

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Yehezkel: The Book of Ezekiel
By Dr. Tova Ganzel

Shiur #14: “The Soul that Sins – It Shall Die” (18)

The concept of Divine justice is treated in four separate places in *Sefer Yehezkel*: Chapters 3:16-21; 14:12-23; 18; and 33:1-20. We have already discussed three of these. Now, with our study of Chapter 18, we will conclude our analysis of this subject in *Sefer Yehezkel*.¹

Social injustices (18:1-20)

Unlike the other chapters in *Sefer Yehezkel* that address this subject, this chapter is unique by virtue of the nature of the sins that it enumerates. Elsewhere in the Book, social and moral injustices seem to be pushed aside, perhaps owing to the paucity of prophecies addressing them. Not so in this chapter.

Our chapter opens with the people questioning the situation: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (v. 2). What follows is the prophet’s response: “The soul that sins – it shall die” (v. 4). He then lists the deeds of the righteous man, which include avoidance of idolatry and prohibited sexual relations (vv. 8-9). In this sense, the list here resembles the list of the deeds of his wicked son which follows on (vv. 10-13), as well as the deeds of his righteous grandson (vv. 14-17). Following a description of the deeds attributed to each of the three generations, Yehezkel emphasizes that the wicked son will be punished for his actions (v. 18), and concludes with the same words with which he began: “The soul that sins – it shall die” (v. 20). The prophetic unit concludes with a reiteration of individual responsibility. Each person, throughout his life, is responsible for his own actions. Take someone who turns back from the path on which he began: a formerly wicked person who repents will live (vv. 21-23). But a righteous person who turns to sin will be punished (v. 24). The people, as quoted by the prophet – “The way of the Lord is unfair” (vv. 25, 29) do not, it seems, at first grasp the distinction that Yehezkel draws between the nation as a whole (whose actions have brought about the imminent destruction of the Temple and the exile, both of which are now irreversible) and the responsibility of every individual for his actions and the life-and-death consequences that follow. Therefore, throughout the chapter, the prophet repeats and emphasizes this message.

¹ One study of these four chapters and the concepts of Divine justice and retribution they raise is G. Brin’s *Iyunim be-Sefer Yechezkel*, Tel Aviv 5735, pp. 80-105.

Yehezkel concludes by stating that the people's claim – that the son dies because of the sins of the father – is simply incorrect:

“The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son...” (18:20).

Thus, Chapter 18 is unique for its explicit discussion of individual responsibility. Apparently the people of his generation claimed that since the Destruction was now inevitable, their individual actions no longer had any importance. It made no difference whether they remained loyal to God's commandments or not. The prophet refutes this erroneous view. Without casting the slightest doubt on the imminent Destruction, this nevertheless does not exempt anyone from personal responsibility.

The gates of repentance (18:21-32)

In verses 21-30 the prophet declares that the gates of repentance remain open to the individual, and this is emphasized at the end of the prophecy:

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord God. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, so that iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions in which you have transgressed, and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit: for why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dies, says the Lord God; therefore repent, and live.” (18:30-32)

Addressed mainly to the inhabitants of Yehuda and Jerusalem prior to the Destruction, these verses are quite unusual given that nowhere in the Book is there any call for the people to mend their ways so that God will not destroy His Temple. Although the prophet here calls upon the people to repent, he offers no promise that this will prevent the Destruction; he only speaks of deliverance from the death for the sinners when the Destruction comes. It may be that in the context in which this prophecy appears, the righteous individuals will be the remnant that will survive in Jerusalem or among the exiles.

The sins brought about the imminent Destruction of the city can be categorized. The main group consists of different forms of idolatry. Unquestionably the most prominent in *Sefer Yehezkel*, these sins receive attention every time the prophet talks about the nation's transgressions. The second group of sins includes sexual immorality (such as acts performed as part of pagan ritual in chapters 16 and 23 as well as adultery). Finally, the prophet notes the sin of bloodshed. This too is sometimes connected to idolatry, as well as being an obvious violation of proper social conduct. In contrast, when Yehezkel mentions “social” sins, there is a distinction between those committed

privately (Chapters 18, 33) and those of the office-bearers and leaders of the nation. It turns out that Yehezkel does not seem to attribute the Destruction of the First Temple to the social transgressions of the nation as a whole – in neither the prophecies before nor after the Destruction.

Social injustices after the Destruction (Chapter 33)

Besides Chapter 18, the prophet also addresses individual retribution in Chapter 33:1-20. In the latter, the target audience is the exiles in Babylonia and accordingly, the prophet must address a different claim:

“Thus you speak, saying: If our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?” (33:10)

The prophet once again emphasizes that a person is judged for his present actions. Again, in describing the wicked person who mends his ways, he mentions social misdeeds:

“If the wicked will restore the pledge, give back that which he had robbed, follow the statutes of life without committing iniquity...” (v. 15)

As we can see from the context, the prophet is talking about the deeds of the exiles after the Destruction, not the deeds that caused it. The subject of retribution is repeated because even after the Destruction, the inhabitants of the land who had survived did not despair of the possibility that they would inherit the land in the future. In response, Yehezkel enumerates their sins that brought about the Destruction and emphasizes that so long as such behavior continues, the land will not be given to them as an inheritance:

“Therefore say to them, So says the Lord God: You eat with the blood, and lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood; shall you then possess the land? You stand upon your sword, you carry out disgusting deeds, and you defile every man his neighbor’s wife; shall you then possess the land?” (33:25-26)

The sins mentioned here explicitly are the kind that continue to be committed in the absence of the Temple. Among these sins are social injustices; note the explanation given to Yehezkel for the people’s failure to change their ways even after the Destruction:

“Their heart is set on unjust gain” (v. 31).

The role of interpersonal sins in bringing about the Destruction of the First Temple is discussed in the Gemara:

“For what reason was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three phenomena: idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed...” (*Yoma* 9b)

Accordingly, it was not interpersonal sins alone that brought about the Destruction of the Temple. Indeed, we have noted that it was idolatry, in its various forms, that Yehezkel points to as the main factor that defiled the Temple: the “*shikkutzim*,” the “*gilulim*,” the “abominations,” the passing of children through fire (which is also bloodshed). In addition, Yehezkel also mentions sexual immorality (including, for example, adultery).

The sins of the office-bearers

In contrast, the social sins committed by office-bearers of the people affect their status. Indeed, the Gemara goes on to question explicitly whether indeed causeless hatred did not exist at the time of the First Temple, citing in support a verse from Yehezkel:

“But [during the time of] the first Sanctuary did not groundless hatred prevail? Surely it is written: ‘Terrors by reason of the sword are upon My people; smite therefore upon your thigh’ (*Yehezkel* 21:17)? And R. Eliezar said: This refers to people who eat and drink together and then thrust each other through with the daggers of their tongue! That [same quality] existed also among the princes in Israel, for it is written, ‘Cry and wail, son of man; for it is upon My people’ (*ibid.*) etc. Since the verse says, ‘Cry and wail, son of man’ we might have understood that [this evil quality] was universal, but it goes on to say, ‘it is upon all the princes of Israel’² [indicating that this causeless hatred existed only among the leaders, while the regular populace was not filled with hatred].” (*Yoma* 9b)

While R. Eliezer’s interpretation of the verse seems far removed from its plain meaning, a closer look at the text reveals that along with the prophet’s warning about the fate of the people, he also features interpersonal sins in his description of the sins of the leaders.

In Chapter 22 we find a unique list of sins, out of character with the rest of the *Sefer*. As the Destruction of Jerusalem draws nearer (“that her time may come” – v. 3; “You have caused your days to draw near, and have come to your years” – v. 4) the prophet appears to place more of an emphasis on the personal responsibility that the leaders of the people bear for their actions, along with the dire consequences of their corrupt leadership for the nation as a whole. This chapter attributes sins both social and religious in nature to the office-bearers in leadership positions. The fate of the city is sealed because of idolatry, sexual immorality, bloodshed, and – finally – the deeds of the leadership. In practical terms, not all of these sins were committed during the generation of the Destruction; rather, the city’s fate and decree are the result of the accumulated

² The verse in its entirety reads, “Cry and wail, son of man, for it is upon My people; it is upon all the princes of Israel; terrors by reason of the sword are upon My people; smite therefore upon your thigh.”

wrongdoing (similar to the description of the sins of idolatry in Chapter 8). But every individual, and every leader, is able to determine his own personal fate (as we saw in Chapters 18 and 33). To this end the prophet lists the sins and punishments of the various officials: the *nesi'im* (22:6-13)³, the prophets (vv. 22, 25, 28), the *kohanim* (22, 26), the princes (22, 27) and finally – the common people (22, 29).

In his post-Destruction guidance to the office-bearers of the future near the end of the Book, Yehezkel notes social sins. Thus, for example, the *kohanim* are supposed to fill a judicial function:

“And in a controversy they shall stand in judgment and they shall judge it according to My judgments, and they shall keep My teachings and My statutes in all My appointed times, and they shall sanctify My shabbatot.” (44:24)

The prophet exhorts the *nesi'im*:

“So says the Lord God: Enough now, you princes of Israel; remove violence and spoil, and execute judgment and justice; take away your exactions from My people, says the Lord God. You shall have just balances and a just *efa* and a just *bat*. The *efa* and the *bat* shall be of one measure, that the *bat* may contain the tenth part of a *chomer*, and the *efa* the tenth part of a *chomer*; its measure shall be in accordance with the *chomer*.” (45:9-11)

Along with their personal responsibility for what is happening on the national level the prophet once again emphasizes the personal sphere in which their fate is determined.

Appendix: The term “*chamas*” as a description of the sins of the people in *Sefer Yehezkel*

The term “*chamas*” appears several times in Yehezkel’s descriptions of the people’s sins. The usual meaning of the word as used elsewhere in Tanakh is robbery, extortion, or exploitation of the poor by the rich. This has led many scholars to likewise interpret all such instances in *Sefer Yehezkel* as referring to social sins, and to conclude that it is to these types of sins that the prophet attributes the Destruction. However, closer study of the instances where the term is mentioned by Yehezkel reveals that this interpretation is not entirely correct, and in some instances, inappropriate.

The word first appears in Chapter 7 where Yehezkel prophesies the imminent Destruction. In mentioning the sins that have brought about this

³ In the list of sins attributed to the *nesi'im*, the number of socio-moral transgressions is equal to the number of transgressions in the religio-ritual realm (eight of each: but the division is not entirely clear-cut).

catastrophe, he refers to: “abominations” (7:3,4, 8, 9, 20), “*shikkutzim*” (7:20), and “bloody crimes” (7:23). Verses 11 and 23 also mention “*chamas*” as a cause of the Destruction. In verse 11 the prophet declares that “*Chamas* has risen up into a rod of wickedness.” The meaning of the word here is rather ambiguous. It may be meant as a general description of the actions of the people: “The ‘*chamas*’ that you have committed” (as interpreted by Radak and R. Yosef Kara), or alternatively, as Kasher suggests:

“The ambiguity of the previous verse continues here. Perhaps the image refers to what is happening in Yehuda, such that ‘*chamas*’ would be the rod with which the wicked strike. Or the verse may be describing the enemy: the ‘*chamas*’ that is embodied in the enemy develops and rises up into a rod of wickedness that strikes cruelly at the inhabitants of Yehuda.”⁴

Either way, the word “*chamas*” here does not specifically describe social sins. It may be a general description of the behavior of the people, or of the rod, or of the enemy.

In contrast, the reason for the Destruction in v. 23 seems to be set down more explicitly: “for the land is full of bloody crimes, and the city is full of ‘*chamas*’.” The term “bloody crimes” (*mishpat damim*) appears nowhere else in Tanakh, and it may refer to *mishpatim* (social laws) whose violation entails the death penalty (hence “bloody”), and therefore the prophet adds that the city is “full of *chamas*.” From the context, we can deduce that this sin – along with idolatry (v. 20) and bloodshed – has brought about the desecration of the Temple. The next appearance of “*chamas*” in *Sefer Yehezkel* is in Chapter 8, where it describes violations of a religious nature. Thereafter the term “*chamas*” is noted in the context of the sins of the people, in Chapter 12:

“... that her land may be desolate, bare of its fullness, because of the *chamas* (violence) of all that dwell in it.” (12:19)

Like the examples above, the word ‘*chamas*’ here is used in a general sense. The land will be desolate and bereft of its inhabitants because of the ‘*chamas*’ perpetrated in it. An alternative (but similar) explanation is that the land will be desolate and emptied of the *chamas* that now fills it.

The word “*chamas*” also occurs later on in *Sefer Yehezkel* in relation to the sins of the office-bearers in 22:26, where the prophet talks about the sins of the *kohanim*: “Her priests have violated (*chamsu*) My Torah,”⁵ and likewise in

⁴ Kasher, p. 231

⁵ For use of the word in the same sense, namely violation of Torah commands, see Tzefania 3:4.

45:9, in describing the sin of the *nesi'im*: “Enough, now, you princes of Israel; remove *chamas* and spoil...”⁶

Hence, the word “*chamas*” in *Sefer Yehezkel* does not necessarily indicate social sins.

It may be a more general term referring to all the sins of the people against God, and especially the most serious transgressions, including idolatry and bloodshed. The verses that contain the word “*chamas*” do not represent proof that Yehezkel refers to interpersonal sins. The prophet refers to these sins in the chapters where he speaks about individual reward and punishment. But when he speaks about the causes of the Destruction, he mentions bloodshed and sexual immorality along with religious sins, making no specific mention of social injustice. For this reason the general picture arising from *Sefer Yehezkel* seems to be that the Destruction of the Temple was caused not by the moral transgressions of the people in a general sense, but only as a result of the religious violations that cause the Temple to be desecrated – including idolatry and bloodshed. The prophet addresses moral transgressions and the need for repentance and repair only when he speaks about the fate of the individual, as opposed to the fate of the people as a whole and the fate of the Temple, both of which have already been sealed.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

⁶ Likewise in the description of the sin of Tzor in 28:16: “By the multitude of your merchandise they have filled the midst of you with *chamas*, and you have sinned...” – where “*chamas*” means unfair or dishonest trade.