

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

**Shiur #29: The Vision of the Future Temple:
The Temple with God's Glory in Its Midst (40:1 – 43:9)**

The final nine chapters of *Sefer Yechezkel* set forth a vision of the future Temple. These chapters are rich in detail about the dimensions of the building, the various sacrifices, land inheritances, and more. Our focus here will be more thematic.

The last part of *Sefer Yechezkel* begins by noting the date:

“In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the [first] month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck...” (40:1).

Besides the chronological date (apparently, the 10th of Nissan in the year 573 B.C.E.), this introduction also indicates the significant dates of that period which serve as anchors for counting years: the exile of Yehoyakhin, and the Destruction. (In fact, this is the only prophecy which Yechezkel dates in relation to the Destruction.) Until now Yechezkel has counted years based on the exile of Yehoyakhin (see, for example, 1:2; 8:1; 24:1, and more), which attests to its significance as a turning point by which to date events. Now, fourteen years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the grave ramifications of this catastrophe are seeping into the consciousness of the exiles in Babylonia. Most had been exiled with Yehoyakhin prior to the Destruction, and were therefore largely cut off from what was happening in Eretz Yisrael. Now, perhaps with new exiles joining their communities in Babylonia, they begin to internalize the significance of the Destruction.

It is not coincidental that Yechezkel's prophecy about the future Temple comes now, a point when the nation has become accustomed to the reality of life in exile, without an active Jewish center in the land (following the descent of the remnant to Egypt, which appears to have occurred just a few years after the Destruction). In their new reality, the exiles are left uncertain about their future and their status. This is reflected in the prophecies of Yechezkel and, even more so, in the messages of the prophets of the return: Chaggai, Zekharia, and Malakhi.

Note that this prophecy by Yechezkel is something of a “lone voice” in a period of scant prophetic activity. This makes this prophecy one of great importance. (The next date to be noted in a prophecy is the declaration by Koresh (Cyrus), during the period of the Return, some thirty-five years after this prophecy by Yechezkel, and Chaggai and Zekharia were active only some sixteen years after that declaration.¹) In fact, this prophecy by Yechezkel uttered in the Land of Israel, is the last one by which we can assess the situation of the exiles in Babylonia at this time.² The importance of the date is emphasized by the prophet himself: “... on that very day the hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me there.” (40:1)

The prophet is brought back to the Land of Israel:

“In the visions of God He brought me into the land of Israel, and set me upon a very high mountain, upon which was something like the structure of a city to the south.” (40:2)

The description of the place where he is set down – “a very high mountain” – is certainly interesting. The verse gives no indication whether Yechezkel is referring to somewhere within the boundaries of the city of Jerusalem, or whether he refers to the entire land of Israel west of the Jordan. Perhaps he is describing the place gradually, such that only at the end does he indicate the precise location: “land of Israel,” “a very high mountain,” “the structure of a city,” “to the south”. But is the city Jerusalem? This question is left unanswered. The question is even amplified by the fact that all of the following chapters make no explicit mention of the name of the city.

Immediately upon arrival in the city, the prophet sees a man whose job is to measure, using a thread of flax and a measuring reed (the accepted instruments for this task in the Ancient Near East):

“And He brought me there, and, behold, there was a man, whose appearance was like the appearance of brass, with a thread of flax in his hand, and a measuring reed, and he stood at the gate. And the man said to me, Son of man, behold with your eyes, and hear with your ears, and put your mind to all that I shall show you; for you were brought here in order that they might be shown to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel.” (vv. 3-4)

God brings the prophet to the place where this land surveyor awaits him. God emphasizes the importance of conveying the vision that Yechezkel is about to see to all of Israel. The root “*r-a-h*” (to see) is repeated five times over the

¹ An exception is the end of *Sefer Yirmiyahu* (52:31-34), which deals with the fate of Yehoyakhin in Babylonia, in the year 561 B.C.E. – about twelve years after this prophecy by Yechezkel.

² The only prophecy in *Sefer Yechezkel* that is dated later than this is the prophecy to Egypt (29:17), which we have discussed previously, but the text there gives no explicit information in this context.

course of these two verses, along with mention of the eyes. This emphasis is apparently meant to convey the importance of passing on the vision precisely as the prophet has seen it.

The plan of the building (40:5 - 42)

From 40:5 until the end of Chapter 42, the prophet describes the plan of the Temple.³ The verses present a multitude of difficulties.⁴ It is not the nation that will build the Temple: this is the message that the verses seem to collectively convey. Therefore they do not need a plan according to which the construction might proceed. Perhaps the opacity of the verses and the futility of trying to construct an actual model based on them is deliberate. Perhaps their aim is to rule out the possibility of anyone initiating the Temple's reconstruction on the basis of this prophecy at any stage, now or in the future.⁵ At the same time, it is important to the prophet to convey the vision of the building of the Temple in a very tangible and convincing way, but at the same time to do so in an opaque enough way that prevents premature efforts in this direction. So the detailed description carries a dual – and indeed self-contradictory – message: on one hand, the Temple is presented as something concrete and real; on the other, it cannot actually be built (at least at this stage).

At first the prophet sets down the dimensions of the wall surrounding the Temple and of the eastern gate (vv. 5-16). An interesting detail that is difficult to understand in this description concerns the windows referred to as "*chalonot atumot*" (v. 16). This might mean that they are fake windows, framed and set in relief, but actually filled with stone. The reason for this might be that it is forbidden to look in on the Sanctuary. The windows exist, but are in reality "opaque." Symbolically, this expresses the special protection for the Temple at the points of potential weakness, such as the windows.⁶

³ On the face of it, the description seems so detailed that one has the impression that a model Temple could be built on the basis of its dimensions. However, upon closer inspection it turns out that some of the essential details are omitted. Many sketches have attempted to make sense of the plan as set forth in these chapters, and we shall not elaborate on them here. The interested reader might refer, for example, to Da'at Mikra on Yechezkel, pp. 319-349; Yechezkel – Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter, pp. 322-328; and modern commentaries on Sefer Yechezkel.

⁴ See the commentary of Y. Moskowitz in his introduction to these chapters (Da'at Mikra on Sefer Yechezkel, pp. 317-324) where he lists the various exegetical proposals for solving these difficulties, and then points out the exegetical problems that remain.

⁵ This idea offers a clear answer to the question that has troubled many scholars: the question of why the Second Temple was not built in accordance with Yechezkel's vision. The builders simply had no technical way of doing so, even had they wanted to (and all this in addition to the many other challenges facing them, as attested to in the prophecies of Chaggai, Zekharia and Malakhi). Moreover, it may be that the prophetic message of these chapters in Yechezkel is that it is not the nation that will build the Temple on this model – or, at least, that that was the way in which his prophetic message was understood. Perhaps the expectation of a Temple that would be built by God and would fit the description in these chapters in Yechezkel added to the difficulties facing the returnees to the land when they commenced building the Second Temple.

⁶ This suggestion was raised by Dr. Guy Stiebel at a lecture delivered on 4 Kislev 5767. In this lecture he explained the verse, "And for the House he made windows that were "*shekufot atumot*"

Thereafter, the prophet describes the dimensions of the outer courtyard and the gates (the northern gate, the southern gate, and the inner court gate; vv. 17-37). The end of Chapter 40 includes a description of the burnt offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering upon tables at the entry to the northern gate, as well as the chambers of the *kohanim* who are the “keepers of the charge of the house” and the “keepers of the charge of the altar” (vv. 38-46). These *kohanim* are henceforth referred to as “the sons of Tzaddok, from among the sons of Levi, who come near to the Lord to minister to Him”; we will discuss their special status below. Here, too, within the framework of the dimensions of the House, there is a clear tendency towards protecting the Sanctuary, like we saw with the windows. For this reason the *kohanim* are “keepers of the charge,” and therefore their lineage is carefully guarded.

In verse 48 the prophet moves on to a description of the inner plan of the Temple. He first describes the porch (*ulam*) (40:48-49), followed by the *heikhal*, the Holy of Holies, the inner chamber, and the decorations on the walls (41:1-26). In the midst of this description the prophet notes the wooden altar and the table (v. 22). In Chapter 42 the prophet is brought to the outer courtyard, where he describes the chambers in between the outer courtyard and the inner one (vv. 1-14). In vv. 13-14 he notes the holy chambers and their function:

“... they are holy chambers where the *kohanim* who approach the Lord shall eat the most holy things there they shall lay the most holy things, and the meal offering, and the sin offering, and the guilt offering, for the place is holy. When the *kohanim* enter there, then they shall not go out of the holy place into the outer court, but there they shall lay their garments in which they minister, for they are holy, and shall put on other garments, and shall approach to those things which belong to the people.”

The chambers are meant as places where the *kohanim* can eat the sacrificial meat and change their garments. Emphasized, here too, is the gap: the distance between the *kohanim* (and their garments) on one hand, and the people, on the other. The people are not involved with the sacrifices in these verses, nor do they even see the *kohanim* in the garments in which they minister. Symbolically, this image carries a harsh message about the distancing of the people from the future Temple – a message reiterated and impressed more deeply in the chapters that follow. Yechezkel concludes this section of the tour of the Temple with a description of the perimeter of the Temple Mount and the wall around the Temple (42:15-20).

(*Melakhim* I 6:4) as being derived from the idea of a “*mashkof*” – a lintel, protecting the entrance. I therefore adopted the same interpretation for the verse in Yechezkel, and I thank him for this contribution.

The return of God's Glory to the Temple (43:1-9)

The prophet describes the return of God's glory to the Temple (we earlier touched on these verses when discussing of the journeys of God's glory in *Sefer Yechezkel*):

“Then He brought me to the gate, the gate that looks towards the east, and behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the earth, and His voice was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with His glory.

And the appearance of the vision which I saw was like the vision that I saw when I came to destroy the city, and the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river Kevar, and I fell upon my face.” (vv. 1-3)

We will make a few points that will complement our earlier discussion. Here, too, as at the beginning of Chapter 40, the prophet makes repeated use of the root “*r-a-h*” (to see, appearance, vision). However, while previously what the prophet saw was the plan of the Temple, here the same root points to a vision of God's glory.⁷ In addition, as in Chapter 1, here too the vision is full of sound and light. God's glory is revealed not in silent modesty, but with great power. The “sound of many waters” to which God's voice is compared, will turn out in Chapter 47 to represent, more than ever before, the bond between God and His people. Attention should be paid to the fact that this image serves as a sort of “compensation” for the lack of participation of the nation in the offering of the sacrifices – unlike the situation at the time of the Temple built by Shlomo. Now the prophet emphasizes once again the return of God's glory to the Temple:

“And the glory of the Lord came into the House by the way of the gate whose entrance is towards the east. And a spirit carried me up and brought me into the inner court, and, behold, the glory of the Lord filled the House.” (vv. 4-5)

These verses create an exalting sense of God's complete presence. The transition to the next four verses is therefore sharp and unexpected:

“And I heard one speaking to me out of the House, and a man stood by me. And he said to me, Son of man, behold the place of My Throne, and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of Bnei Yisrael forever; and the house of Israel shall no more profane My holy Name – neither they nor their kings, by their harlotry, nor by the carcasses of their kings in their high places. In their setting of their threshold by My thresholds, and their doorpost by My posts, and only the wall between Me and them, they have defiled My holy Name by their disgusting deeds

⁷ In addition, the appearances of the root here are a contrast and complement to its use in Chapter 8 to characterize the idolaters, who do not see God.

which they have committed; and so I have consumed them in My anger. Now let them put away their harlotry, and the carcasses of their kings, far from Me, and I will dwell in the midst of them forever.” (vv. 6-9)

The sudden fall from such lofty exaltation to such depths seems to reflect the fact that one of the conditions for the return of God’s glory to the Temple is that “the house of Israel will no more profane My holy Name”. The aim of this prophecy is to point out the cause of the defilement of the Temple, in the years in which God’s glory left the Temple and the edifice was destroyed, since this prophecy belongs to the vision of the future Temple (Chapters 40-48) and not to the chapters of rebuke (2-24). Unlike the concept of “profaning [*chillul*] of God”, which, in *Sefer Yechezkel*, always refers to God’s status in the eyes of the other nations, the “defiling [*tum’a*] of God’s Name” arises from the actions of Bnei Yisrael – actions whose gravity causes a more profound desecration of God’s Name than any outward apparent damage to His standing. Therefore, in vv. 7-8 the prophet repeats twice the main reason for God’s glory having left the Temple: the house of Israel, through their evil actions, caused God’s holy Name to be defiled.

“... neither they nor their kings, by their harlotry, nor by the carcasses of their kings in their high places. In their setting of their threshold by My thresholds, and their doorpost by My posts, and only the wall between Me and them....”

These verses describe the burial of the kings close to the Temple. According to the commentaries of Rashi, Radak, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency, the kings were actually buried in the Temple itself. This interpretation amplifies the severity of their actions.⁸ Such burial would bring severe impurity upon those in proximity to the burial place; beyond this, it would represent a defiant challenging of God’s supremacy over the mortal kings. Symbolically, burial of the kings in the Temple is an expression of the kings’ view of themselves as worthy of resting near the holiest place, together with God, while they themselves are performing actions that are considered “harlotry”. In *Sefer Yechezkel* this expression is used as a general reference to the worst type of idolatry. The cessation of such activity is a necessary condition for God dwelling in the nation’s midst forever. In the verses that follow, Yechezkel demands, as a condition for giving over the plan of the Temple to the people, that they “be ashamed of their iniquities” (v. 10) and “are ashamed of all that they have done” (v. 11). Although these are chapters devoted to the vision of the future Temple, following on after the chapters of revival, the prophet nevertheless emphasizes once again the severity of the sins that brought about the destruction of the First Temple. The conclusion of this prophecy represents the end of the rebuke to the nation in

⁸ However, in the final chapters of *Melakhim* II, which discuss the sins of the kings during this period, no mention is made of burial of the kings in the Temple, although the idolatry introduced into the Temple is explicitly noted (21:4-7; 23:6-7). Where explicit mention is made of burial of kings, the location is the garden of Uzza (21:18, 26) or the city of David.

Sefer Yechezkel. Now, a study of the prophecies leaves us longing for a vision of the future without any painful reminder of the events of the past.

Translated by Kaeren Fish