

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
By Rav Tzvi Sinensky

Shiur #08: Chagai Redoubles His Efforts

The Comparison to Egypt

In the opening five verses of chapter two, prophesying on the 24th of *Elul*,¹ Chagai once again exhorts the community to remain committed to the building process. Although they had obeyed Chagai's first prophecy, they had apparently become discouraged yet again. Chagai begins by acknowledging the obvious: anyone who had not witnessed the First Temple would not be impressed by this pale imitation. Still, he reminds Zerubavel, Yehoshua, and the people to strengthen themselves and recall the covenant (*brit*) that He forged with the Jews in Egypt. God's spirit remains with the people ("*ve-ruchi omedet be-kirbekhem*"), so they need not fear.

The references to Egypt are unusual, and they piqued the commentators' interest. First, the reference to a covenant is strange, as we do not find a covenant in the Torah's account of the Exodus. Some (*Targum Yerushalmi* 2:5; *Metzudat David*, s.v. *et*) explain cryptically that the reference is to the covenant that was forged as the Jews left Egypt. Filling in the gaps of this interpretation, Malbim (s.v. *ve-atta*) suggests that the reference is to the *brit ha-aganot*, the covenant of the basins, recorded in *Shemot* 24. More broadly, Malbim continues, God's spirit refers to the miracle-working divine presence that descended upon the Jews during the redemption.

Building on this interpretation, we may suggest that *brit Mitzrayim* and "*ruach Hashem*" refer to the open miracles that accompanied the Jews during the Exodus. This fits nicely with the allusion to the verse "*Va-ya'aminu ba-Hashem u-veMoshe avdo*," "They had faith in God and Moshe His servant," which we noted in the previous chapter. As in the first chapter of Chagai, the term "*ruach*"

¹ The two dates mentioned in the second chapter are 24 *Elul*, the day before the creation (on some Tannaitic views), and 21 *Tishrei*, Hoshana Rabba. Returning to the first chapter of *Chagai*, it turns out that his prophecies have run from 1 *Elul* to 21 *Tishrei*, which, according to tradition, represents the full period of repentance. This is especially striking in light of the language of *teshuvah* ("*simu levavkhem*"), which figures so prominently in our *sefer*. As with many other instances in the *Shivat Tziyyon* period, the rabbinic outlook is rooted in *Tanakh*.

hearkens back to the inspiration of Cyrus, which triggered the period of *Shivat Tziyyon*.²

Shaking Heavens and Earth

In verses 6-9, God promises that He will shake (“*ve-hirashti*”) the heavens and earth, the sea and dry land, and all the nations. In doing so, He will fill the Second Temple with the nations’ treasures. Indeed, the honor (“*kavod*”) of the Second Temple will exceed that of the first. The imagery of the treasures of other nations being acquired by God and His people (“*li ha-kesef ve-li ha-zahav ne’um Hashem Tzevakot*”) parallels the third chapter of *Malakhi*. As we will discuss toward the end of our classes, *Malakhi* invokes this imagery to describe a massive upheaval that is anticipated at the end of days. Here too, the prophet conveys a similar message, if one more specifically directed at the *Shivat Tziyyon* period: although things might presently appear grim, ultimately a transformation will occur, and the Second Temple’s glory will outstrip even that of the First.

There is, of course, another event to which the prophecy of riches alludes: the events of the plague of darkness, during which the Jews seized the Egyptians’ possessions. It is also highly reminiscent of the events following the plague of the death of the firstborn, which the Jews took material goods from their Egyptian neighbors. This reinforces the parallels we have already noted between Chagai and the miraculous spirit of the Exodus. By extending the implicit analogy of the Jews’ newfound ownership of massive amounts of gold and silver, Chagai reinforces just how radical is the transformation he anticipates. During the period of the Jewish enslavement in Egypt, the notion that the impoverished slave nation would suddenly take possession of their captors’ riches would have seemed utterly implausible. Much the same, argues Chagai implicitly, may be said for the metamorphosis he foresees.

The term *ve-hirashti* is also noteworthy. In light of the dating of this prophecy to the 21st of Tishrei, Hoshana Rabba, Mr. Steven Weiner has proposed that the practice of *chibbut arava*, beating the willow branch, is an allusion to Chagai’s vision.³ Just as the *ra’ash* of the prophecy was a source of great solace to the people of Chagai’s generation, so too the people of *bayit sheni* began to beat the *aravot* to remind themselves of Chagai’s optimistic vision for the future. It is for this reason that *chibbut arava* is best understood not as a commemoration of the destroyed Temple, but as the continuation of a practice that began while the Second Temple stood.

A Halakhic Query

² Possibly, the term also alludes to Yechezkel’s famed prophecy of the dry bones (*Yechezkel* 37:1-14). In that *nevua*, God declares that He will revive the Jews with his *ruach*, giving them hope once again for restoration.

³ <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2015/09/what-did-willows-ever-do-to-deserve.html>

We now turn to the second prophecy of chapter two, which was delivered on the 24th day of Kislev. Chagai poses two legal questions to the priests. First, if one were to touch food with his cloak, does the food automatically become sanctified? They answer, “No.” Second, he continues, if one who has contracted impurity from a human corpse touches food, does it become impure? They answer, “Yes.” Chagai cryptically concludes, “That is how this people and that is how this nation looks to Me, declares the Lord, and so, too, the work of their hands: Whatever they offer there is defiled” (2:14). Afterward, Chagai goes on to once more urge the Jews to proceed with the construction. If they do so, their crops will yield bounty.

The meaning of the halakhic metaphor is unclear, leading the commentators to offer varied interpretations. Rashi and *Metzudat David* (2:14) suggest based on the Talmud (*Pesachim* 17a) that in fact the people’s first answer was incorrect: the food is indeed sanctified. Just as the people have erred in this regard, Chagai concludes, so too they have erred in many other respects concerning the Temple service, and they must repent. R. Yosef Kara, a student in Rashi’s school of biblical commentary, follows this approach, adding that the nation is therefore obligated to study closely the relevant laws before continuing the reconstruction.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that there is no indication in the text that the priests answered incorrectly. Had that been the case, we would have expected Chagai to explicitly note their mistake. Moreover, nowhere else in our chapter does Chagai allude to any shortcomings in regard to the Jews’ Temple ritual practice. His critique is limited to their lack of diligence in completing the physical edifice.

R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod (*Da’at Mikra* to 2:14) suggests that “this nation” refers not to the Jews, but to the Samaritans and other antagonists. Their every act is ritually impure, and they have no share in the building of the Temple. In issuing this stinging critique, Chagai confronts head-on one of the major conundrums that bedeviled the *Shivat Tziyyon* community.

This reading, however, also seems difficult. Although the Jews’ enemies figure prominently in *Sefer Ezra*, there is no discussion of them whatsoever in *Chagai*. It seems strange to suddenly introduce them at this stage in the book. Moreover, Chagai refers to “this nation,” which, in context, as Rashi and other commentators maintain, most likely refers to the Jews.

Finally, R. David Kimchi explains that the point is that offering sacrifices without building the Temple is “*tamei*,” impure. That the priests can correctly answer Chagai’s questions in no way reduces the shamefulness of the situation. By continuing to offer sacrifices yet delaying the Temple’s construction, the priests thoroughly devalue the sacrificial service.

In contrast to the alternatives considered above, Radak's interpretation has two strengths. First, he follows the simple reading of the text by assuming that the priests have answered the query accurately. Second, he avoids introducing a consideration, such as the priests' ignorance or the enemy nations, that is otherwise extraneous to *Chagai*. His interpretation therefore seems to represent the simplest reading of the text. Chagai uses the metaphor to find another way to urge the people to proceed with the stalled project.⁴

The Blight of the Harvest

In the conclusion to the second prophecy of the chapter, on the 24th of Kislev, Chagai returns to the agricultural curse: "I struck you, declares the Lord, with blight and mildew and hail, but you did not return to me" (2:17). This verse bears similarities to the plague of hail during the Exodus (*Shemot* 9:18-34) and to the *tokhecha*, the scathing rebuke of *Parashat Ki Tavo* (*Devarim* 28:22). Above all, it bears a striking resemblance to the verse in *Amos* (4:9): "I scourged you with blight and mildew, repeatedly your gardens and vineyards, your fig trees and olive trees were devoured by locusts. Yet you did not turn back to me, declares the Lord." Here, again, the parallels to earlier texts serve to highlight both the similarities and differences in their respective messages. For both Amos and Chagai, the concern for agricultural blessing is paramount. The definition of "returning to the Lord," however, differs sharply: whereas *Amos*, like *Yoel* (discussed in our previous lecture), refers to repentance in the classic prophetic sense, connoting especially social justice and idolatry, Chagai uses the same terminology to speak to the mandate of his time: completing God's house.⁵

Zerubavel's Ascension

We now turn to the work's concluding prophecy. In the final four verses, also on the 24th of Kislev, Chagai foresees that God will shake the earth and overturn kings' thrones, chariots, and their riders. The *sefer* concludes:

On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O my servant son of Zerubavel, son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and make you as a signet (*chotam*); for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts.

⁴ Irrespective of the analogy's precise meaning, the fact that Chagai conveys a key lesson via halakhic analogy dovetails nicely with what we have seen. Chagai is presented as a legal authority facilitating a transition from the era of prophecy to that of rabbinic law.

⁵ As we conclude this section of the chapter, it is worth dwelling on the prophecy's date, the 24th of Kislev. This, of course, is the day immediately prior to Chanuka. In a remarkable tour de force, R. Yoel bin Nun, echoed by R. Menachem Leibtag, argues that our verses constitute nothing less than a Biblical basis for Chanuka. In fact, there is an allusion to R. Yoel's theory in Rashi's commentary to the earlier part of the chapter. On the phrase "*va-ani marish*" (2:6), Rashi comments: "*be-nissim ha-na'asim livnei Chashmonaei*," "with the miracles that will be performed during the days of the Hasmoneans." To properly appreciate this thesis, we will set aside this discussion until our analysis of the fourth chapter of Zekharia in a few classes' time.

The prophecy is doubly unclear. First, to which time period does Chagai allude? Will Zerubavel himself be chosen? Or does Chagai refer to a future era, perhaps even messianic?

The commentators present a range of views. Rashi and Ibn Ezra suggest that the reference is to the downfall of the Persian empire; Radak reads the passage as describing either Persia's dissolution or wars that will be fought by the Persian empire; R. Yosef Kara understands the prophecy to refer to the period of the Hasmoneans (see n. 2); and both *Metzudat David* and Malbim simply read the prophecy as messianic.

Be that as it may, again in contrast to many of his earlier peers among the latter prophets, Chagai only turns toward messianic or long-term prophecies at the *sefer's* coda. Even then, unlike eschatologically-minded prophets such as Yoel and Tzefania, little in the way of apocalypse appears. Ultimately, Chagai's message incorporates an aspect of the longer prophetic view, but remains predominantly focused on the practical task at hand: *simu levavkhem*.

A Literary Analysis

In concluding the work, it is worth taking a step back and considering its overall literary structure and the significance thereof. A close examination yields an ABCDABCD structure:

1. Chagai instructs the leaders and Jews to build (1:1)
 - a. The people refuse to build (1:2)
 - i. The lean agricultural yield will be reversed if the people build (1:3-11). This is accompanied by *simu levavkhem* (x2).
 1. Zerubavel and the peoples' spirits are raised, and they listen (1:12-15)
2. Chagai instructs the leaders and Jews to continue building (2:1-9)
 - a. The people's actions are impure (2:10-14)
 - i. The lean agricultural yield will be reversed if the people build (2:15-19). This is accompanied by *simu levavkhem* (x3).
 1. Zerubavel will be elevated (2:20-23)

There is, then, a straightforward literary structure to *Sefer Chagai*. This arrangement reinforces many of the motifs we have noted. The simplicity of the book's design mirrors the directness of the prophet's message. Anxiety about agricultural yield increases the peoples' motivation to follow Chagai's charge. *Simu levavkhem* appears at crucial junctions, with the extra (fifth) reference in the second half of the book bolstering Chagai's call to practical, nationalist repentance.

The *sefer's* "double" (ABCDABCD) structure helps to explain Chagai's success in ultimately setting the reconstruction project back on its footing. By single-mindedly urging the people again and again to focus on one task, he ultimately achieves what he sets out to accomplish.

Chagai's pragmatic message, however, only tells half the story. If the verse in *Ezra* (5:1-2) is any indication, Chagai's colleague Zekharia, who manifested a markedly different prophetic style, was equally influential in prodding the Jews to continue their efforts. To fully understand the people's prophetic inspiration, then, we must consider Zekharia's esoteric visions, to which we will turn in our next *shiur*.