

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

By Dr. Tova Ganzel

Dedicated in memory of Gertrude and Samuel Spiegel z”l
by Michael and Patti Steinmetz

Shiur #07: The Deeds of the People in the Temple (Chapter 8)

The Divine vision (8:1-18)

Having so far prophesied to the people about the defilement of the Temple, now Yehezkel pronounces a Divine vision whose message is that although the Temple is still standing, it is effectively empty and worthless.¹ This message stretches over chapters 8-11, which together form a single prophetic unit. In this unit, Yehezkel is transported in a vision to Jerusalem, after which he returns to the elders of Yehuda sitting before him. Chapter 8, the first part of this vision, is devoted to enumerating the reasons for God’s glory leaving the Temple. This is a more detailed depiction of the more general descriptions that the prophet has offered so far (5:11; 6:7, 20) and its purpose is “to show him the actions for which the Temple is destroyed and God’s glory departed” (Radak).²

These verses, which depict idolatry, emphasize that Yehezkel is seeing these visions as a representative of God. This impression is achieved through the repeated use of the root “r-a-h” (to see), along with mention made of the eyes.³ This is in contrast to the people’s perception that God’s abandonment of the land means that He does not see (v. 12, and also further on, 9:9). This message is also emphasized in v. 18: “Therefore I too will deal in fury; My eye shall not spare, nor will I have pity.”

¹ Verses 1-3, which introduce this prophecy, relate to subjects that we have already discussed: the time and place in which the prophet speaks and his target audience, as well as the Divine vision that he saw at the start of his prophetic mission.

² As the Gemara teaches (*Yoma* 9b): “Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three things that existed there: idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed.” The sexual immorality and bloodshed are addressed in later chapters.

³ Expressions here include: “There I saw,” “visions of God,” “according to the vision that I saw,” “Lift up your eyes,” “So I lifted up my eyes,” “Do you see,” “you shall see,” “And I saw,” “Go in and see,” “And I went in and saw,” “Do you see,” “the Lord does not see us,” “you shall see,” “Have you seen,” “Do you see,” “My eye shall not spare.”

This chapter is divided into four parts, each focusing on a different type of idolatry, and each concluding with God telling the prophet, “You shall yet again see greater abominations than these” (vv. 6, 13, 15, and variation in v. 17).⁴ It is not necessary to assert that these forms of idolatry occurred simultaneously in all the parts of the Temple. Rather Yehezkel sees, by means of a Divine vision, four symbolic sins (which might in fact have actually been committed over the course of earlier years): the “image of jealousy” (vv. 5-6); the tracings on the walls and offering of incense (vv. 7-13); the “weeping for Tammuz” (vv. 14-15); and the prostration to the sun (vv. 16-17).⁵

In each section, Yehezkel encounters a sight worse than its predecessor, in a new location.⁶ In the second vision, Yehezkel even identifies “the elders of the house of Israel” offering incense, and notes Yaazniyahu ben Shafan by name.⁷ This group of elders contrasts with the “elders of Yehuda” who are sitting before Yehezkel in Babylonia as he experiences this vision. This seems to highlight the difference between the “elders of Yehuda” (exiled during the exile of Yehoyakhin, together with Yehezkel), and those who remained in Jerusalem. The latter, no longer part of “Yehuda,” are referred to as “Israel.” By means of the appellation “Israel” the prophet emphasizes that the inhabitants of Jerusalem represent the continuity of the nation. But this situation is turned on its head after the Destruction of Yehuda, when it becomes clear that the continuity of the people is represented instead by the exiles of Yehoyakhin. This opens the door to Yehezkel’s prophecy that the nation will be rebuilt, after its Destruction, specifically by the “house of Yehuda.”

Descriptions of idolatry in Chapter 8 and in Devarim 4

We have seen that Yehezkel uses many and varied terms to describe the Jewish people's idolatry. Sometimes he suffices with a general reference, while elsewhere he is more detailed and provides examples – such as, for example, in the terms in Yehezkel 6 (compare this to Vayikra 26, which clearly provides the background to this account).

We will now devote some attention to the very detailed description of the nation’s sins in Chapter 8, which recalls Chapter 4 of Sefer Devarim (and especially vv. 15-19). A review of the chapter in Devarim contributes to our

⁴ For discussion of the literary structure of this unit, see Kasher, pp. 241-243.

⁵ For one presentation of this argument, see Moskowitz’s introduction to this chapter in *Daat Mikra*, p. 49.

⁶ Some scholars view the progression as a move inwards into the inner parts of the Temple. But if this is the case, the words “to the door of the inner gate” (v. 3) must be understood as referring to an outer gate, or alternatively disregarded for the purposes of the progression.

⁷ The identity of this person is unknown. He might have been related to the Shafan family, who were loyal to God and did not sin (see, for example, Yirmiyahu 26:24). If this hypothesis is correct, then the message of this vision is that even leaders whose families had followed God for generations had become sinners. For more on the Shafan family, see B. Z. Luria, “Shafan – Sofer ha-Melekh,” *Beit Mikra* 34c, 5749, pp. 261-264.

understanding of the full significance of Yehezkel's prophecy in Chapter 8. The expressions common to the two sources include "image" (*semei*; in our chapter – "image of jealousy"), tracings of *remes* and abominable beasts, and prostration to the sun. To these the prophet adds the "*gilulim*," which appeared also in Sefer Vayikra (which we discussed previously), and the "weeping for Tammuz," which is not mentioned elsewhere.⁸

a. The "image" (*semei*) is the first vision of idolatry that Yehezkel encounters in Chapter 8, and it is mentioned twice as part of the expression, "image of jealousy":

"...where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy." (8:3)

"... and behold, northward at the gate of the altar, this image of jealousy at the entry." (8:5)

In the Torah, the concept of a "*semei*" occurs only once:

"Lest you become corrupt and make a carved idol, the similitude of any image (*semei*), the likeness of male or female..." (Devarim 4:16).⁹

b. Like the first vision, the second (including the expression "*kol tavnit remes*") is also directly connected to Devarim 4,¹⁰ and describes another form of idolatry. The Biblical background to this second description of the idolatry being carried out in the Temple is found in the verses in Devarim warning against the fashioning of different forms:

"And take good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire; lest you become corrupt and make a carved idol, the similitude of any figure... the likeness of anything that creeps upon the earth." (Devarim 4:15-18)

c. The third vision, in which "there sat women weeping for Tammuz," has no parallel in Tanakh. Nevertheless, there are other sources attesting to its nature. Yaakov Klein writes the following about this worship:

⁸ It should be noted that throughout Sefer Yehezkel mention is made of other types of idolatry (in addition to the tracings of creeping things and prostration to the sun) that are also mentioned in Sefer Devarim: "*shikkutzim*," "wood and stone," passing children through fire, "upon every high mountain/hill and under every leafy tree." The command to cut these down is also common to both sources. See more below, in the appendix to this chapter.

⁹ The word "*semei*" occurs five times in Tanakh: once in Devarim 4, twice in Yehezkel 8, and twice more in Divrei Ha-yamim II 33 (vv. 7, 15), as part of the description of the idolatry that Menashe introduced into the Temple. (Some scholars view Yehezkel 8 as a reflection of the period of Menashe; see Greenberg, p. 202.)

¹⁰ It should be noted that the terms "*tavnit*" and "*remes*" also occur in Sefer Vayikra, the latter being used in the sense of "creeping things."

“Tammuz’ is the name of the Sumerian shepherd god, Dumuzi (the name means “the faithful son” or “the legal son”). Dumuzi was also viewed in Mesopotamia as the god of vegetation and played a central role in fertility rites... alongside his partner, Inanna-Ishtar. In Sumerian literature, Dumuzi is also depicted as the tragic figure: he is a god who dies, goes down to Sheol, and is resurrected each year. While in Sheol, ceremonies of lamentation and other magical, sympathetic ceremonies are held for him...

The legends of the tragic death of Dumuzi and his descent to Sheol are the subject of many Sumerian lamentations...

The popular “weeping for Tammuz” was unquestionably a women’s form of worship... We can deduce this from the Sumerian lamentations... which always attributed the lament to female figures. Furthermore, most of Sumerian lamentations for Tammuz are composed in language that is characteristic of women; and the priest-lamenters apparently imitated women in their voices and accents....”¹¹

Therefore the prophet’s succinct description of women sitting and weeping for Tammuz in the Temple reflects a form of pagan worship that is familiar to us from inscriptions from the Ancient East.

d. Yehezkel describes his fourth vision as follows:

“... and behold, at the door of the Lord’s Temple, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs towards the Lord’s Temple, and their faces towards the east, and they were prostrating themselves towards the sun eastwards.” (8:16)¹²

This scene, too, relates to a warning that appears only in Sefer Devarim:¹³

“Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, and the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you are misled to worship them, and serve them...” (Devarim 4:19).

To summarize: Yehezkel’s prophecy about the sins the people committed in the Temple recalls phrases that are known to us only from Chapter 4 of Sefer

¹¹ Taken from Klein’s explanation as cited in G. Brin (ed.), *Yehezkel, Olam ha-Tanakh*, Tel Aviv 1993, pp. 48-51.

¹² The same sort of worship was practiced during the reign of Menashe (Melakhim II 21:5), until Yoshiyahu’s revolution (ibid. 23:5). If this idolatry did not reappear again, this could be proof that the visions that Yehezkel experiences in our chapter reflect forms of idolatry that were practiced at different times over the years, and not necessarily worship that occurred in his lifetime when his prophecy took place.

¹³ Other than Devarim 4, the warning appears again in Devarim 17:3 – “He has gone and served other gods, and worshipped them – either **the sun**, or moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded....”

Devarim. This is no coincidence. Note the context within which the prohibitions on idolatry in Sefer Devarim are found: a command to the nation to fulfill God's word. This command is repeated several times at the beginning of the chapter:

“Now therefore, Israel, obey the statutes and the judgments which I teach you, to perform them, in order that you may live and come in and inherit the land which the Lord God of your forefathers gives to you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor shall you diminish from it, that you may observe the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you... But you that cleave to the Lord your God are alive, every one of you, this day.

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act accordingly in the land to which you go, to possess it. And you shall observe them and perform them, for they are your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, who shall hear all these statutes...

Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but teach them to your children, and to your children's children... Take therefore good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire...” (Devarim 4:1-15)

This explicit warning stands in blatant opposition to the actions of the nation, and emphasizes the nation's sins to God during Yehezkel's time.

Later in the chapter in Devarim, following the warnings not to engage in idolatry, mention is made of the covenant between God and the nation, and thereafter there is a description of what will happen to those who “forget the covenant”:

“When you beget children, and children's children, and you have remained long in the land, and shall deal corruptly, and make a carved idol – the likeness of anything, and shall do evil in the sight of the Lord your God, to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you shall soon utterly perish from off the land into which you pass over the Jordan to possess it; you shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the Lord shall lead you. And there you shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell.” (4:25-28)¹⁴

¹⁴ To my mind, the importance of this comparison between Devarim 4:1-40 and Sefer Yehezkel goes beyond the descriptions of idolatry. In fact *all* of Yehezkel's prophecies maintain an indirect dialogue with other parts of the chapter. Other elements of comparison include: the importance of the way in which Israel's situation is perceived by the nations; the place of the Exodus in the bond

To reinforce to his prophecy, Yehezkel emphasizes the causes that have led to the Destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people. He does this not only explicitly – through the words of the prophecy itself – but also indirectly, by drawing a parallel between the deeds of the people (as he sees them in his own time) and the repeated warnings to the people not to act in this way – borrowed, in this case, from Devarim 4.

To be continued

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

between God and the nation; the dispersion of Israel among the nations; and the forging of the covenant between God and His people.