

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

This week's shiurim are dedicated in commemoration of the yarhzeit of
Rabbi Lipman Z. Rabinowitz, by his family

Shiur #27: The Future of the Kingdom of Israel (37:15-25)

The revival of Israel

In the second half of Chapter 37, along with Yechezkel's prophecies of revival, there is an additional element, unmentioned until this point: the future unification of the exiles of Israel with the exiles of Yehuda. The prophet now speaks of the kingdom of Israel - which had been exiled by the Assyrian kingdom almost 150 years beforehand, - and when the time comes, he states, these exiles too will return to the land, along with the exiles of Yehuda who are in Babylonia.

This is a rather surprising prophecy. Up until now, Yechezkel has not mentioned the exiles of Israel. Moreover, consider the people's questioning of their status in exile, which we discussed in the previous chapter. This arose from the fact that as, as far as we know, the exiles of Israel, unlike the exiles of Yehuda, did not live in exile as a community with a separate, independent identity. The prevailing philosophy among them was the pagan world-view which assumed that as well as obeying the local administration, exiled groups would also show loyalty to the local deity.¹ Therefore, this prophecy concerning the reunification of the kingdom of Israel with the kingdom of Yehuda is both a notable and significant development.

Thus, our prophecy is an elaboration on verse 11, in the first part of the chapter: "... These are the bones of the whole house of Israel; Behold, they say, Our bones are dried and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off." The nation did not believe that it would recover; and even the prophet is unable to answer the question, "Can these bones live?" (v. 3). Forced to direct the question to God: "And I answered, O Lord God, You know" (ibid). The mere presence of bones does not suffice to point to the nation's future. Human bones can be discovered many years after the person has died, when they are already completely

¹ This reality is supported by the text in Melakhim II (17:24-41) and Ezra (4:1-3).

desiccated and devoid of all vitality; their condition may make identification impossible such that one cannot know whose bones these were.

But the state of these bones is different. Despite the very long time that has passed, the bones are identifiable: they are the bones of the house of Israel. It turns out that the 150 years that have passed since the exile of the Kingdom of Israel are not proof of their annihilation, and the nation receives a Divine promise of Divine revival: “Behold... I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel” (v. 12).

Like many other prophecies in *Sefer Yechezkel*, here too both metaphor and meaning are intertwined. The prophet compares the two kingdoms to two separate pieces of wood, which in the future will again become one (vv. 16-17), and then states explicitly that the nation will once again be reunited:

“... and you, son of man, take yourself one stick, and write upon it, ‘For Yehuda, for the children of Israel, his companions’; then take another stick and write upon it, ‘For Yosef, the stick of Efraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions. And join them one to the other to make one stick, and they shall become one in your hand.’” (vv. 16-17)

The people, hearing the prophet’s words, refuse to believe its message. Their response clearly testifies that the reunification of the Jewish people is a most unexpected and seemingly unlikely vision. In the wake of their response, the prophet reinforces his words and states his message explicitly:

“And when the children of your people shall speak to you, saying, Will you not tell us what you mean by these? Say to them, So says the Lord God: Behold, I will take the stick of Yosef, which is in the hand of Efraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions, and will put them and it together with the stick of Yehuda, to form one stick, and they shall be one in My hand. And the sticks on which you write shall in your hand before their eyes.” (vv. 18-20)

Now the prophet comes back to the prophecy of the nation’s revival. He integrates the idea of reunification as a single kingdom – an element that was not mentioned in his earlier prophecies of revival:

“And I will make them into one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all, and they shall no more be two nations, nor shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all” (v. 22).

The expression “into one nation” in this verse now assumes its full significance, as referring to all parts of the nation. It should be noted that the mention of “the mountains of Israel” as the place of this reunification is also

significant, as a complement to Yechezkel's prophecy in Chapter 36, which addressed the mountains of Israel.

The prophet continues:

“Nor shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions, but I will save them in all their dwelling-places where they have sinned, and will cleanse them; so shall they be My people, and I will be their God.” (v. 23)

Notably, the prophet emphasizes that it is not the people who change their behavior or ceases to sin; rather, it is God Who cleanses His people after bringing them out from among the nations.

An eternal dwelling, an eternal leader, an eternal covenant, and an eternal Temple

Our prophetic unit concludes with vv. 26-28, in which Yechezkel conveys the promise that the revival of the people, in all its various manifestations (dwelling, prince, covenant, and Temple), will last forever:

“And they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Yaakov, My servant, in which your fathers dwelled; and they shall dwell there – they and their children and their children's children, forever, and My servant David will be their prince forever. Moreover, I will make a *covenant of peace (brit shalom)* with them; it shall be an *eternal covenant (brit olam)* with them, which I will give them, and I will multiply them, and will set My Sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore.” (vv. 25-26)

The expression “covenant of peace” appeared previously, in 34:25 – “And I will make with them a *covenant of peace*, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land, and they shall dwell safely in their wilderness, and sleep in the woods.” In this prophecy in Chapter 37, Yechezkel adds the element of eternity.

In contrast, the expression “eternal covenant” is mentioned only in a prophecy that precedes the Destruction but already foretells the future revival: “And I shall remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you *an eternal covenant*” (16:60). However, the prophetic context is different in each case and accordingly, the message entailed in this expression is unique to each context.

In our chapter, the “eternal covenant” symbolizes the eternal bond between the nation and its God. In Chapter 16 there is an emphasis on the contrast between God's fulfillment of the covenant and the violation of the

covenant by the people: “For you have despised the oath in breaking the covenant” (16:59), and this expression serves to highlight this gap.

Similarly, the promise concerning the eternal Temple appears for the first time in this prophecy; for this reason, it is emphasized twice in this unit (vv. 27, 28). These verses parallel, to a certain extent, the promises that appear at the beginning of *Parashat Bechukotai* (*Vayikra* 26:3-13). Even the formulation of the future promises is similar in both places. Nevertheless, this similarity also serves to highlight what is unique to our prophecy – not only in relation to Yechezkel’s other prophecies, but also compared to the promises in the Torah. It would seem that another significant innovation in this prophecy is that the Temple will exist forever – first through the promise *it will exist in the nation’s midst* forever, and then again through the promise that *God* will dwell in their midst forever.

The future Temple has not yet been mentioned at all in Yechezkel’s prophecies of revival. The only place where it will appear again, in any form, is in 43:9 – “And I shall dwell in their midst forever”, where the formulation emphasizes the Divine Presence rather than the physical structure in the midst of the people. This fact reflects the close connection between the Temple and the nation in the future. Or more accurately it reflects the fact that it is not the Temple that is at the center of the promises to the nation for the future; instead, the promise is that God Himself will dwell in the midst of His people forever. In light of this, attention should be paid to the fact that the element of eternity (“forever”) is absent from the parallel verses in *Sefer Vayikra*, as is the promise concerning the “prince” (*nas*). On the other hand, in *Sefer Vayikra* we find a different element that does not appear in Yechezkel’s prophecy – a promise of victory in war. The reason for this is that there are no wars in the future described in Yechezkel’s prophecy (36:35).

Unique phenomenon, compared to the rest of the *Sefer*, are the four promises that appear here, and that will be kept forever: the nation’s existence upon its land (v. 25), the covenant with God (v. 26), a unified leadership for both parts of the nation (vv. 19, 22), and the Temple that will stand forever: “Then the nations shall know that I, the Lord, sanctify Israel, when My Sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for ever more” (v. 28). This concluding verse brings these various motifs together and emphasizes the impact of this ideal reality upon the other nations. It serves to emphasize the positive motifs in the prophecies after the Destruction, such that the listeners may take some measure of comfort and optimism – which has been lacking until now. Thus, these prophecies introduce a new dimension into *Sefer Yechezkel*.

Although this conclusion of Chapter 37 sounds like a suitable platform from which to proceed to describe the vision of the future Temple (chapters 40-48), we first encounter two chapters that are devoted to the war of Gog from the land of Magog. These make no mention at all of the Temple and only afterwards does the prophet return to this subject. This transition indicates that the

necessary conditions for the return of God's glory to the Temple are not yet in place. It is these conditions that are addressed by the next two chapters.

Summary of the common and unique motifs in Yechezkel's prophecies of revival

The common themes that Yechezkel treats are found in all his prophecies (see Appendix below), but his prophecies also contain special elements that are unique to each prophecy related to its context in the *Sefer*. In Chapters 11, 16 and 20 we find the prophecies of revival that preceded the Destruction. In none of these chapters does the prophet call upon the people to change their ways in order to prevent the imminent disaster. The unique element appears in 11:14-21 – from these verses we learn that the ingathering of the people to the land in the future is not the result of any change in the people's behavior, but rather the result of God's wish to sanctify His Name in the eyes of the nations. The change will be effected by God replacing their "heart of stone" with a new heart (v. 19). This serves to reinforce the prophet's message to the exiles that despite their sins, it is specifically from them that the future of the nation will sprout, and not from those remaining in the land. In Chapter 16 (vv. 59-63), we find another prophecy of revival; this one is different from all the others (and therefore is not included in the Appendix). At the end of this chapter, most of which is devoted to pointing out the scope of the nation's sins and their severity, the prophet suddenly makes a sharp turn (in a manner that is unique in all of the *Sefer*) and speaks of a process of atonement: "when I have forgiven you for all that you have done, says the Lord God" (16:63). So despite the very severe rebuke given to the nation, this harsh chapter also ends on an optimistic note. The third prophecy of revival is to be found in 20:33-44, and consists of two parts (vv. 33-39; 40-44). This prophecy, too, ends with the message that despite the nation's "corrupt doings" (*alilot nishchatot*) - a unique expression conveying the severity of their sins - God will bring them to their land.

As in this prophecy, in each of the prophecies of revival that come after the Destruction (Chapters 34, 35, 36, 39) there is a unique message. The prophecy in Chapter 34 concludes with vv. 25-30, in which, for the first time, Yechezkel does not speak of the past or of the shepherds who did not carry out their task as they should have; instead, the prophetic message might be summarized as God's blessing to His people (v. 31). The uniqueness of the prophecy of revival in Chapter 36 lies in the ceremony of purification, which we have discussed earlier. Here, too, the prophecy ends with an optimistic message that had not appeared up until now: the resettlement of the cities with "flocks of men" (v. 38). In light of this review, the uniqueness of the prophetic message in Chapter 37 (discussed above), in which Yechezkel mentions for the first time the reunification of the kingdoms, and the Divine Presence that will dwell in their midst forever, becomes manifest. Finally, the end of Chapter 39, too, illuminates unique elements that have no parallel anywhere else in the *Sefer*. The main elements that we see here are the return, compassion, and God's zealotness

for His people. It seems that these concluding verses of this part of *Sefer Yechezkel* represent a deliberate change of direction in Yechezkel's prophetic message with the conclusion of his prophecies.

In addition to these prophecies, we find one more prophecy of revival that is interwoven with Yechezkel's prophecy to Tyre (28:25-26). In this context it should be noted that this prophecy also contains a unique message: the reference to the nation as "My servant, Yaakov" (v. 25), as well as the contrasting of God's actions towards His people - "And they shall dwell safely there, and shall build houses, and plant vineyards, and they shall dwell in security" (v. 26), and His actions towards the other nations: "when I have executed judgments upon all those that disdain them round about them" (ibid.).

Having noted that each of Yechezkel's prophecies of revival throughout the chapters of the *Sefer* has its own unique element(s), we will now mention both the themes that are common to him in general, but that also make his prophecies different compared to the prophecies of consolation in *Yirmiyahu* or the prophecies of redemption in *Yishayahu*.

Yechezkel vs. Yirmiyahu

Just as we have noted the unique characteristics of Yechezkel's prophecies, so we might characterize the unique components of the parallel prophecies in *Sefer Yirmiyahu* (which are concentrated mainly in Chapters 30-33).² His prophecies include a call to repentance, a process whose reward is assured: a return to Tzion, a worthy leadership, fertility in the land. In addition, his prophecies focus on the centrality of the Ark of God's Covenant and the role of Jerusalem as God's Throne, and they describe the nation's prayer and supplication to God, with God responding to the prayer and bringing them back to the land.

Yirmiyahu's calls to repentance were in a period that preceded Yechezkel's prophecy. Yirmiyahu's prophecy occurred at a time when it still seemed possible to avert the Destruction if the people would change their behavior. In general, the prophecies of Yirmiyahu that are distinguishable from Yechezkel's include many positive motifs: return and repentance, compassion, relief, love, joy, consolation, and forgiveness. Indeed, the purpose of Yirmiyahu's prophecies for the future seems to be to comfort the people, and they therefore contain words of consolation over the Destruction of Jerusalem – an element absent from *Sefer Yechezkel* and from the other chapters in *Sefer Yirmiyahu*.

At the same time, Yirmiyahu's prophecies lack certain other central elements that are to be found only in Yechezkel's prophecies of revival. For instance, in Yechezkel we find a more detailed description of the return of the people to the land; some central details of this process are absent from

² Also in 3:14-18; 16:14-15; 23:3-8; 24:4-7; 29:10-14; 46:27-28; 50:34.

Yirmiyahu's accounts. Similarly missing are the ceremony of purification of the people by God, the future sanctification of God's Name, the pouring of God's spirit upon the people, and atonement and the promise of the eternal Temple. Finally it should be noted that the salvation and deliverance that characterize many of Yishayahu's prophecies of redemption are largely absent from both Yechezkel and Yirmiyahu. The reason for this would seem to be that the prophetic response to the tragedy of exile and Destruction is the promise of the future revival. This promise is encouraging and consoling, but ultimately it cannot turn the wheel backwards and prevent the Destruction and exile. The prophets who lived through the time of Destruction could not be as consoling. In contrast, many chapters of *Sefer Yishayahu* contain find messages of deliverance, but that was because the Destruction of the Temple did not happen in his time.

Appendix

Prophecies preceding the Destruction							
11			I will yet gather (ve- <i>kibatzti</i>) you from the peoples	And assemble (ve- <i>asafti</i>) you out of the countries	And I will give (ve- <i>natati</i>) you the land of Israel	And I will give (ve- <i>natati</i>) them a heart of flesh	
20a		I will bring you out (ve- <i>hotzeiti</i>) from the peoples	And will gather (ve- <i>kibatzti</i>) you out of the countries	And I will bring (ve- <i>heveiti</i>) you into the wilderness of the peoples	And will remonstrate with you... And I will cause you to pass...		
20b		When I bring (be- <i>hotzi'i</i>) you out from the peoples	And gather you (ve- <i>kibatzti</i>) from the	And I will be sanctified (ve- <i>nikdashti</i>) in you before the nations	When I bring (be- <i>havi'i</i>) you into the land of Israel	And you shall remember ... And you shall know	
End of prophecy to Tyre							
28			When I have gathered (be- <i>kabtzi</i>) the house of	And I shall be sanctified (ve- <i>nikdashti</i>) in them, in the		And they shall dwell... And they shall know	

			Israel from the nations	eyes of the nations			
Prophecies after the Destruction is known							
34		And I will bring them out (<i>ve- hotzeitim</i>) from the peoples	And gather them (<i>ve- kibatztim</i>) from the countries	And will bring them (<i>ve- havioti m</i>) to their own land		And I will save... And they shall know...	
36	And I will sanctify (<i>ve- kidashti</i>) My great Name... And they shall know that I am the Lord	And I will take (<i>ve- lakachti</i>) you from among the nations	And gather (<i>ve- kibatzti</i>) you out of all countries	And bring (<i>ve- heveiti</i>) you into your own land	And I will sprinkl e clean water upon you	And I will give (<i>ve- natati</i>) you a new heart	And you will dwell... And I will save... And they shall know
37		I will take (<i>lokeach</i>) the children of Israel from among the nations	And will gather (<i>ve- kibatzti</i>) them on every side	And bring (<i>ve- heveiti</i>) them into their own land	I will save... And I will cleanse ... And they shall dwell	Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when My Sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for ever more	
39	I will have mercy... And I will be zealous for My holy Name	When I have brought(<i>b e- shovevi</i>) them back from the peoples	And gathered (<i>ve- kibatzti</i>) them out of their enemies' lands	And am sanctifi ed (<i>ve- nikdas hti</i>) in them, in the eyes of many nations	And I have gathered them in (<i>ve-kinastim</i>) to their own land	And they shall know	

Translated by Kaeren Fish