

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #11: Obscure Reveries

Due to the limitations of our series, this week we will only briefly review chapters 5-8 of *Zekharia* and add a note regarding the final six chapters, which sketch a picture of the End of Days. Next week, we will return to *Sefer Ezra*.

Chapter 5

Beginning in chapter 5, Zekharia's reveries become especially obscure. Zekharia's first vision is that of a flying scroll. The scroll, twenty cubits long and ten wide, flies throughout the earth to decimate the homes of those who have stolen or taken God's name falsely. A tub then flies forth; the angel explains that the tub represents the sinners' eye throughout the earth.

Next, a disc of lead is lifted, revealing a woman flying in a tub. The angel identifies the woman with wickedness and presses a leaden weight into her mouth. After that, two women are seen sitting in the tub. Their wings are like storks (which travel far distances¹), and they carry the tub between heaven and earth. The angel explains that they are carrying the tub to Shinar, a synonym for Babylonia.

What is the symbolism of these events? To better understand what is happening, a few notes are in order. First, it is worth noting the parallel to the scroll of the *sota*, who is forced to drink the accursed waters at the entranceway to the Temple (*Bamidbar* 5:16). Second, as the rabbis noted (*Vayikra Rabba* 86), the dimensions of the scroll are precisely those of the entryway to the Temple sanctuary (*Melakhim I* 6:3). Third, the meaning of the term "*einam*," "their eye" is unclear in context. What does it mean that the flying tub is their eye throughout the earth? It is worth noting as well that the word "eye" was especially significant in the previous chapter, in which the stone and candelabra are described as representing God's eyes throughout the earth (3:9, 4:10).

¹ R. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra*, p. 20.

Taking this background into account, the following interpretation may be offered. By its dimensions, the scroll is implicitly identified with the Temple, representing that sacrilege threatens to sully the Temple's sanctity. The allusion to the *sota* woman, who is forced to drink before the Temple (*Bamidbar* 5:16), strengthens this reading. Anyone who steals the Temple's materials or otherwise defiles the holy house will be cursed. All this refers to the Jews' enemies, who seek to stifle the Jews' attempts to build the Temple by way of theft and any other means possible. Their end, hints the prophecy, will be that of curse and failure.

In the continuation of the chapter, the enemies seek to counter God's roaming eyes with eyes of their own; they leverage whatever information they gather in their attempt to halt the construction project. Ultimately, however, God will foil their plans and send them to build homes in Babylonia, essentially taking the Jews' place in exile.

Chapter 6

In the opening section of chapter 6, like chapter 1, Zekharia beholds four chariots. This time they emerge from two copper mountains. The horses in each chariot are colored red, black, white, and speckled respectively. The angel explains that the chariots represent the four winds of heaven, which have emerged after presenting themselves before the earth's Master. Each chariot travels in a different direction, but God singles out the black chariot, which had traveled northward, for commendation; it has fulfilled God's will by traveling in that direction.

The meaning of this prophecy is perhaps even more obscure than its predecessors, in part because it is difficult to directly link our chapter to the contemporaneous events of *Shivat Tzion*. Many commentaries understand that the four chariots represent Divine forces² that will gain dominion over the four kingdoms that have historically ruled over the Jews (Rashi 6:1, s.v. *ve-heharim*; Radak 6:1, *ve-ashuv*; and others).

In the latter part of chapter 6, Zekharia is instructed to fashion crowns and place them on Yehoshua's head. Then he is to inform Yehoshua that "Tzemach" (presumably Zerubavel) will build the Temple. Each one, Yehoshua the high priest and Tzemach the king, shall sit on his respective throne, and "a harmonious understanding shall prevail between them" (6:13). The appointment of multiple leaders without a clear hierarchy is generally a recipe for disaster. The prophecy predicts that despite the potential for tension, the two leaders will cooperate peaceably.

In this connection, it is interesting to consider once again the connection between this prophecy and the Chanuka story, in particular the rise and fall of the

² The color copper represents something otherworldly. See *Yechezkel* 1:7, 40:3, and *Da'at Mikra*, p. 21, note 2.

Hasmonean dynasty. As Ramban (Commentary to *Bereishit* 49:10) notes, the Hasmoneans, a priestly family, ascended the throne in the years following the Maccabees' victory. This angered the rabbis, for there was intended to be a separation of powers between the priests and monarchs in order to minimize the potential for corruption. The Hasmoneans, in other words, acted contrary to the spirit of our prophecy. Malbim (*ibid.*, s.v. *ve-hu*) notes this explicitly in his commentary to our passage: "For in the time of the Hasmoneans, they wore the crowns of monarchy and arrogated greatness to themselves." The violation of Zekharia's prophecy was a sure sign that the Hasmonean victory had all-too-quickly devolved into self-aggrandizement, the opposite of the prophetic vision of measured, responsible leadership.

Chapters 7-8: The Fast of the Fifth Month

The seventh and eighth chapters of *Zekharia* detail a halakhic question posed by the Jews of Babylonia to the prophet. Should they continue fasting during the fifth month? After channeling the ancient prophets and delivering a scathing rebuke emphasizing that God desires righteousness and not fasting, Zekharia transitions to an uplifting messianic vision depicting the old and young flourishing in the streets of Jerusalem. Zekharia then adds a key point that, for perhaps the final time in his work, clearly anchors his message in the period of *Shivat Tzion*. Those who are struggling to rebuild the Temple should take heart from this prophecy. While it has been difficult to reap harvest and place bread on the table, ultimately "the vine shall produce its fruit, the ground shall produce its yield, and the skies shall provide their moisture" (8:12).

Zekharia goes on to movingly pull together the loose ends of chapters 7-8, as well as the *sefer* to this point. Eventually, he concludes, all the fasts associated with the *churban* will be transformed into joyous occasions. Moreover,

just as God planned to afflict you and did not relent when your fathers provoked me to anger... so at this time, I have turned and planned to do good to Jerusalem and the house of Judah. (8:14-15)

The phraseology of this passage invokes the language of the opening six verses of the book: the language of return; the contrast between the sin and punishment of the father's generation and the positive potential for the children; and the appearance of the root "ZMM," referencing God's planning both for good and bad.

The enveloping of the first eight chapters of *Sefer Zekharia* points to a subtle but fundamental transition that has unfolded throughout the course of the book to this point. Whereas at the beginning of the *sefer* the prophet presents repentance as a necessary precondition for the Jews to receive Divine reward, by the end of the eighth chapter, the two appear to have been disentangled from one another. Certainly the Jews are required be righteous. Still, the simple

reading of our chapter indicates that the salvation will be forthcoming whether or not the Jews follow God's word.

How are we to resolve this apparent contradiction? Is repentance a precondition for salvation or not? *Zekharia* seems to offer contradictory answers to this basic theological question.

We might suggest, following a classic view in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 97b), that there are two possible triggers for the redemption: either the Jews' merit or the conclusion of a predetermined period of time. However, another interpretation, more deeply rooted in *Zekharia*'s motifs, presents itself. Had we been held to the strict standards of God's justice, salvation would have been fully contingent upon God's mercy. That message is presented in the book's opening chapter. However, God recognizes that Israel is "a brand plucked from fire." The suffering endured by the Jews through the exile and displacement has aroused God's mercy for the Jews of *Shivat Tzion*. Ultimately, for *Zekharia*, God's love is unconditional. That is the comforting message of our prophet to the remnant, beleaguered generation of *Shivat Tzion*.

Zekharia Chapters 9-14

A proper analysis of the final six chapters of *Zekharia* would require more space than we have available in context of this series. Still, a few broad observations are in order.

First, these chapters are rather different from the first eight chapters in tone and style. *Zekharia* transitions from cryptic visions reminiscent of those of Daniel to a style of prophecy more akin to those of earlier, apocalyptic prophets including Yeshayahu, Yermiyahu, and Yechezkel. The discrepancies run so deep that many scholars, beginning with Nachman Krokhmal, a 19th-century *maskil*, ascribed the books to different authors and even eras.³

In this connection it should be noted that although the styles differ considerably, there are a number of important literary elements that bind the two books together. The very first verse of chapter 9 records that "all men's eyes shall turn to the Lord," which picks up on the imagery of God and human eyes that has been prominent throughout the book. The imagery of a stone, similarly symbolic of Divine providence in *Zekharia*, makes another appearance as well: God will make Jerusalem a stone for all the peoples to lift (12:3), which will cause them injury.

Moreover, *Zekharia* envisions a fire at the end of days that will purify one third of the population. God says, "They will invoke Me by name, and I will respond to them. I will declare, 'You are My people,' And they will declare, 'The

³ *Moreh Nevukhei Ha-Zman*, chapter 11. For a summary and traditional response, see *Da'at Mikra*, "Introduction," pp. 19-28.

Lord is our God!” (13:9). The smelting imagery is evocative of the smiths who figure prominently in chapter 2. It is also highly reminiscent of the prophecy of Malakhi, who prophesied only a short number of years after Zekharia (see *Malakhi* 3:2-3). There are thus literary connections tying together the book’s two major sections.

Since the final chapter bears some resemblance to other elements in *Shivat Tzion*, we will conclude with an observation regarding chapter 14. After describing an epic battle and a time in which the nations will come to recognize God, the verses teach that the surviving members of the nations will ascend each year to worship God and celebrate Sukkot. Those who do not come will not receive rainfall. On that day, even the horses’ bells will be inscribed with God’s name. Every meal pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be inscribed with God’s name, and no more merchant Caananites will be in the city.

The imagery of Sukkot in the conclusion of *Zekharia* is particularly interesting in light of its presentation in *Nechemia*. As we will discuss later, in chapter 8 of *Nechemia*, the Jews celebrate a spectacular Sukkot after having heard the reading of the Torah by Ezra and other leaders. Significantly, in that case the Jews celebrate Sukkot on their own, without the participation of other nations. In fact, throughout *Ezra-Nechemia*, the other nations are shunned as enemies and illegitimate marriage partners. In Zekharia’s messianic vision, by comparison, all the nations are meant to celebrate Sukkot alongside the Jewish People.

In concluding his book, Zekharia implies that the strife so ubiquitous to the *Shivat Tzion* period is situational. Ultimately, following Shlomo’s prayer (*Melakhim I*, chapter 8), all the nations will worship God at the Temple. *Shivat Tzion* may be a time of harsh realism, but Zekharia, true to his idealistic spirit, foresees a time of healthy Jewish-gentile relations and, above all, universal commitment to the service of God.

It is Zekharia’s idealistic message, coupled with Chagai’s straightforward, repeated calls to rebuild, that inspired the Jews to complete the Temple in the fifth and sixth chapters of *Sefer Ezra*, to which we return next week.