

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

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Shiur #06 The End is Near! (6:11-7:27)

Yirmiyahu's prophecy to the exiles in Babylon

The dating of Yehezkel's prophecies shows that they follow chronological order: Chapter 1 is dated the fifth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, while the date at the beginning of Chapter 8 is the sixth year of the exile. Therefore we can conclude that the symbolic acts and prophecies of Destruction in Chapters 6-7 were uttered approximately five years before the Destruction (592 or 591 B.C.E.), and about three years before the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem. We have seen that the exiles in Babylonia also assumed that their situation was a temporary one, and that they would be returning to Jerusalem soon. An echo of their impressions can be heard in a prophecy of Yirmiyahu that relates to their future:

“As I live, says the Lord, even if Konyahu, son of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, were the signet upon My right hand, I would still tear you off from there; and I shall give you into the hand of those who seek your life, and into the hand of those whom you fear, into the hand of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, and into the hand of the Kasdim. And I will cast you out, and your mother who bore you, into another country, where you were not born, and there you shall die. But to the land to which they desire to return – to it they shall not return.” (*Yirmiyahu* 22:24-27)

In this prophecy, Yirmiyahu addresses the status and role of Yehoyakhin, who was exiled to Babylonia just a few months after his coronation in Jerusalem. This issue seems to have bothered the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who wondered about the status of the king who had ruled over them for such a short time. Grappling with the same question were the exiles in Babylonia, amongst whom Yehoyakhin was living. The kings of Babylonia treated him with respect, and Yehoyakhin's special status in exile exacerbated the exiles' difficulty in answering this question.¹

¹ Note the difference between the description of his exile (*Melakhim* II 24:12-16; 25:27-30) and that of Tzidkiyahu (*ibid.* 25:6-7).

We need to distinguish between the short term and the long term in respect to Yehoyakhin. In the short term, he seems to have been cast aside like “an object that no one cares about”:

“Is this man Konyahu a despised broken vessel, an object that no one cares about? Why are they cast out, he and his progeny, and banished to a land which they do not know?” (*Yirmiyahu 22:28*)

Yirmiyahu's response contains a prophetic message to the inhabitants of the land, a message which will stay with the exiles for as long as they are in Babylonia. The answer is that although they cannot understand it now, Yekhonyahu's importance lies precisely in his exile:

“O land, land, land – hear the word of the Lord. So says the Lord: Write this man childless, a man who shall not prosper in his days, for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David and ruling any more in Yehuda.” (*ibid.* 29-30)

In other words, in his own days in Yehuda he is childless; in his own days he is “a man who shall not prosper”; in those years that Yehuda is desolate, none of his progeny will prosper as king or ruler. But in the long term, the exile of Yehoyakhin serves as the salvation of the people. We see this in Yirmiyahu's prophecy about the exile of Yehoyakhin:

“The Lord showed me, and behold, two baskets of figs were set before the Temple of the Lord, after Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, had carried away into captivity Yekhonyahu, son of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, and the princes of Yehuda with the carpenters and smiths, from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Babylonia. One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first ripe; and the other basket had very poor figs, which could not be eaten, they were so poor.

Then the Lord said to me, What do you see, Yirmiyahu? And I said, Figs; the good figs – very good; and the bad – very bad, that cannot be eaten, they are so poor.

Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying: So says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so will I regard with favor those who are carried away captive of Yehuda, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Kasdim. For I will set My eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them again to this land, and I will build them, and not pull them down, and I will plant them, and not pluck them up. And I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord, and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.

And as the bad figs, which cannot be eaten, they are so evil – surely thus says the Lord: So will I make Tzidkiyahu, king of Yehuda, and his princes, and the residue of Jerusalem, that remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt: I will make them a horror for evil to all the

kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and curse, in all the places into which I shall drive them. And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, among them, until they are consumed from off the land that I gave to them and to their fathers.” (*Yirmiyahu* 24:1-10)

Yirmiyahu tells us in this prophecy that even after the exile of Yehoyakhin, the inhabitants of Jerusalem had not yet grasped that the exiles in Babylonia – Yehoyakhin first and foremost among them – were the “remnant” that had been saved from Destruction. It would be these exiles who would return one day to rebuild the land which was about to be destroyed.

Perhaps the need to confirm this prophecy about Yehoyakhin prompts the prophet Chaggai to use the same phrase about the signet ring in his own prophecies about Zerubavel, grandson of Yehoyakhin, at the start of the return to Zion. This encourages the returnees, who fear that God’s Presence is no longer with them. He declares:

“On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubavel, My servant, son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts.” (*Chaggai* 2:23)

In so doing, he is also promising the fulfillment of Yirmiyahu’s promise:

“As I live, says the Lord, even if Konyahu, son of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, were the signet upon My right hand, I would still tear you off from there.” (*Yirmiyahu* 22:24)

The prophetic message that the end of Jerusalem is imminent is also important for the exiles in Babylonia. They, too, believe that somehow God will save the inhabitants of Jerusalem, allowing them to survive this crisis. The exiles themselves, though, might – in a best case scenario – return to the land; but will otherwise assimilate and disappear among the nations.

This is arguably the most important “news” in the prophecy of Yirmiyahu 29, where Yirmiyahu sends a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles. He instructs them to settle down in Babylonia because they will not be returning soon. It does not occur to them that it may be their children who will return to the land, not them; or that they can settle in Babylonia without assimilating. The idea that the Jewish People can survive or thrive in exile is foreign to them. For us this has been part of our nation’s history; but at the time, for the exiles in Babylonia, it was unthinkable. These circumstances were the background to the symbolic acts performed by Yehezkel, through which he describes the imminent reality awaiting the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This is also why the sins of the nation, set forth explicitly by Yehezkel, make the exile a necessary and inevitable.

The death of the inhabitants of Jerusalem (6:11-14)

The end of Chapter 6 reiterates the punishment of death described at the end of Chapter 5. The emphases in these verses seem to highlight the immediate historical context of the events; these verses thereby complement Yirmiyahu's prophecy to the inhabitants of the land. First, those who manage to escape the Destruction are mentioned. Upon reaching Yehoyakhin and the exiles, they will tell of the people's actions and of the Destruction they witnessed. This will be accompanied by clapping of hands, stamping of feet and a cry of sorrow on the part of the prophet ("Smite with your hand, and stamp with your foot, and say, Alas," 6:11), expressing lamentation over the fate of the house of Israel. The descriptions of death here are no longer general in nature; they depict with accuracy the fate of the inhabitants of the city:

"He who is far off shall die of pestilence, and he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who remains and is besieged shall die by the famine."
(6:12)²

Finally, the nation's sins and God's actions against the nation are set forth:

"... when their slain shall be among their idols round about their altars, upon every high hill, in all the tops of the mountains and under every green tree, and under every thick oak, the place where they offered sweet savor to all their idols." (6:13)

And the fate of the entire land is sealed:

"... and I shall make the land desolate and waste, from the wilderness to Divla, throughout their habitations." (6:14)

The exiles, like those who remained in Jerusalem, held onto the fact that the Temple and Jerusalem were still standing as proof that all was still under control. For this reason the prophecies of Chapters 4-5 deal specifically with Jerusalem. Now, after detailed attention to the city, the prophecy continues in order to remove any doubt by addressing what will happen throughout the country. Each of these emphases concludes with a statement of the purpose of all of these events:

"And **they will know that I am the Lord**, and it was not in vain that I said that I would do this evil to them... Then **you shall know that I am the Lord**... and **they will know that I am the Lord**." (6:10-14)

But even after these prophecies, neither the inhabitants of Jerusalem nor the exiles in Babylonia were convinced. The Temple was still standing; the

² That this prophecy of Yechezkel and the previously quoted prophecies of Yirmiyahu complement each other is also evident in the descriptions of punishment in the verses here. Compare *Yechezkel* 6:12; 7:15, *Yirmiyahu* 24:10; 27:13.

inhabitants of Jerusalem remained steadfast despite the crises they had faced since the time of Shlomo. These facts made a stronger impression than the prophecies of Yirmiyahu and Yehezkel. Perhaps distance from Yehuda also contributed to the denial in Babylonia: the exiles could not see the deteriorating situation for themselves and considered their own exile as bad as things could get. So the struggle waged by Yirmiyahu and Yehezkel against the nation's preconceived notions, reinforced by false prophets, was not over. Yirmiyahu's prophecies dating to this period emphasize the futility of Tzidkiyahu rebelling against Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, since the exile of the remnant of Yehuda is just a matter of time (*Yirmiyahu 27:12-22*).³

In contrast to Yirmiyahu, Yehezkel (in his prophecies in the coming chapters) addresses the two flawed assumptions held by the exiles that caused them to brush off his warnings:

1. Many prophets over the generations had spoken of Destruction of the Temple. The people had become accustomed to this, and even if the possibility was contemplated seriously, it was regarded at most as something that was theoretically possible, but not in the foreseeable future. This assumption is addressed by the prophet in Chapter 7.
2. Despite all the sins of the nation, the Temple still stood. And how could it be otherwise, lest God's Name be desecrated in the eyes of the nations? It is this view that the end of Yehezkel's prophecy in Chapter 7 deals with, continuing into Chapters 8-11.

The end is near (7:1-12)

We have noted the greatest challenge facing the prophet: convincing the people that the Destruction of the Temple is imminent. This is the focus of Chapter 7. To convey his messages (which appear to have been stated verbally in addition to being committed to writing), Yehezkel enlists all possible means. So far we have mentioned two of them: the use of symbolic acts and the borrowing of expressions familiar from the Torah. Now, another means is adopted: a key word, aimed at emphasizing the subject of the prophecy as a whole. We see here the repeated use of the word "*ketz*" (end):

"So says the Lord God to the land of Israel: An end, the end has come upon the four corners of the land. Now the end has come upon you, and I will send My anger upon you... An evil, a singular evil, behold, has come. An end has come; the end has come, which He has stirred up against you; behold, it has come. The dawn has come to you, O you who dwell in the land: the time comes, it is near; the day is a day of confusion, and not of

³ Admittedly, in this context Yirmiyahu also prophesies the imminent downfall of the king of Babylonia (*Yirmiyahu 51:49-53*). The prophecies about subjugation to Babylonia, sounded along with the prophecies describing the imminent Destruction, strengthen the prophetic message that the ascendancy of Babylonia happened in a short period, and happened only to allow Babylonia to serve as God's emissary in destroying His Temple, when the nation's deeds made this inevitable.

joyful shouting on the mountains. Now I will shortly pour out My fury upon you... Behold the day, behold, it is coming; the dawn has gone forth, the rod has blossomed, arrogance has budded... The time has come, the day draws near..." (7:2-12)

The word "end" stands out in these verses both because it is repeated six times, but also because it is accompanied by a verb – "comes" – which also appears six times in these verses. In addition, we find the expressions "the day draws near," "it is near," and "the day draws near," all belonging to the same semantic field.⁴

The prominence of the imminent "end" in the prophecy is because it is precisely the message of this prophecy. This is the difference between what the audience is accustomed to hearing from its prophets – i.e., threats and warnings about the Destruction of the Temple – and what Yehezkel is telling them: that the Destruction is already underway.

Despite the similarity between parts of this prophecy and those that have been uttered in the past, the repetition of and emphasis on this semantic field serves to highlight the revolutionary message of this prophecy. Perhaps with a view to emphasizing that the fate awaiting Jerusalem is drawing near, Yehezkel enlists another technique: deliberate allusion to the story of the Flood. He achieves this by using the word "*ketz*" in conjunction with the expression "full of violence" (v. 23), just as they occur in close proximity in *Sefer Bereishit* (5:11-13).⁵ Indeed, it appears that the link to the deeds that brought about the Flood is meant to emphasize the prophetic message arising from this chapter as a whole, just as the description of the sins of the generation of the Flood – the violence and corruption - led to God declaring, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the land is full of violence" (6:13). God's way of bringing the end upon the city is described succinctly with the same words used in Chapter 5, recalling what was already said there in detail:

"I will pour out My fury upon you, and accomplish My anger upon you, and I will judge you according to your ways, and I will repay you for all your abominations. And My eye will not spare, neither will I have pity; I will repay you according to your ways and your abominations that are in the midst of you, and you will know that I, the Lord, smite." (7:8)⁶

In the second part of the chapter, Yehezkel illustrates for the exiles the reaction of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to the impending end using increasingly intense language. He starts by evoking scenes of purchasing, a seemingly mundane activity, but one that brings no cause for rejoicing (vv. 12-13). He goes

⁴ In other words, the prophecy contains many words that have the same general meaning, along with the key word (in these verses – "*ketz*").

⁵ See Kasher, p. 223.

⁶ See 5:11-13.

on to declare that there is no point in preparing for war, since death is near (vv. 14-15), and concludes with a description of the very difficult circumstances that will face those who escape and the mourners (vv. 16-19). It is painful to imagine the scenes described in verses 16-18 of survivors fleeing to the mountains, crying out in pain, fearful, dressed in mourning, defeated and shamed, but it seems that this is an accurate portrayal of them after the Destruction.⁷

The end and its ramifications (7:23-27)

In the last part of the chapter, Yehezkel prophesies for the first time that the Temple will be desecrated by strangers, and then points to the main culprits. The following prophecies, starting with verses 20-24, are devoted to this situation, viewed as impossible by the exiles and the inhabitants of Jerusalem alike:

“As for the beauty of His ornament which He set up in majesty, they have set up in it the images of their abominations and of their detestable things; therefore I have set it far from them. And I will give it into the hands of the strangers for a prey, and to the wicked of the earth for a spoil, and they shall profane it. My face I will also turn from them, and they shall profane My secret place, and the robbers shall enter into it, and profane it...⁸ And I will bring the worst of the nations, and they shall possess their houses; I will also make the pride of the strong to cease, and their holy places shall be profaned.”

Here again, as at the beginning of the chapter, Yehezkel emphasizes his prophetic message by using different appellations for each of its elements: the Temple (“the beauty of His ornament”; “My secret place,” “the pride of the strong”); the fate that will befall it (“far,” “for a prey,” “for a spoil”); God’s emissaries who will carry out this punishment (“the strangers,” “the wicked of the earth,” “robbers,” “the worst of the nations”), and – finally – the terrible outcome (“they shall profane it,” “they shall profane,” “and profane it,” “they shall possess” – all indicating the defilement of the Temple). To those who heard Yehezkel, defilement of the Temple seemed to be an impossibility, a contradiction in terms.

⁷ In verse 17, the water expresses their fear. According to R. Yeshaya of Trani, this refers to “the urine that they pass in their great fear,” while R. Menachem ben Shimon interprets it as “perspiration – for a person perspires when he is afraid, owing to his great toil and sorrow.” (Perhaps this refers to weakness of the knees.)

⁸ The subject of the phrase, “they shall profane My secret place” is not clear. One possibility is to connect it to the first part of the verse: “My face I will also turn from them,” so that the subject is Israel. God turns His face away from the nation, after their sins have caused the Temple to be profaned, and the end of the verse explains how this profanation comes about: “for the robbers shall enter into it, and profane it.” Alternatively, only the first part of the verse – “My face I will also turn from them” – refers to Israel, while the other nations are the subject of the rest of the verse: “And they shall profane My secret place, and the robbers shall enter into it and profane it.” Either way, the actual desecration of the Temple is carried out by the nations who are sent by God to the Temple, and their very presence defiles it.

Yet defilement of the Temple through the presence of strangers is also mentioned elsewhere as the cause of its profanation:

“You have brought strangers into My Sanctuary, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My Sanctuary, to pollute My House...” (44:7)

Perhaps this is why later in the book, strangers are removed from the Temple in the vision of the future Temple (“No stranger, uncircumcised in heart, nor uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into My Sanctuary,” 44:9).⁹

In conclusion, Yehezkel points to all the leaders and sources of authority amongst the nation as helpless in preventing the Destruction:

“Anguish comes, and they shall seek peace, but there shall be none. Calamity shall follow upon calamity, and rumor shall come upon rumor; then they shall seek a vision from the **prophet**, but Torah will perish from the **kohen**, and counsel from the **elders**. The **king** shall mourn, and the **prince** shall be wrapped in despair, and the hands of **the people** of the land shall be enfeebled; I will do to them after their way, and according to their judgments I will judge them, and they will know that I am the Lord.” (7:25-27)

In the following chapters, Yehezkel experiences a Divine vision in which he sees, close up, how the Temple has been defiled. This, too, might be explained in terms of the principle outlined at the beginning of this chapter: as part of Yehezkel’s attempts at concretization of the Destruction, the description of the Temple as defiled (even though in reality it is still standing) is meant to persuade the exiles that there is no longer any point in hoping to return to Jerusalem.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁹ Aside from defilement of the Temple by strangers, Yechezkel also mentions a specific act whose severity in and of itself causes the Temple to be defiled: “For when they slew their children to their idols, then they came to My Sanctuary on that day to profane it, and behold – thus they did in the midst of My House” (23:39).