

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**  
**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**  
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**Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel**

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**Shiur #10: The Fate of the Kings of Yehuda (19)**

So far our focus has been on Yehezkel's description of the decline of the institution of the Israelite monarchy. Now, another element is introduced to explain the parable in Chapter 17, which depicted historical processes such as the coronation of a man of royal ancestry, Tzidkiyahu, in place of Yeyohakhin (17:13), and the obligation of the king of Yehuda to be loyal to the king of Babylonia, obey him and act in accordance with his wishes, along with the demand that the kingdom of Yehuda be a "lowly kingdom that does not lift itself up" (17:14). We saw that the king of Yehuda forged a covenant with the king of Egypt, thereby violating both the pledge of loyalty to the king of Babylonia (Nevukhadnetzar) and the oath and covenant with God. The consequence of this act of rebellion is the king being taken to Babylonian for judgment (17:15-21). This prophecy concludes the story of the monarchy of Yehuda, and emphasizes that its last king, too, violated his covenant with God, and thereby failed in his role. And with the end of his reign, the entire institution of the monarchy ends.

This prophecy shares some stylistic and thematic links with the prophecy about the fate of Tzidkiyahu. It takes us back a generation to the days of Yehoachaz and Yehoyakim. The lamentation seems to have been uttered after the events it describes have transpired, and thereby complements the prophetic perspective that shows the fate of Jerusalem as being sealed.

"And you – take up a lamentation for the princes of Israel." (19:1)

Yehezkel uses the term "lamentation" (*kina*) more often than any other prophet.<sup>1</sup> He mentions it at the beginning and at the end of our chapter (19:1, 14); previously, the content of his prophecies has been described as "lamentations and mourning and woe" (2:10); it appears four times in his prophecy to Tzor (26:17; 27:2, 2:32; 28:12) and twice in his prophecy to Egypt (32:2, 16). It seems that more than the lament reveals about Yehezkel's attitude

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<sup>1</sup> The term "*kina*" is not a common one in Tanakh. It first appears when David laments the death of Shaul and Yehonatan (*Shmuel* II 1:17). Thereafter it occurs in the Book of Amos (5:1; 8:10), and when Yirmiyahu uses the term to describe the reactions to the Destruction (7:29; 9:9, 19). A description of Yirmiyahu and the "singing men and the singing women" lamenting (over Yoshiyahu) is found in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35:25.

towards the imminent destruction of Yehuda, its use in the other contexts is instructive about the special status of Tzor and Egypt in the Book of Yehezkel, as expressed in different ways.

### The princes of Israel

The title “*nasi*” in Tanakh usually means a ruler or governor. In most instances it refers to the head of a tribe or a regional leader, but in some places the title ‘*nasi*’ is used in the monarchical sense (For example, Shlomo is referred to in this way in *Melakhim I* 11:34). The origin of the title ‘*nasi*’ – referring to a regional or tribal leader – indicates that his status is lower than that of a king, and his rights and obligations are accordingly lesser. The ‘*nasi* of Israel’ appears in a number of different contexts in Chapters 1-39 of the Book of Yehezkel, but the use of this title in these chapters, as opposed to the ‘king,’ is somewhat ambiguous. At the beginning of Chapter 12 the prophet is commanded to exile himself symbolically from his place, and Yehezkel explains this act by describing the departure of the *nasi* into exile (12:1-11). In Chapter 19, the prophet takes up a lament for the final kings of Yehuda, referring to them as the “princes of Israel” (*nesi’ei yisrael*) (19:1). Chapter 21 mentions punishment by the sword for the *nasi* and for the people as a result of their evil actions (21:17), and the prophet notes that the day of the *nasi* of Israel has come: “And you, profane wicked prince of Israel whose day is come...” (21:30). At the same time, there is no explicit description of the sins of the princes, other than the prophecy in Chapter 22, which includes the deeds of the princes of Israel:

“Behold, the princes of Israel, each of them amongst you, putting out his full force for shedding blood.” (22:6)<sup>2</sup>

The leadership of the people by the princes, which included the use of force, has led to acts of bloodshed; but the princes, by virtue of their role as leaders, were responsible for preventing such a situation.

In each of the contexts mentioned here where Yehezkel uses the term ‘*nasi*,’ the title ‘*melekh*’ – king – apparently could have been used instead. Note that Yehezkel does indeed use the term ‘*melekh*’ when speaking of the kings of Israel in the past and of the kings of the other nations in the present, and he deliberately uses of the title ‘*nasi*’ for the future leader of Israel in Chapters 40-48. However, he nevertheless chooses to refer to the contemporary kings of Yehuda using the title ‘*nasi*’ instead of ‘*melekh*’ in order to indicate that while the king who is called ‘*nasi*’ did have dominion over his kingdom, it was already a truncated,

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<sup>2</sup> The text in Chapter 45 also allows us to identify the sin of the princes: “... And My princes shall no more oppress My people, but they shall give to the house of Israel the rest of the land according to their tribes... Enough now, you princes of Israel: remove violence and spoil, and execute judgment and justice; take away your exactions from My people...” (45:8-9). In addition to resorting to violence (which led to bloodshed), the princes are also guilty of oppression and are responsible for the “violence and spoil” that occurs under their leadership, and for the lack of judgment and justice.

doomed kingdom. Thus, in Chapters 12 and 19 the prophecy concerns the *nasi* who is about to be exiled, and Chapters 21-22 describe the sins of the *nasi* before being removed from his position.

Yehezkel's prophecy to the kings of Yehuda in this chapter is conveyed through two parables: in the first, the royal family of Yehuda is compared to a family of lions; in the second, to a vine. It would appear that the basis of these parables, along with the connection between them, is found far back in history, where the journey of the tribe of Yehuda began – in Yaakov's blessing to his sons:

“Yehuda, it is you who your brothers will praise... Yehuda is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up; he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lioness, who shall rouse him up: The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his feet, until Shilo come, and the obedience of the people be his. Binding his foal to the vine, and his ass's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes; his eyes are red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.” (*Bereishit* 49:8-12)<sup>3</sup>

**“What a lioness your mother was! She lay down among lions, she nourished her whelps among young lions” (19:2-9)**

The parable describes two young lions. The conventional interpretation regards the first as symbolizing Yehoachaz (son of Yoshiyahu). Opinions are divided as to the symbolism of the second young lion: it might refer to Yehoyakim (Rashi, Radak, R. Yosef Kara and others), to Yehoyakhin, to Tzidkiyahu (an appropriate symbol, since he was the brother of Yehoachaz, from the same mother/“lioness”: both were sons of Chamutal daughter of Yirmiyahu of Livna, according to Melakhim II 23:31 and 24:18),<sup>4</sup> or to all of them (see R. Eliezer of Beaugency).<sup>5</sup>

In prophesying about the fate of the kings of Yehuda, Yehezkel leaves out only Yehoyakhin. This fits well with his prophetic messages concerning the special status of the exiles who were exiled while under his leadership.

To understand the significance of Yehezkel's parable in this chapter, the prophecy should be compared with the historical events to which it refers, as

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<sup>3</sup> There is room to discuss the significance of the elements common to Yaakov's blessing to Yehuda and our chapter as well as the prophecy against Tzidkiyahu in Chapter 21, but this lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

<sup>4</sup> See Greenberg, pp. 355-356.

<sup>5</sup> Substantiation for each of these possibilities is to be found among traditional and modern commentators on the relevant verses. It may be that the reason for the obscurity here lies in one of the explanations we noted previously regarding the references to the kingdom of Babylonia in Yechezkel's prophecies.

documented in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (following the lamentation for Yoshiyahu) and in *Sefer Melakhim*.<sup>6</sup>

<b>Yehezkel 19</b>	<b><i>Divrei Ha-yamim</i> II 36</b>	<b><i>Melakhim</i> II 23-24</b>
And she brought up one of her whelps; it became a young lion	Then the people of the land took Yehoachaz, son of Yoshiyahu	And the people of the land took Yehoachaz, the son of Yoshiyahu
And it learned to catch the prey; it devoured men		And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord
The nations also heard of him; he was taken in their pit	And the king of Egypt deposed him in Jerusalem, and mulcted the land a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold	And Pharaoh Nekho put him in bands at Rivla in the land of Chamat, that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and put the land to a tribute of a hundred talents of silver, and a talent of gold
And they brought him with hooks to the land of Egypt.	And Nekho took Yoachaz his brother, and carried him to Egypt	And he took Yehoachaz away, and he came to Egypt, where he died
Now when she saw that though she had waited, her hope was lost, then she took another of her whelps and made him a young lion.	And the king of Egypt made Eliakim, his brother, king of Yehuda and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Yehoyakim.	And Pharaoh Nekho made Eliakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king in place of Yoshiyahu his father, and he changed his name to Yehoyakim
And he went upon and down among the lions, he became a young lion, and he learned to catch the prey, and devoured men.	And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God	And he did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord... In his days Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, came up, and Yehoyakim became his servant for three years, then he turned and rebelled against him.
And he knew their palaces, and he laid waste their cities, and the land and all that was in it was appalled by the noise of his roaring.		And the Lord sent against him bands of Kasdim
Then the nations set on him on every side from		and bands of Aram, and bands of Moav, and bands

<sup>6</sup> While the verses below from Yechezkel are cited fully and in the proper order, verses from *Divrei Ha-yamim* and from *Melakhim* are presented only partially, with the bringing of Yehoachaz to Egypt brought forward in order to match the order of the text in Yechezkel.

<p>the provinces, and spread their net over him; he was taken in their pit.</p>		<p>of the children of Ammon, and sent them against Yehuda to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke by His servants the prophets. It was surely at the command of the Lord that this came upon Yehuda, to remove them out of His sight... which the Lord would not pardon.</p>
<p>And they put him in a cage with hooks, and brought him to the king of Babylon; they brought him into strongholds, that his voice should not more be heard upon the mountains of Israel.</p>	<p>Against him came up Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, and bound him in fetters, to carry him to Babylonia. And Nevukhadnetzar carried some of the vessels of House of the Lord to Babylonia, and put them in his temple at Babylon.</p>	

A comparison of Yehezkel's prophecy with the descriptions of the events in *Divrei Ha-yamim* and in *Melakhim* helps us understand what the prophet means. In addition to the identity of the second young lion, the description of what the young lions do – “And he learned to catch the prey, and devoured men” – should also be interpreted as an image from the world of the parable, symbolizing behavior that is evil in the eyes of God, as committed by both kings (despite the brief duration – just three months – of the reign of Yehoachaz). The “nations” mentioned by Yehezkel refers to the king of Egypt, who increases the burden of Yehoachaz, as a preliminary stage before exiling him to Egypt.

The identity of the lioness (who is described in the introduction to the parable and again in verse 5) is not clear. This image may represent the earthly personalities and functionaries who coronate a king (and unwittingly serve as God's emissaries): first, the people of the land who coronate Yehoachaz, and later, the king of Egypt, who appoints Yehoyakim as king.

The comparison with the parallel texts reveals that in the final part of his parable, Yehezkel is referring to the actions of the king of Egypt, who has meanwhile risen to greatness. But perhaps – as we have noted previously – circumstances do not allow the prophet to state this explicitly. This seems explain why much of the concluding part of the parable is obscure, with the only explicit

words made in reference to the cessation of the monarchy in Israel: “that his voice should not more be heard upon the mountains of Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

### **“Your mother is like the vine” (19:10-14)**

The prophet now reinforces his message with another parable. This new parable does not appear to be directed at any specific king of Yehuda; rather, it marks the end of the monarchy of the kings of Yehuda collectively. First the prophet describes the potential embodied in the vine:

“Your mother is like the vine in your likeness,<sup>8</sup> planted by the waters; she was fruitful and full of branches by reason of many waters. And she had strong rods for the scepters of them that bore rule, and its stature was exalted among the thick branches, and it appeared in its height with the multitude of its tendrils.” (19:10-11)

Thereafter, the prophet describes the vine being cast down to the ground, becoming dried up and being burned; eventually, it is cut off from its source of nourishment, until it is utterly destroyed by fire. This parable is noticeably harsher than the previous one. The outcome in the first parable is the capture of the lions (that is, kings) live, with hooks, whereas in the second parable nothing remains of the vine at all: at first it dries up completely, and then, to compound matters, it is burned. Only the conclusion of the parable reveals that the expression “scepters of those who bore rule” (*shivtei moshlim*) (which appears at the beginning) is a reference to those leaders who are now prevented from carrying out their role: “she has no strong rod to be a scepter to rule” (19:14). Had the people been led properly by its leadership, perhaps they could have prevented the results of the fire (19:12).

Yehezkel concludes in the same mood with which he began: “This is a lamentation, and a lamentation it has become” (19:14). This lamentation, in which the prophet mourns the events of the past, will be a lamentation both in the present and in the future. The description of the fate awaiting Yehoachaz and Yehoyakim now turns out as the end of the monarchy of Yehuda.

### **A parable with no explanation**

This prophetic unit is entirely devoid of any mention of God’s Name. The parable does not mention His Name, and – unlike the other parables that Yehezkel uses to convey his messages – no interpretation is supplied at its conclusion. This omission is especially glaring given the many instances in which

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<sup>7</sup> To complete the picture concerning the death of Yehoyakim and the prophetic messages surrounding his death in Egypt, see *Yirmiyahu* 22.

<sup>8</sup> This word seems to be deliberately ambiguous. On one hand it is related to “likeness” or parable (as Rashi understands it); on the other hand, it recalls “blood” (*dam*) (as R. Eliezer of Beaugency understands it), alluding to the reason that the vine will be burned (bloodshed).

Yehezkel's prophecy is attributed to God ("So says the Lord...") throughout all the chapters of the Book. Perhaps this is another device to emphasize the prophetic message that God is exiled; He is no longer present. On the revealed level, in the text before us, He is – quite literally – "gone". But it also seems that His Presence is even hinted at in this chapter, in the form of the "east wind" that dries up the vine (19:12) – the same force that dries up the vine in Chapter 1: "Shall it not utterly wither when the east wind touches it?" (17:10). This possibility is supported by the other appearances of the east wind in Tanakh, where it serves as the vehicle that executes God's judgment. Examples include the plague of locusts (Shemot 10:13), the splitting of the Reed Sea (Shemot 14:21), Yirmiyahu's prophecy to the people (Yirmiyahu 18:17), Yona 4:8, Tehillim 48:8, and Hoshea 13:15.<sup>9</sup>

### **The fate of Tzidkiyahu (21:23-32)**

The description of the fate of the last king of Yehuda, Tzidkiyahu, appears as part of a series of prophecies in Chapter 21 that describe the end of the kingdom of Yehuda, all of which appear to have been uttered close to the imposition of the siege on Jerusalem on the tenth of Tevet. In verses 23-32 the prophet describes the military campaign of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylonia, which will ultimately lead to the conquest of Jerusalem. Tzidkiyahu is described in this prophetic unit as follows:

"As for you, profane wicked prince of Israel (*chalal rasha nesi yisrael*) whose day is come, in the time of his final punishment..." (21:30)

The expression "*chalal rasha*" has a dual meaning with regard to Tzidkiyahu's fate. On one hand, the prophet calls him "wicked" (*rasha* – the opposite of the trait captured in his name, '*tzaddik*'), whose sanctity has been profaned and who has reached his end. On the other hand, he is depicted as a wicked one who has been put to death, or is deserving of death (*chalal* – see Melakhim II, 21). Hence, the time has come for him to be divested of his royal insignia:

"Thus says the Lord God: Remove the turban, and take off the crown; this shall not remain the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high." (21:31)

The language with which the prophet concludes his message concerning the kings of Yehuda hints at their sins over the course of generations. Other than this verse, the turban (*mitznefet*) only appears as one of the priestly garments. The message it suggests is that the kings of Yehuda have been arrogant; they have not maintained, along with their role as kings, their subjugation to God and

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<sup>9</sup> See also Rashi on *Tehillim* 48:8 – "With an east wind' – an expression of punishment that the Holy One, blessed be He, brings upon the wicked."

His charge. They have not upheld God's sanctity. In this way they have brought about the Destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple:

"A ruin, a ruin, a ruin will I make of it. For all that it shall not be, until he come, whose right it is, and whom I have appointed." (21:32).<sup>10</sup>

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>10</sup> The Destruction is described here in very obscure language that has no parallel elsewhere in Tanach. Perhaps the meaning here is that what is about to happen has never happened before.