

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah z”l,
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Shiur #10: Sefer Zekharia: Optimistic Visions

A Brand Plucked From Fire

At the beginning of the third chapter of *Zekharia*, we encounter Yehoshua the High Priest, the mysterious protagonist whom we previously encountered in *Ezra* and *Chagai*. Yehoshua stands before God’s angel, and to his right stands Satan, the prosecutor. God declares to Satan that he has no power over Yehoshua, who is “a brand plucked from fire.”

Next, we see Yehoshua clothed in soiled garments. The angel instructs those standing nearby to change the high priest into unsoiled garments, explaining, “I have removed your guilt from upon you and clothed you in [priestly] garments.” After adding a “pure diadem” to Yehoshua’s outfit, the angel charges Yehoshua to follow God’s ways, judge the people, and guard the Temple courtyard, for which he will be rewarded with “*mehalkhim*,” according to many a reference to a guardian angel. The angel goes on to declare that he will bring his servant “*Tzemach*,” an apparent reference to a messianic member of King David’s line. He concludes by noting that the stone before Yehoshua has seven eyes. God will “execute its engraving,” ushering an era in which people will invite one another to rest under the shade of vines and fig trees.

We will focus on a number of key elements. First, in what sense is Yehoshua “a brand plucked from fire,” and how does this protect him from Satan? The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 93a) takes this line literally, asserting that Yehoshua had been hurled into the fire along with Tzidkiyahu, the final king of Judah, by the Babylonians at the time of the destruction. Rashi (3:2, s.v. *ha-lo*) cites this midrashic interpretation.

A number of *peshat*-oriented commentators, including R. Yosef Kara, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, understand that the fire need not be taken literally, but should

rather be understood symbolically: Yehoshua is one of the few survivors from the conflagration of the *churban*. How dare Satan wish to do him harm? We may add that although it is difficult to take literally the suggestion that Yehoshua survived the *churban*, his father Berekhya was exiled (*Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 5:41) and his grandfather Ido executed (*Melakhim II* 25:18-21), making him a second-generation survivor.

The Talmud may also seek to make a similar point, namely that Yehoshua was a survivor, adding a literal dimension (the fire) to intensify the point. Either way, the image is poignant: a survivor has returned to lead his people in the service of the Temple that had been destroyed.

A comparison to the fourth chapter of *Amos*, which invokes a very similar term in a rather different context, furthers our appreciation of the “brand plucked from fire” imagery. Drawing to the conclusion of a devastating criticism of the First Temple period’s Northern Kingdom, *Amos* adds: “I have wrought destruction among you as when I destroyed Sodom and Amora; you have become like a brand plucked from burning (*ke-ud mutzal mi-sereifa*). Yet you have not turned back to me, declares the Lord” (4:11). In *Amos*, the Jews are so devastated as to be grasping for survival. The ironic reversal of *Zekharia* is deeply optimistic. The Jewish People are no longer just barely surviving God’s wrath. Quite the opposite. It is now the same brand plucked from fire that will lead his people in reversing the *churban* that his family had experienced first-hand.

Our understanding of the “brand plucked from fire” motif is further heightened by a close look at Yehoshua’s soiled clothing. Ibn Ezra understands the clothing to simply represent the sorry state of present affairs. A priest is offering sacrifices upon an altar, but without a Temple to house the *mizbei’ach*.

The term “*avon*,” “iniquity” in verse 4, however, seems to indicate that the filthy clothing represent sin. The Talmud (*ibid.*), followed by most classical commentators, explains that Yehoshua’s sons married gentile women. Rashi (3:3, s.v. *lavush*) adds that he was punished for not having protested against his children. Despite this sin, God instructs Yehoshua to remove his clothing and don sparkling clean new garments, in addition to the crown. If Yehoshua has sinned, why does God “automatically” forgive him? It would appear that God’s mercy is aroused due to Yehoshua’s past. He is chosen not so much for his own actions, but for what he represents. Of course, he must discharge his responsibilities properly; if he neglects his religious duties, he will be removed from his position. Still, it is due to the comforting symbolism of “the brand plucked from fire” that Yehoshua has been chosen for the role, and it is because of that history that his sins have been overlooked.

The imagery of a brand plucked from fire, of course, has great relevance to the post-Holocaust generation. As Ha-Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l* noted in a

lecture,¹ Yehoshua's story is our story. Despite his imperfections, Yehoshua is appointed to a prominent position due to his status as a survivor. Similarly, instead of passing judgment regarding the causes of the *Shoah* or the religious shortcomings of any survivors, *Zekharia* reminds us that we must revere them and, in important respects, view them as our leaders.

The Seven-Eyed Stone

The chapter concludes with the vision of the seven-eyed stone. What could this possibly represent? As many commentaries note, the stone seems to allude to the boulder used by Zerubavel to lay the Temple's foundations (4:10). What of the eyes? As we find elsewhere in the Bible, such as regarding God's unique protection over the Land of Israel (*Devarim* 11:12), eyes represent Divine providence. God will protect the rebuilding project, "removing the country's guilt in a single day" (3:9). Like Yehoshua, the people are perhaps not fully innocent and worthy. Still, just as in the high priest's poignant story, they are all deserving of consolation after the trauma they have endured. Therefore, God will ensure the success of their endeavors.

Not By Might, Not by Power

The fourth chapter presents the image of the candelabra. Zekharia is shown a golden lamp with seven branches and candles, flanked by two olive trees. The angel is surprised that Zekharia does not know the vision's meaning and proceeds to explain its significance. God says to Zerubavel that "*lo ve-chayil ve-lo ve-khoach ki im be-ruchi*," "not by might, not by power but by My spirit" (4:7). Any mountains that stand in Zerubavel's path shall be flattened; all will laud the beauty of his stone. God then adds:

Zerubavel's hands have founded this house and Zerubavel's hands shall complete it. Then you shall know that it was the Lord of hosts who sent me to you. Does anyone scorn a day of small beginnings? When they see the stone of distinction in the hand of Zerubavel, they shall rejoice. (4:9-10)

Finally, two additional symbolisms are explained. The seven candles represent the eyes of God, which range over the whole earth. And the two olive trees represent the two anointed dignitaries, presumably Yehoshua and Zerubavel, who stand above the whole earth.

The central thrust of the passage seems to be twofold. First, as in the imagery of the rock, the seven-pronged *menora* indicates that God's providence will ensure the success of the rebuilding. Once again, as opposed to Chagai, Zekharia's message is not an instruction to build, but that the project will succeed. Despite its humble start, no one should "scorn a day of small beginnings." The work will be led by Zerubavel and Yehoshua together.

¹ Available at <http://etzion.org.il/en/not-brand-plucked-fire>

Second, the method for achieving those steps is not by military might, but through spirituality: “*ki im be-ruchi*.” This terminology is, of course, familiar to us from Cyrus’ call at the beginning of *Ezra*, as well as Chagai’s description of God having inspired the spirit of Zerubavel, Yehoshua, and the nation to rebuild the Temple (*Chagai* 1:14). Once again, Zekharia emerges as the spiritual counterpart to Chagai’s practical program.

What of the olive trees? While instinctively we might identify olive trees as symbols of peace, in fact there is no evidence that this association was present in Biblical times. What does seem likely is that the olives represent the oil with which the high priest and king are anointed. Additionally, as I have argued elsewhere,² it seems likely that the olive represents permanence. As Nachum Sarna explained in relation to the olive branch’s symbolism in the Noach story:

The olive tree, one of the earliest to be cultivated in the Near East, is an evergreen. It is extraordinarily sturdy and may thrive for up to a thousand years. Thus, it became symbolic of God’s blessings of regeneration, abundance, and strength, which is most likely the function it serves here. (*JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 8:11)

Applied to our context, the olive trees would appear to signal the durability of Zerubavel and Yehoshua’s leadership. God’s eyes will watch over the community and its leaders, ensuring the survival of the imperiled community.

The Chanuka Connection

Having reviewed the prophecy of the *Menora*, we are now in position to consider the significance of the selection of Zekharia’s prophecy as the *haftara* of Shabbat Chanuka. Although the image of the *menora* provides an obvious connection to Chanuka, in particular given the rabbis’ spiritually-oriented emphasis on the miracle of the oil over the Maccabees’ military prowess, it is not immediately clear what the deeper significance of this choice might be. To better appreciate that connection, let us review the remarkable thesis of R. Yoel Bin Nun. R. Bin Nun seeks to establish a pervasive connection between the prophecies of *Shivat Tzion* and the miracles of the Hasmoneans.

R. Yoel offers a number of insights.³ First, he notes that Chagai’s final prophecy is delivered on the twenty-fourth of Kislev, the day before Chanuka. Chagai foresees a time in which God will “shake up” the entire earth. As we noted in our discussion of *Chagai*, it is unclear to which time period the prophet refers. Second, there is reason to believe that there was an ancient holiday around the time of the winter solstice that celebrated the eventual return of the

² <http://www.tzvisinensky.com/2015/10/19/the-olive-leaf/>

³ See *Megadim* 12, pp. 49-97. For an excellent synopsis of R. Bin Nun’s view, see R. Menachem Leibtag’s first two Chanuka *shiurim*, available at <http://tanach.org/chanuka.htm>.

warmer climate and the successful growth of the crops. Indeed, the Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 8b) traces such a celebration to the time of *Adam Ha-Rishon*, who, as the days grew shorter, feared that sunshine would eventually disappear altogether. When he saw that the sun began to set earlier and that the world had not expired, Adam rejoiced. R. Bin Nun suggests that this may serve as something of a basis for our celebration of Chanuka around this time of year. The light of Chanuka symbolizes the restoration of the warmth marked by the passing of the winter solstice. Finally, based on his first-hand exposure to Israeli agriculture, R. Bin Nun observes that the Israeli olive season runs considerably later than the overwhelming majority of its crops, beginning around the time of Sukkot and concluding at roughly Chanuka.⁴

Given all this, it seems likely that Chagai intentionally offered his optimistic prophecy on this joyous date, which marks the conclusion of the olive harvest and the transition of the seasons. Moreover, based on the book of *Maccabees*, it appears likely that the Maccabees opted to celebrate on the twenty-fifth of Kislev for the same reason. If so, it seems reasonable to suggest that the rabbis were making a similar suggestion by establishing the reading of *Zekharia* on Shabbat Chanuka. *Zekharia* experienced a positive prophecy on this date for much the same reason that the rabbis established Chanuka beginning on the twenty-fifth of Kislev.⁵

Beyond the *haftara* connection, there is also a contemporary significance to *Zekharia's* prophecy. In 1949, based on a design submitted by the brothers Gabriel and Maxim Shamir in a 1948 competition, the State of Israel adopted a national emblem depicting the *menora* flanked by two olive trees. Although to the best of my knowledge the brothers never fully explained the meaning behind their design, it seems clear that they “lifted” the design from *Zekharia*.

In light of our analysis, we may offer a deeper appreciation of the brothers' design. The emblem is a reminder that although the State of Israel is required to pursue military means to protect herself, ultimately she is driven by a vision of peace and spirit – *ki im be-ruchi*. *Zekharia's* optimism, moreover, was especially appropriate for the fledgling country. Just as the beleaguered *Shivat Tzion* community could remain confident in its future, so too the new state could be sure that despite the modest beginnings and seemingly insurmountable challenges, Divine providence would ensure that the state survives and thrives.

⁴ It is for this reason that Chanuka is the latest date on which one may offer *bikkurim*; see *Bikkurim* 1:2.

⁵ R. Bin Nun goes so far as to claim that from a literary standpoint, the prophecy of the *menora* stands at the center of *Zekharia* chapters 1-8. He compares all the surrounding prophecies to the “outer branches” of the *menora*, and the prophecy of the *menora* to the central branch. Thus, the central message of all *Zekharia's* visions is fundamentally one and the same: the importance of spiritual endeavor, as captured in the phrase “*lo ve-chayil ve-lo ve-khoach ki im be-ruchi*.”