

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
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Shiur #15b: “The Abominations of Their Fathers” (Chapter 20) (continued)

“I Gave Them Statutes That Were Not Good” – How So?

Verses 25-26 of Chapter 20 are especially problematic:

“I gave them statutes that were 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.”

How are we to understand the words of the prophet? The commentators offer different approaches.¹ Targum Yonatan offers the following interpretation:

“So I too - after they rebelled against My words and did not listen to My prophets – I put them away, and gave them over into the hands of their foolish inclination; they went and made [for themselves] unbecoming statutes and practices whereby they would not live.”

Thus, the creation of the bad laws is attributed to the nation; God’s role is simply to allow the people to follow their own inclination, which causes them to follow the statutes in an improper way. In other words, God allows the people to sin (which is what they want to do). In the wake of the Targum, Rashi comments:

“I gave them over into the hand of their foolish inclination, to stumble in their sin... Those gifts that I set down for them as statutes – to sanctify every firstborn for Me - I gave them over into the hands of their inclination [which caused them] to pass those same firstborn [through fire] to Molekh; thus, the statutes are referred to as ‘not good’.”

R. Eliezer of Beaugency, who understands the nation’s sin as mixing Divine service with idolatry, explains that the statutes are described as “not good” in the sense that Bnei Yisrael will not receive reward for them, because of the severity of their sins.

¹ For further discussion see Kasher, “Appendix D: Yehezkel 20:25-26 in the traditional Jewish literature,” pp. 404-406.

Either way, these interpretations offer an understanding that we do not find in the plain text alone. A different approach is presented with great clarity by Moshe Greenberg:

“Since exile has already been decreed for Israel, it is necessary to ensure that they will persist in their wickedness to the end, until their measure is full and they have completed their sin. If God seeks to put someone to death, He puts a stumbling-block before him that causes him to die (20:3). As in many other places where he describes Divine punishment, the prophet describes the stumbling-block here in terms of ‘measure-for-measure’: twice they despised God’s good statutes “which, if a man follows, he shall live by them,” choosing [instead] the statutes and judgments of their fathers (which were not good, and by which people do not live). What was God’s retribution? He upheld their choice, giving them, instead of good statutes, “statutes that were not good and judgments whereby they should not live.” Therefore he is able to fulfill the promise, “I will do to them after their way, and according to their deserts will I judge them” (*Yehezkel* 7:26) ... Thus we conclude that the prophet viewed the entire First Temple Period as a time of filling the measure of sin, so as to justify the annihilation that had already been decreed.”²

It seems that the “statutes that were not good” are those related to the people’s offering of gifts that defiled them: “in that they caused to pass [through fire] all that opens the womb.” Perhaps the prophet is attributing to the people the false notion that sacrifice of the firstborn is permitted. This act – offering children to Molekh and passing them through fire – was common among pagans and is echoed in the story of the binding of Yitzchak. It led to a perception that seems to have been prevalent amongst the nation that such practices had Divine legitimacy. Yehezkel’s words come into sharper focus against the background of Yirmiyahu’s descriptions of the nation’s actions during this period:

“They have built the high places of the Tofet, which is in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind.” (*Yirmiyahu* 7:31)

“And they have built the high places of the Ba’al, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to the Ba’al, which I did not command, nor did I speak it, neither did it come into My mind.” (*ibid.* 19:5)

“And they built the high places of the Ba’al, which are in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molekh, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind that

² Greenberg, p. 436. In his article he also points out the similarity between the history of Israel as presented in this chapter, climaxing in the giving of “statutes that were not good,” and the history of the Egyptians in *Shemot* 7-15, climaxing in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

they should do this abomination, to cause Yehuda to sin.” (ibid. 32:35)³

Yirmiyahu emphasizes, in each of the three verses where the burning of children by fire is mentioned, that the act violates God’s command; that such an idea never “came into God’s mind,” and that God would never mislead His people this way. Such emphasis is unusual in descriptions of the people’s sins; usually, the prophets do not take the trouble to spell out that the actions of the people were not commanded by God. Moreover, it is possible that the people adopted a literal interpretation of the verse in *Shemot* 22:28: “The firstborn of your sons shall you give to Me.”

If indeed – as it appears from Yehezkel – the view prevailed among the people that this act was legitimate in God’s eyes, then it is clear why Yirmiyahu repeats over and over the prophetic message that there is no basis for it. This message is also emphasized in Yehezkel’s own words:

“For when you offer your gifts, and make your sons pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols, to this day; and shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, says the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you.” (20:31)

“And I will be sanctified through you in the eyes of the nations” (20:30-38)

The periods in Jewish history recalled in Chapter 20 of Yehezkel are not randomly chosen, and a review of them offers important insights into the process of redemption as expressed in the *Sefer*. The revival of the nation in the future is described in verses 32-38 as follows:

“And that which comes into your mind shall never come about, that you say, We will be like the nations, like the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone. As I live, says the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with anger poured out, will I be King over you. And I will bring you out from the peoples and will gather you out of the countries in which you are scattered, with an outstretched arm, and with anger poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there will remonstrate with you face to face. As I remonstrated with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I remonstrate with you, says the Lord God. And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the numbering of the covenant (or “discipline of the covenant” - *masoret ha-berit*), and I will purge out from among you the rebels, and they that transgress against Me: I will bring them out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

³ See also *Mikha* 6:7: “... Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Yehuda Elitzur has an interesting comment on these verses:

“Here, too ... there is an allusion to exile ... We can say this is the other side of the coin of Israel’s existence The text maintains ... that Am Yisrael has two spheres of existence: one of light and grandeur – the sphere of the Land of Israel, and the other of punishment and darkness – the sphere of exile. Both are legitimate spheres of existence that were destined for Israel in advance, with one anticipated and the other a constant threat.”⁴

In view of this, Elitzur explains “the wilderness of the nations” as a symbolic expression for the cruel mechanism of exilic existence, while the expression *masoret ha-berit* here (adopting the interpretation of the Septuagint) means “numbering”: as the prophet says, “I shall cause you to pass under the rod” – that is, like a shepherd counting his flock, He keeps the ones that need to be kept and sends to slaughter those that need to be slaughtered. Elitzur concludes:

“In summary ... these verses in *Yehezkel* 20 seem to me to convey a vision of exile, of the great concept that passes through and accompanies all the generations – the statutes that apply in exile. He states that any Israelite gathering in exile that imagines that “the House of Israel is becoming like the nations” – i.e., that it is proceeding towards assimilation – is being told by Yehezkel that it will not succeed in assimilating. It will be annihilated before becoming assimilated... This is hinted at for the first time in *Vayikra* 26: “the land of your enemies shall eat you up,” where no explanation is given. We propose that the “eating up” that takes place in the exile is not random, but rather selective... Yehezkel comes along and reveals the secret. This selection is based on a principle: those of Bnei Yisrael who are dwelling in exile but wish to remain “Bnei Yisrael” – will live; those who do not wish to remain “Bnei Yisrael” will not live... This prophecy pertains to the fundamental concept of exile that is interwoven through all generations, but here it is a warning given to the exiles in Babylon....”⁵

There on My holy mountain (20:39-44)

The concluding verses of the chapter are explained beautifully by Moshe Greenberg:

“In v. 39 the prophet introduces a new subject: he turns to his listeners angrily and tells them, Better that you serve the idols for the time being;

⁴ Y. Elitzur, “Yisrael be-Midbar ha-Amim (*Yehezkel* 20:32-38),” in: Y. Avishur (ed.), *Iyunim be-Sefer Yehezkel*, Jerusalem 5742, pp. 46-47. For an explanation of this prophetic unit (and a comparison to Amos 9:8-9), the article should be reviewed in its entirety (ibid. pp. 43-66).

⁵ Ibid. p. 52.

only do not defile God's service any more with your abominable gifts! The time and place that are appropriate for Divine service are only when the entire nation is able to participate, after the redemption and in the Land of Israel. 'In My holy mountain... *there* shall all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, serve Me; *there* I will accept them and *there* I will require your offerings....' The three-fold repetition of the word 'there' indicates the proper place for God's service, contrasting with the four-fold mention of the place and its portrayal of the place in v. 28."⁶

Only then does the process of redemption reach its conclusion:

"I will accept you with your 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 through you before the nations. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel, into the country about which I lifted up My hand to give it to your fathers." (20:41-42)

But the prophet emphasizes once again that even after the nation is gathered up and brought back to the land, they will persist in sinning because their return did not follow a process of repentance or any change in their behavior:

"And there you shall remember your ways, and all your doings, in which you have been defiled, and you shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that you have committed. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have acted with you for My Name's sake, not according to your wicked ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel, says the Lord God." (20:43-44)

The unit 20:30-44 is the third and final prophecy of revival preceding the Destruction (preceded by 11:14-21 and 16:59-63). It seems that the aim of this prophecy, which concludes Yehezkel's review of the history, is to emphasize through unique devices the severity of the nation's sins. The expression "corrupt doings" (*alilot nishchatot*) (20:44) – with which the unit concludes – is reminiscent of the two previous prophecies of revival that precede the Destruction. All of them emphasize the deeds of the nation, such that the vision of the future redemption that is offered prior to the Destruction is shadowed by their sins.⁷

According to Yehezkel's prophecy (as we have seen), the future revival of the nation will not come because of the covenant of the forefathers – which is not mentioned here at all – nor as the result of the nation repenting. It is a "forced"

⁶ Greenberg, p. 438.

⁷ The other prophecies of revival similarly conclude on a note that emphasizes the nation's sins. See 11:21, concerning their hearts that follow despicable things and abominations, and 16:63, concerning the remembrance and shame over the nation's disgrace.

redemption, motivated by the desecration of God's Name inherent in the very fact of the nation's exile: "These are God's people, and they have gone out of His land" (36:20). This is emphasized and repeated throughout Chapter 20 (vv. 9, 14, 22, 41). The nation should therefore be ashamed of its deeds because of the Divine motivation to restore them to their land. This redemption is "forced" upon the people, as it were, with no opportunity for them to exercise their free choice – perhaps even against their will. It is for this reason that the whole nation will not return. God will choose some of them from amongst Am Yisrael while they are in the "wilderness of the nations." Apparently it is no coincidence that this description of the future revival differs from the descriptions of redemption familiar to us from Yirmiyahu and Yishayahu – a difference that extends also to the chapters of revival in *Yehezkel* 34-39.

Translated by Kaeren Fish