they that are left of you shall waste away (*yimaku*) for their iniquity...”  
(*Vayikra* 26:39).<sup>9</sup>

e. The final symbolic act, the most distressing of all, describes what awaits the inhabitants of Jerusalem after the siege:

“And you, son of man – take yourself a sharp knife; a barber’s razor take for yourself, and pass it over your head, and over your beard, and take yourself balances for weighing, and divide it [the hair]. A third shall you burn with fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are fulfilled; and take a third and smite about it with the sword; and a third shall you scatter to the wind, I will draw out a sword after them. And you shall take from these a small number, and bind them in your skirts. Then take more of them, and cast them into the midst of the fire, and burn them in the fire; from there a fire shall come forth into all of the House of Israel.”  
(5:1-4)

Thus, at the very beginning of his prophecy, before even having spoken to the people at all, the shaving of his hair demonstrates what awaits them: a third of the inhabitants of Jerusalem will die by fire; a third will die by the sword; and a third will flee. Of this final third, a small number will be saved and may perhaps even reach Babylonia. These are symbolized by the hairs that are gathered in the skirts of his garment, but even among these, some are burned.

Thus, Yechezkel’s symbolic acts are a step-by-step demonstration of what is yet to happen: first the siege with no response from God (or perhaps the siege itself is undertaken as a Divinely guided mission); the unbearable hunger and thirst; and finally – annihilation of most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, only a few of whom will escape and be saved.<sup>10</sup>

By means of these actions, Yechezkel demonstrates the sharp rift between God and His people, and the steadily deteriorating situation of Jerusalem.

---

<sup>9</sup> Yechezkel’s prophetic messages are intensified, in many cases, when we consider their biblical background in general, and *Vayikra* 26 in particular. We shall devote further discussion to the biblical background of the nation’s sins in Chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the first two symbolic actions are left unexplained, while the other actions are explained in the course of their description. The reason for this would seem to be that the drawing of the city on the brick, and the placing of the iron pan, are clear enough actions that speak for themselves – especially since they have a place in the nation’s historical memory, for this is not the first time that Jerusalem has been besieged (it was previously under siege by Sancheriv). However, the symbolic acts that follow (the sins of the people, the hunger, and the anticipated suffering) are introduced by Yechezkel for the first time, and so the people cannot be assumed to understand their deeper meaning unless they are explicitly explained.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish