

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel

By Dr. Tova Ganzel

Shiur #09a: Tzidkiyahu (12:1-20; 17)

Yehezkel's next prophecy deals with the obscure figure referred to as the "prince" (*nasi*), and the response the prophet receives which contains the meaning of his actions. The prevailing assumption is that this "prince" is Tzidkiyahu: the description of his exile in *Sefer Melakhim* and in *Yirmiyahu* conforms to the symbolic act presented in our chapter. To understand the full significance of this prophecy, we will broaden our discussion and review other prophecies of Yehezkel that relate to Tzidkiyahu in chapters 17, 19, and 21:23-32 along with this chapter.

Tzidkiyahu is not mentioned by name in *Sefer Yehezkel*, not even in the decoding of the symbolic acts that address his actions. Furthermore, the kingdom of Babylonia is likewise only mentioned in these chapters indirectly and there is no prophecy that deals with the future of Babylonia and its destruction in the upcoming group of chapters that offer prophecies to the nations (25-32).¹ In fact, Babylonia is only mentioned here in the context of its failed war against Tzor (26:7 onwards) and the fact that Babylonia is God's emissary in its war against Egypt (29:18-19; 30:10, 24-25; 32:11).²

The reason there is no prophecy against Babylonia in *Sefer Yehezkel* is related (it appears) to the indirect manner in which Yehezkel mentions Tzidkiyahu. There are two ways of interpreting this connection. One is that Babylonia, in the generation of the Destruction, functions as God's emissary, and so while it fulfills this function, there are no damaging prophecies made about its future. The other interpretation is that because Yehezkel is based in Babylonia, he is unable to denounce the empire in which he dwells. This explanation also explains the obscure description of Tzidkiyahu, with no explicit mention made of his name. For the kings of Babylonia, the coronation of Tzidkiyahu in Jerusalem had the effect of creating an artificial quiet, while in effect discontinuing the monarchy of the dynasty of David in Jerusalem. This is evident from the fact that

¹ *Yirmiyahu* 59 contains a prophecy of the future destruction of Babylonia and a review of that chapter offers an important complement to Yehezkel's prophecies. That discussion, however, lies beyond the scope of our present study.

² In addition to its mention in the parable in 23:14 onwards, and the noting of the length of the siege on Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 24:2.

after Tzidkiyahu's exile to Babylonia, we do not know what happens to him – in contrast to Yehoyakhin, who was exiled before him, and was shown honor, even compared to the other exiled kings who were with him there (*Melakhim* II 25: 27-30). So paying explicit attention to Tzidkiyahu as king may have aroused the ire of the Babylonians, especially because Tzidkiyahu did not fulfill their expectations following his appointment, and rebelled against Nevukhadnetzar.

A symbolic act and its meaning (12:1-16)

Immediately after sharing his Divine vision with his fellow exiles (chapter 11), Yehezkel again hears – as at the beginning of his prophetic career (chapter 2) – that the people around him were and remain “a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not” (12:2). In that sense, they resemble the idolatry they worship: “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have a mouth, but do not speak; they have eyes but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear...” (*Tehillim* 115:5-6).

So Yehezkel is commanded to continue prophesying. But for the first time, his prophecy concerns the future of the inhabitants of Jerusalem who will be exiled (not killed) at the time of the Destruction. He demonstrates their fate through another symbolic act, and his use of this device may reflect the hope that those who are destined to join the exiles will make real, through their descriptions, the results of the Destruction for the exiles of Yehoyakhin. This prophecy also emphasizes performing this action in front of the exiles, so that those who “have eyes but do not see” will, finally, see and understand.³

“Prepare yourself gear for exile, and remove yourself as though for exile by day in their sight, and you shall remove from your place to another place in their sight; perhaps they will see, though they are a rebellious house. Then you shall bring forth your gear by day in their sight, as gear for exile, and you shall go forth at evening in their sight, as they that go out into exile. Dig for yourself through the wall in their sight, and carry out through it. In their sight you shall bear it upon your shoulders, and carry it out into the dark; you shall cover your face, so you do not see the ground; for I have set you for a sign to the house of Israel. And I did as I was commanded: I brought out my gear by day (*yomam*), as gear for exile, and in the evening I dug through the wall with my hand; I brought it out in the dark and I bore it on my shoulder in their sight.” (12:3-7)

Through this symbolic act, Yehezkel is commanded to “exile” himself, carry his “gear for exile.” The departure into exile is undertaken in the evening, in the dark, with his face covered, through a hole he digs in the wall. Yehezkel, it seems, repeated this act for a number of days (“by day”). Each morning, a divine

³ The word “*le-enehyim*” (in their sight) is repeated seven times in verses 3-7. In addition are the expressions: “perhaps they will see” (v. 3); “you shall not see the ground” (v. 6), and “I carried it in their sight” (v. 7).

explanation of what his act meant followed, in response to the people's question: "Has the house of Israel, the rebellious house, not said to you, 'What are you doing?'" (12:9)

God explains the symbolic act:

"This burden concerns the prince in Yerushalayim, and all the house of Israel that are among them. Say, I am your sign: as I have done, so shall it be done to them; they shall go into exile, into captivity. And the prince that is among them shall bear upon his shoulder in the dark, and shall go out; they shall dig through the wall to carry out through it; he shall cover his face, so as not to see the ground with his eyes. I will also spread My net upon him, and he shall be taken in My snare; and I will bring him to Babylonia to the land of the Kasdim, but he will not see it, though he will die there. And I will scatter towards every wind all that are about him to help him, and all his troops, and I will draw out the sword after them..." (vv.10-14)

The language of the prophecy creates a close connection with what we find later in chapter 17:

"And I will spread My net upon him, and he shall be taken in My snare, and I will bring him to Babylonia, and will plead with him there⁴ for his trespass that he has trespassed against Me. And all his fugitives of all his troops shall fall by the sword, and they who remain shall be scattered to all the winds..." (17:20-21)

This prophecy is God's response to Tzidkiyahu's rebellion against Babylonia, which contravenes God's order conveyed to him by the prophet (as we shall see below).

When explaining the symbol in chapter 12, the prophet first relates to the entire "house of Israel," who will be exiled and taken in captivity, and then connects the parable to its interpretation by means of a description of "the prince who is in their midst":

"He shall bear upon his shoulder in the dark, and shall go out; they shall dig through the wall to carry out through it; he shall cover his face, so that he does not see the ground with his eyes." (12:12)

In contrast, the parallel prophecy in chapter 17 has at its center the figure of "the king's seed" (17:13). Both titles ("prince" and "the king's seed") seem to refer to Tzidkiyahu. In *Sefer Melakhim* we read:

⁴ Literally, "I will be judged with him" – *ve-nishpateti ito*.

“And the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Tzidkiyahu. And on the ninth day of the fourth month the famine prevailed in the city, and there was no bread for the people of the land. And a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which is by the king’s garden, and the Kasdim were against the city round about, and they went in the direction of the Arava. And the army of the Kasdim pursued after the king, and overtook him in the plains of Yericho, and all his army were scattered from him. So they took the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylonia to Rivla, and they gave judgment upon him. And they slew the sons of Tzidkiyahu before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Tzidkiyahu, and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylonia.” (*Melakhim* II 25:2-7)

The parallel text in *Yirmiyahu* reads:

“And it was, when Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda and all the men of war saw them, then they fled, and went out of the city by night, by the way of the king’s garden, by the gate between the two walls, and he went out the way of the Arava. But the army of the Kasdim pursued after them, and overtook Tzidkiyahu in the plains of Yericho, and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, to Rivla, in the land of Chamat, where he issued judgment upon him. Then the king of Babylonia slew the sons of Tzidkiyahu in Rivla before his eyes; also the king of Babylonia slew all the nobles of Yehuda. Moreover, he put out Tzidkiyahu’s eyes, and bound him with fetters, to carry him to Babylonia.” (*Yirmiyahu* 39:4-7; see also 52:7-11)

These descriptions of Tzidkiyahu’s exile match the details of Yehezkel’s prophecy: the capture of the king, bringing him to Babylon, and the fate of his company. In chapter 12 we also find mention of the dark (apparently symbolizing night) and the covering of the face (apparently symbolizing Tzidkiyahu’s blindness). It may also be that the prophecy in chapter 17 where the king will be judged “with God” for having trespassed against Him is fulfilled with the king of Babylonia (representing God) “issuing judgment” against Tzidkiyahu after he is brought there.

The next few verses in chapter 12 describe another symbolic act that the prophet must carry out:

“Son of man, eat your bread with quaking, and drink your water with trembling and with anxiety, and say to the people of the land, So says the Lord God of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and of the land of Israel: They shall eat their bread with anxiety, and drink their water with appalment, that her land may be desolate, bare of its fullness, because of the violence of all that dwell in it.” (12:18-19)

These verses, recalling the restricted eating and drinking of the prophet in chapter 4, complement the symbolic act described at the beginning of our chapter. Thus Yehezkel connects the beginning of the chapter to the events about which he prophesied at the beginning of the *Sefer*. The prophet's departure does not occur in a vacuum; it is the result of the situation in the city.

This connection is also manifest in the description in *Sefer Melakhim*, where – in a similar way to the description in Yehezkel – the severity of the famine is manifest in the fact that it reaches even the “people of the land” (the leadership of the people; see 7:26-27):

“... and the famine prevailed in the city, and there was no bread for the people of the land” (*Melakhim II 25:3*).

The aim of the prophecy

The aim of Yehezkel's prophecy, as we learn from chapter 12, is

“... they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall scatter them among the nations, and disperse them in the countries. But I will leave a few men of them over from the sword, from the famine, and from the pestilence, that they may confess all their abominations among the nations where they come, and they shall know that I am the Lord.” (12:15-16)

Indeed, this message is emphasized once again as the conclusion of this prophetic unit:

“And the cities that are inhabited shall be laid waste, and the land shall be desolate, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (v. 20)

Unlike the situation that has prevailed thus far, from now on “knowledge of God” will be attained by those who remain, in order that they testify that it was God Who scattered His people among the nations. This is in contrast to the formulation familiar to us from the Torah:

“Why should Egypt speak and say, ‘In an evil hour He brought them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your fierce anger, and relent of this evil against Your people.” (*Shemot 32:12*)

The same lesson will now be learned even though the exile will involve a desecration of God's Name amongst the nations:

“And when they came to the nations into which they came, they profaned My holy Name, in that men said of them, These are the people of the Lord, and they are gone out of His land” (*Yehezkel 36:20*).

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish