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**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**  
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**Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel**  
**By Dr. Tova Ganzel**

**Shiur #13: “He Speaks in Allegories” (Ch. 15-16)**

The prophecies in Chapters 15-24 present a series of parables or metaphors through which the prophet describes the fate of Jerusalem, its inhabitants, and its leaders.<sup>1</sup> The reader who has followed the chapters of *Sefer Yehezkel* from the start now discovers a new device through which the prophet conveys his message, along with symbolic acts (especially in Chapters 4-5)<sup>2</sup> and the image of the building of a house (13:10-16) which preceded our Chapter.

Parables and metaphors are used more often in *Sefer Yehezkel* than in the Books of the other prophets to convey prophetic messages. This again testifies to the literary diversity and rhetorical precision of Yehezkel’s messages. In Chapters 15, 17 and 19 there appears a parable of a vine; in Chapter 19 the parable of the lioness; and in Chapters 16 and 23, the parable of the harlot. Each prophecy between Chapters 15 and 24 is introduced with a parable. Thus, Chapter 18 starts with a parable that Bnei Yisrael propose concerning Divine reward and punishment;<sup>3</sup> Chapter 21 starts with the parable of the fire; Chapter 22 presents the parable of the furnace, and Chapter 24 – the parable of the cauldron, concluding this series of prophetic units. It seems that indeed Yehezkel’s style succeeded in gaining the people’s attention. From the words that the prophet addresses to God we see that the nation’s response to this device was not long in coming:

“Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! They say of me, Does he not speak in allegories?’” (21:5)

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<sup>1</sup> The term *mashal*, often translated as “parable” is taken from the prophecy (16:44; 21:5) and is also used by Chazal. However, we refer here also to “allegory”, “metaphor” and “personification”, which are more commonly used terms in modern scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> The death of Yehezkel’s wife is also significant, as is its location in Chapter 24. There is an echo of further symbolic act in 7:23.

<sup>3</sup> In this instance, the word "*masha*" actually means a fable, by means of which the nation or the prophet makes a statement. The same is the case in 12:22-23. Notes Kasher: “This term is used in the Bible to denote different literary genres, such as idioms, lyrical speeches, allegories, etc. The term itself seems to be derived from the root *m-sh-l*, which means similarity, comparing something with something else. The term is repeated several times in *Sefer Yehezkel*, being used in the sense of an allegorical story (17:2; 24:3) or in the sense of a brief fable (12:22; 18:2-3)” (ibid., p. 289).

A review of Yehezkel's allegories shows that often no historical interpretation is provided at their conclusion, so we cannot match the allegory with precision to any historical reality. Sometimes an entire prophecy appears to end with the conclusion of the parable. Hence, the "solutions" to the parables in Yehezkel's prophecies must be sought within the parables themselves. Greenberg describes this phenomenon eloquently.<sup>4</sup> He explains that over the course of the narrative there occur various major or minor "interventions" of the reality to which the parable refers. These interventions may include a series of verses (as in 16:17-22), or nothing more than a single word that deviates from the continuous description of the parable, alluding to the interpretation.<sup>5</sup> The parable is interwoven with its interpretation to the point where sometimes it is difficult (or even impossible) to define which of the prophet's words are which. For instance, some of the descriptions of the actions of the harlot in Chapter 16 can be interpreted as the actions of the woman (which are an allegory for the idolatry committed by the people). But they can also be interpreted as descriptions of the idolatry committed by the people. Or both – perhaps these actions were a ritual harlotry which would suit both the message of the parable and its interpretation. Therefore our discussion below will not distinguish between the parable and its meaning; rather, we will address the meaning of the prophecy as we have it before us.

### **"A fire shall devour them" (Chapter 15)**

Notwithstanding our introduction above, in Chapter 15 (and unlike the chapters that follow) it is easy to distinguish between the parable (verses 1-5) and its meaning (verses 6-8). The parable describes a vine that is burned and therefore no longer serves any purpose: it cannot be used for work, nor to make any vessel. In his explanation, the prophet reveals that the vine is a symbol for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who will be devoured by fire.<sup>6</sup> The main message, perhaps, is that Yehezkel does not propose – even in the parable – any possibility of the vine producing grapes; the city is fated as useless as the burned vine.

"And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, says the Lord God" (15:8)

This third-person reference to the inhabitants of Jerusalem ("they have acted faithlessly") indicates that Yehezkel is addressing the exiles in Babylon. He aims to inform them not only that the city's is the end of the city very near, but that the entire land will be desolate. The desolation of the land is a prophecy that appears and reappears over the course of the *Sefer*. Through it, the prophet tells

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<sup>4</sup> See Greenberg, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> An example is 23:29, in which the word "*yegi'ech*" ("your labor") describes the reward of the man, rather than the accessories of the woman.

<sup>6</sup> A.A. Rivlin discusses the literary structure of this chapter, "Mashal ha-Gefen ve-ha-Esh: Mivneh, Miktzav ve-Diktzia be-Shirat Yehezkel", *Beit Mikra* 20, 5735, pp. 562-566.

the exiles that for the first time in its history, the continuation of the Jewish People lies not with the remnant in Jerusalem, but with the exiles themselves.

### **“Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord!” (Chapter 16)<sup>7</sup>**

Having used all the means at his disposal to convey God’s word about the nation’s fate, Yehezkel compares Jerusalem to an abandoned woman, and in the interpretation, to the inhabitants of the city or the Jewish People as a whole. This stark image is like a scream directed at the people. Our assumption in explaining this metaphor is that the literary device and its meaning are deliberately blurred, that is, a blurring between the harlot and her real punishment, and the actual situation of Jerusalem and its impending destruction.

The image of the harlot becomes fully clear in Chapter 16, but throughout the chapters dating to the years prior to the Destruction (1-24) there is a motif of words and terms that relate to women. Especially prominent are chapters 16 and 23, where Jerusalem is metaphorically compared to a woman. This image is fully realized at the end of this series of chapters (24:15-24), with the death of the prophet’s wife, symbolizing – *inter alia* – the final destruction of the city.<sup>8</sup> Later, in chapters 25-48, there is an almost complete lack of images and terms belonging to the semantic field of women – to the point where there is no mention, whether explicit or implied of any “woman” in the description of the future city.

### **The deeds of Jerusalem (16:1-34)**

Verses 1-34 describe the unfaithfulness of Jerusalem. The prophetic message in this chapter is conveyed, *inter alia*, through the literary adoption of a repetitive vocabulary: “poorly clad and bare” (vv. 7, 22, 39); “covering/revealing nakedness” (vv. 8, 36, 37); blood (vv. 6, 9, 22, 38), and garments (vv. 10, 16, 39). This depicts the deeds of the city with great impact.

The prophet starts by describing the nativity (v. 3) and birth of this “girl” in the field, with none to care for her (vv. 4-5). God sees her weltering in her blood and gives her life (v. 6). Then the prophet describes her growing and becoming a young woman (v. 7), and God’s act of covering her and entering into a covenant with her (“I swore to you, and entered into a covenant with you” – v. 8). The city is gathered up by God, Who provides for all her needs and extends His patronage (vv. 9-14), but gradually, step by step, she loses everything she has been given. God gave her fine garments and ornaments, but she offers them over to idolatry, builds high places (v. 16), sacrifices to foreign gods (v. 19), and even offers up her own children (vv. 20-21). God cries out, as it were (“Woe! Woe to you! says the Lord God” – v. 23) over her playing the harlot “in every street,” receiving

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<sup>7</sup> In this chapter our aim is to examine the way in which Yehezkel prophesies and not to provide a close, literal interpretation of the verses.

<sup>8</sup> This idea is presented by J. Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel* (SBLDS 130, Georgia, 1992).

nothing in return (vv. 3-34). This harlotry symbolizes the bonds maintained between Jerusalem and Egypt (v. 26), Assyria (v. 28), and Babylon (v. 29). The description of the unfaithfulness of this woman – Jerusalem – emphasizes the chasm between her humble beginnings, with no lineage and no identity, and the abundance God bestowed upon her and His favors done for her. Perhaps the descriptions of her betrayals in this chapter can be mitigated if we consider the background to her need to assert her identity, which she absorbs “from the outside.”

### **God’s response (1:35-43)**

Verses 35-43 show the city punished measure for measure for her deeds. Now God will reveal her nakedness (vv. 36-38). She is punished with every possible form of death, including stoning, burning, and the sword (vv. 39-42; there are parallels in 23:9-10, 22-29, 45-48). Concerning this punishment, Y. Rosen-Zvi writes:

“This ‘hyper-punishment’ makes sense in light of Yehezkel’s tendency in these chapters to present the Destruction as a total annihilation, a punishment unprecedented in its severity. He presents the imminent Destruction as the ‘punishment to end all punishments’, and therefore constructs a punishment that has no precedent; nothing like it exists in reality. At the same time, he also describes the sin in exceedingly severe terms, which provides justification for such a terrible punishment. To this end, these chapters bring together adultery, bloodshed and idolatry – the three most grave sins. Yehezkel creates his own original punishment, which is prescribed neither for adulteresses nor for killers; he calls it “judgments of women who break wedlock and shed blood” (v. 38) jointly, just as he binds together the sin of the adulteress and that of the harlot. A sin that has no parallel justifies a punishment without precedent.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Jerusalem and her sisters – Shomron and Sodom (16:44-58)**

Yehezkel now goes on to compare the deeds of the city of Jerusalem to those of her “elder sister,” Shomron (which had a greater number of inhabitants and was exiled earlier than Jerusalem) and her “younger sister,” Sodom. The comparisons emphasize that Jerusalem’s deeds have been worse than those of her sisters. Since they were destroyed, the fate of Jerusalem can be deduced by simple logic.

It is interesting to note the sins that are attributed here to the city of Sodom:

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<sup>9</sup> Y. Rosen-Zvi, “‘And I Shall Deal With You as You Have Dealt’: A New Look at the Punishment of the Adulteresses in Yehezkel 16 and 23”; *Beit Mikra* 50b, 5765, pp. 163-193 (the citation is from pp. 186-187). See his article for a full picture of the punishment in Chapters 16 and 23 and their uniqueness.

“Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sedom: she and her daughters had pride, a surfeit of bread, and abundance of idleness, and yet she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.” (16:49)

The sin of Sedom, as depicted here, is that despite the economic stability and strength of its inhabitants, they did not support the poor and needy. In other words: socio-economic sins. This description is rather surprising, in light of the fact that in *Sefer Bereishit*, Sedom is destroyed “because the cry of Sedom and Amora is great, and because their sin is very grievous” (*Bereishit* 18:20), and the story there seems to suggest that their sins included rape or homosexuality (*ibid.* 19:1-9).<sup>10</sup> *Sefer Yehezkel* attributes “social welfare” sins to Sedom, in contrast to the actions described in *Sefer Bereishit*. This fits the prophet’s message about the severity of Jerusalem’s sins in Chapter 16. The surprising disparity between the deeds of Sedom in *Sefer Bereishit* and the deeds attributed to it in *Sefer Yehezkel* makes more sense in the context of the prophetic message arising from the comparison between Sedom and Jerusalem: the comparison emphasizes that Jerusalem’s sins – sins of a religious and adulterous nature – are even worse than those of Sedom:

“... you were more corrupt than they in all your ways. As I live, says the Lord God, Sedom your sister has not done – neither she nor her daughters – as you have done, you and your daughters.” (17:47-48)

Thus, Yehezkel attributes only social sins to Sedom in order to emphasize the more grievous sins of Jerusalem, which are described as unfaithfulness. The end of this prophetic unit emphasizes that Jerusalem will be disgraced through God’s rehabilitation of its sisters, Sedom and Shomron. Jerusalem itself will be rebuilt only after these cities have been restored to their former state (16:53-58).

### **Renewal of the covenant (16:59-63)**

The prophecy in Chapter 16 ends with the promise that God will not break His covenant with the Jerusalem/Israel of earlier times, and that He will make an everlasting covenant with them. This renewal of the covenant will cause Jerusalem to feel shame at her deeds (v. 63). These verses conclude what is one of the harshest prophecies – if not the harshest - in *Sefer Yehezkel*. It is fitting that this concluding prophecy of redemption differs from the other prophecies. First, it lacks elements that are found in all the other prophecies of redemption in this *Sefer*. Second, it includes elements that are common among the other prophets but unusual for Yehezkel, including the establishment of an “everlasting covenant” and Divine forgiveness for the people’s actions. These verses – their prophetic message, their location at the conclusion of the prophecy, the language and in its context – all emphasize to the people that the cataclysm and the repair are bound up with each other. Even the sins that the people have committed –

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<sup>10</sup> See the medieval commentators on *Bereishit* 19:5, “that we may know them.”

including violation of the covenant with God – will not lead to a breaking of the bond between God and His people. Despite the people's actions in the present, the covenant that God remembers and maintains even in the future is a covenant of youth, and at the time of their sin, this historical covenant will stand. This is also why the nation is rebuked just as it is being forgiven:

“That you may remember, and be put to shame, and never open your mouth anymore because of your shame, when I have forgiven you for all that you have done, says the Lord God.” (16:63)

### **Appendix: the woman – Jerusalem**

Throughout the first part of the *Sefer, Yehezkel* addresses Jerusalem by comparing the city to a woman. Along with an understanding of the verses in their context, an examination of the images interwoven throughout these prophecies as a whole points to a trend that becomes entirely clear in Chapters 16 and 23, and concludes with the description of the prophet's own wife in Chapter 24.

For example, vv. 8-17 of Chapter 5 deal with the punishment of the city; in v. 14 we read: “And I will make you a desolation and a reproach... in the sight of all who pass by.” The language with which the prophet describes the scorn of the nations suits the description of the deeds of Jerusalem in Chapter 16. Sometimes the deeds of the people are described using vocabulary that corresponds even more explicitly to Chapters 16 and 23. For example, “... their wanton heart... and their eyes which go astray” (6:9); “their gold shall be like an unclean thing... therefore I have made it an unclean thing for them” (7:19-20). Likewise the use of the word “*damim*” (blood), connotes menstrual women: “the bloody city... A city that sheds blood in the midst of it... You have become guilty in your blood that you have shed...” (22:2-4); “Woe to the bloody city, to the pot in which there is filth... For her blood is in the midst of her.” We propose<sup>11</sup> that this accumulation of examples shows that the comparison of Jerusalem with a harlot is actually maintained, on some level, throughout the chapters of the *Sefer* that contain prophecies of destruction.<sup>12</sup>

In light of the above it is unsurprising that no use is made of the image of a woman in the vision of the future. This image symbolizes the uncleanness of the city that has led to the destruction of the Temple. And perhaps the death of the prophet's wife symbolizes metaphorically that the city will not be made unclean again. If this is correct, then Yehezkel differs in this respect from the other prophets, since they also use images of women in a positive sense, while for Yehezkel, this metaphor is purely negative.

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<sup>11</sup> Following the example of Galambush.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that women appear in other contexts, too, in these chapters: there are the women who weep for Tammuz (8:14); the false prophetesses (13:17-23); and the wife of his neighbor (mentioned in 18:6, 11, 15, and in 22:10-11).

Translated by Kaeren Fish