

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

**Shiur #15: “The Abominations of their Fathers” (Chapter 20)**

Our prophecy opens with a date: “... in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth of the month.” This is two years before the siege of Jerusalem began, a year after than the last date mentioned (at the beginning of Chapter 8), and two years after the date noted at the beginning of the *Sefer*. In other words, the Destruction is drawing nearer.<sup>1</sup>

Now, the prophet notes, “certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and sat before me.” It seems reasonable to connect these elders of Israel with those mentioned in Chapter 14. It is also possible they have come before Yehezkel not as an official body of representative elders, but rather as individuals concerned for their own fate. In either case, their quest is quickly rejected, and Yehezkel rebukes them as representatives of the nation:<sup>2</sup>

“... speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Have you come to inquire of Me? As I live, says the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you.” (20:3)

Instead, the prophet is commanded,

“Will you judge them, son of man; will you judge them? Make known to them the abominations of their fathers.” (v. 4)

Yehezkel then reviews Bnei Yisrael’s history, back to becoming a nation in Egypt. A pattern of behavior is repeated, on the nation’s part and then God’s response. This pattern includes the setting down of statutes for Am Yisrael (or a reminder or rebuke concerning statutes that have been given), followed by violation of the statutes by the nation, then Divine anger and desire to annihilate the nation, and ultimately God’s forgoing the full punishment for the sake of His Name.

<b>Period</b>	<b>Bnei Yisrael in</b>	<b>Generation that</b>	<b>In the wilderness</b>
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<sup>1</sup> If Yehezkel’s prophecies in Chapters 1-24 are indeed arranged in chronological order, then Chapters 1-7 belong to the fifth year of Yehoyakhin’s exile; Chapters 8-19 are from the sixth year; Chapters 20-23 from the seventh year, and Chapter 24 belongs to the ninth year.

<sup>2</sup> See Y. Hoffman, “Li-She’elat ha-Mivneh ve-ha-Mashma’ut shel Yehezkel Perek 20,” *Beit Mikra* 20, 5735, pp. 473-489.

	<b>Egypt (vv. 5-10)</b>	<b>left Egypt, in the wilderness (11-17)</b>	<b>(vv. 18-26)</b>
<b>Giving statutes of and reminder</b>	On the day when I chose Israel and lifted up My hand to the seed of the house of Yaakov, and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up My hand to them, saying, I am the Lord your God; in the day that I lifted up My hand to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt into land that I had spied out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is an ornament for all the lands, then I said to them, Cast away every man the abominations of his eyes and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.	And I gave them My statutes and made My judgments known to them, which, if a man does then, he may live by them. <i>Moreover I also gave them My shabbatot, to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord Who sanctifies them.</i>	But I said to their children in the wilderness, Do not follow the statutes of your fathers, nor observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols; I am the Lord your God; follow My statutes, and keep My judgments, and do them. <i>And sanctify My shabbatot, and they shall be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God.</i>
<b>Rebellion against God</b>	But they rebelled against Me and would not hearken to Me: they did not cast away every man the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt.	But the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not follow My statutes, and they rejected My judgments, which, if a man does, he may live by them,	But the children rebelled against Me; they did not follow My statutes, nor did they keep My judgment to do them, which, if a man does, he may live by them; <i>they profaned My</i>

		<i>and they greatly profaned My shabbatot.</i>	<i>shabbatot.</i>
<b>God's intention to punish with annihilation</b>	Then I said, I will pour out My fury upon them, to accomplish My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.	Then I said I would pour out My fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them.	Then I said I would pour out My fury upon them, to spend My anger against them in the wilderness.
<b>God acts for His Name's sake</b>	But I acted for My Name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, among whom they were, in whose sight I made Myself know to them, in bringing them out of the land of Egypt.	But I acted for My Name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I brought them out.	Nevertheless I withdrew My hand and acted for My Name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations in whose sight I brought them out.
<b>What God does</b>	So I brought them out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness.	Indeed, I also lifted up My hand to them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, one flowing with milk and honey, which is the ornament of all the lands, because they rejected My judgments, and did not follow My statutes, <i>but profaned My shabbatot</i> , for their heart went after their idols. Nevertheless, My	I lifted up My hand to them also in the wilderness, declaring that I would scatter them among the nations, and disperse them through the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had rejected My statutes, <i>and had profaned My shabbatot</i> , and their eyes were after their fathers' idols. So I too gave them statutes that were

		<p>eye spared them, and I did not destroy them, nor did I make an end of them in the wilderness.</p>	<p>not good, and judgments whereby they should not live, and I polluted them by their gifts, in that they caused to pass {through fire} all that opens the womb, that I might blight them, that they might know that I am the Lord.</p>
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According to this prophecy, Israel's history since becoming a nation has consisted of a series of appeals by God which the nation rejects, followed by Divine responses that become increasingly severe. The nation rebels by adhering to the idols of the nations and the corrupt ways of their fathers. Against the nation's will God brings *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt and leads them to the land which He had sought out for them.<sup>3</sup> Note that this is the only place in the *Sefer* where there is any mention of the Egyptian Exodus. Yehezkel makes no reference to that historical event in his prophecies to Egypt (Chapters 29-32), nor even in the context of his words about the Pesach festival (45:21).

Following this litany the prophet rebukes his generation for their behavior. But the relevance of Egypt involves more than a description of the nation's recurrent backsliding; their future redemption is also based on the model made familiar by the Exodus in *Sefer Shemot*. The stages of this future redemption are: an ingathering of the exiles ("I will gather you out of the countries in which you are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with anger poured out" – v. 34); a wilderness ("And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there will remonstrate with you face to face" - v. 35); a covenant ("And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the discipline of the covenant" – v. 37); a winnowing of sinners, and an arrival in the Land of Israel. The repair for the desecration of God's Name, which is a recurring motif throughout the chapter, is sanctification:

"I will accept you with sweet savor, when I bring you out from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries in which you have been scattered, and **I will be sanctified in you before the nations**" (20:41).

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<sup>3</sup> See: M. Greenberg, "Yehezkel 20 ve-ha-Galut ha-Ruchanit," in Y. Kaufmann et al (eds.), *Oz le-David: Kovetz Mechkarim be-Tanakh, Mugash le-David Ben-Gurion bi-Meleat Lo Shiv'im ve-Sheva Shanim*, Jerusalem 5724, pp. 433-442.

This chapter illustrates clearly the cyclical process of history: *Am Yisrael* violates God's laws and as a result is deemed unworthy of redemption – even survival. But nonetheless the nation is restored to its land to prevent God's Name from being desecrated in the eyes of the nations. The desecration of God's Name lies not only in the actual transgression of His laws, but also by how this betrayal is perceived by the nations. Thus the repair of this desecration – the sanctification of God's Name – must likewise also be “before the nations”: through the ingathering of *Am Yisrael* from the places to which they have been scattered.<sup>4</sup>

### “They profaned My shabbatot”

The commandment of Shabbat enjoys a place of honor in *Sefer Yehezkel*. This chapter has repeated special mentions of Shabbat along with the “statutes and judgments” which “if a man does, he may live by them” (see vv. 12-13, 16, 20-21, 24). Furthermore, Shabbat is mentioned among the sins of the *kohanim* and the people in Chapters 22 and 23, and is also awarded a special place in the vision of the future Temple (Chapters 44-46).

The special status of Shabbat in *Sefer Yehezkel* is addressed by the medieval commentators. Rashi and R. Yosef Kara explain (apparently in light of *Shemot* 31:16-17) that the sanctity that God bestows on the nation is apparent from God giving them His own day of rest. R. Yosef Kara comments, “When Bnei Yisrael observe the Shabbat, they testify thereby that I created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh...” But since Yehezkel does not mention the Creation as the reason for the nation's observance of Shabbat, R. Eliezer of Beaugency provides a more precise reading: he notes that the Creation of the world does not, in itself, draw any distinction between *Am Yisrael* and the other nations; God's sanctification of the nation is the reason for them to observe the Shabbat. Other reasons for the special prominence of Shabbat in *Sefer Yehezkel* are offered (for example, by Radak and R. Yosef Ibn Kaspi), explaining that the special characteristics of Shabbat transform it into a symbol for the commandments as a whole.

What makes Yehezkel's attitude towards Shabbat special is not that he mentions more often than the other prophets, but that he views Shabbat as a sign and symbol – not of the Creation of the world, but of the special sanctity of Israel: “that you may know that I am the Lord your God” (20:20). He gives two different meanings for this “sign”:

“Moreover I also gave them My shabbatot, to be a sign between Me and them, **that they might know that I am the Lord Who sanctifies them**” (20:12);

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<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that our chapter includes an additional theme: the praise of the Land of Israel (vv. 6, 15, 28, 40).

“And sanctify My shabbatot, and they shall be a sign between Me and you, **that you may know that I am the Lord your God**” (20:20).

The first meaning of the sign is familiar to us from *Sefer Shemot*:

“You shall surely keep My shabbatot, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, **that you may know that I am the Lord Who sanctifies you.**” (*Shemot* 31:13)

But the second meaning – the testimony offered by the Shabbat that “I am the Lord your God” – is a concept unique to Yehezkel; there is no parallel to it elsewhere in the Torah. This accentuates the importance of Shabbat: through its observance, the nation not only expresses its sanctity, but also testifies to and calls to consciousness the fact that the Lord is their God. Conversely, desecration of the Shabbat violates this testimony.

As Yehezkel points out, immediately after the commandment of Shabbat was given to the generation of the wilderness, it was violated. The nation thereby testified publicly that it was not faithful to God and preferred to worship other gods. This is why Shabbat occupies such a special place in the prophecy of Yehezkel, uttered in the generation of the Destruction. The breach of Shabbat is testimony to the distance between the nation and their God. This ultimately led to the defiling of the Temple and its Destruction. This is also why, apart from our chapter, Shabbat is also mentioned elsewhere (22:8; 23:38) among the reasons for the Destruction.

Shabbat only appears again in *Sefer Yehezkel* in the chapters dealing with the vision of the future rebuilt Temple, but is omitted from the chapters (34-39) preceding that vision. This suggests that Shabbat as testimony to the God of Israel is only relevant when the nation recognizes Him and no longer sins. This will come about only when the Temple is rebuilt. It will not come about through the Destruction, nor while the nation dwells in exile.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish