**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel**

**By Dr. Tova Ganzel**

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In Honor of Ovadia Sutton for his love of Sefer Yechezkel

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**Shiur #24a: Yechezkel’s description of the nation’s purification (36:16-32)**

The climax of the process of Israel’s redemption in Sefer Yechezkel is the purification of the nation by God. This process, with all its constituent elements, appears in its most comprehensive form in Chapter 36, climaxing in the verse,

“And I shall sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols will I cleanse you.” (36:25)

The various descriptions of this redemption (in Chapters 11, 20, 28, 34, 35, 337, 39) suggest that the occurrence of the redemption is not dependent on the nation’s deeds;[[1]](#footnote-1) the process is carried out in its entirety by God. The non-dependence on the behavior of the nation is especially conspicuous against the background of the detailed description of its sins. The prophet states the reason for this: the ingathering of the nation into its land takes place solely because of God’s desire that His Name be sanctified in the eyes of the nations (see 20:9,14,22,41; 36:20-23). The Destruction and the exile do not cause any fundamental change in the nation’s attitude towards God, and therefore the desired processes – purification (36:25; 37:23) and atonement (16:63) - will take place without any preconditions (11:19; 36:26; 39:29). Since the nation is not an active partner in its own purification, Yechezkel devotes relatively little space to this process: it is discussed in just two specific chapters, contrasting with the dozens of times throughout the Sefer that he repeatedly emphasizes their defilement.

The aim of Chapter 36 is to prepare the nation to protect the future Temple, which is described in the prophetic vision in Chapters 40-48. Out of the many chapters dealing with redemption, including the nation’s return to its land, the purification of the nation is mentioned only three times in Sefer Yechezkel. Two of these appearances are in Chapter 36 – a chapter that offers a detailed description of the redemption, climaxing in the renewal of the covenant between God and the house of Israel. At the center of this prophecy is the stage where God sprinkles purifying water over the nation, thereby cleansing them of their defilement and theirs sins:

“For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” (vv. 24-25)

“… On the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities I will also cause the cities to be inhabited, and the wastes shall be rebuilt.” (v. 33)

This “ceremony” of purification of the nation as a whole is exceptional in Tanakh. The expression “clean (or “pure”) water” (*mayim tehorim*) likewise occurs only here; nowhere else in Tanakh is there any description, even metaphoric, of God purifying the entire nation, either through sprinkling water over them or by means of any other procedure.

The other appearance of the purification of the nation is to be found in Chapter 37, which offers no description of the process; the prophet declares only that “They shall not defile themselves any more with their idols… I will cleanse them, so they shall be My people, and I shall be their God.” (37:23)

R. Eliezer of Beaugency interprets the verse thus:

“The water of purification and the sprinkling are a metaphor for the removal of iniquity and the cleaning, clarifying and cleansing that they will undergo through the captivity and plundering that they will undergo for a long time, to atone for sin and remove wrongdoing, as in the verse, ‘Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean’ (Tehillim 51:9), and ‘If I wash myself with snow water…’ (Iyov 9:30). And after you have been purified of all your defilements – ‘I shall give you a new heart’ so that you will not commit such great sins that you will be punished as you are now…”.

We shall adopt this interpretation and attempt to add another layer to it.

**“I shall sprinkle” (ve-zarakti)**

Let us focus on a linguistic aspect of the process of purification. The prophet speaks of “sprinkling” clean water. In Tanakh, verbs based on the root “*z-r-k*” and the root “*n-z-h*” (another word used for ‘sprinkling’) usually appear in the context of religious ritual. In some instances where the blood of a sacrifice must be sprinkled on the altar, the verb ‘*z-r-k*’ is used; in other instances, the Torah uses the verb ‘*n-z-h’*. In the case of the red heifer (Bamidbar 19), both concepts appear: the water that is mixed with the ashes of the heifer are sprinkled, and the text uses the verbs seemingly interchangeably. However, in general there seems to be a distinction between the two terms: ‘*zerika*’ means all the blood, which must be poured on the altar; ‘*haza’ah*’ is a symbolic gesture that uses only a small portion of the blood, effecting a cleansing and sanctification. Let us now trace this fundamental distinction through the details of the actions and their biblical sources:

“And you shall take of the blood that is upon the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it (*ve-hizeita*) upon Aharon, and upon his garments, and upon his sons, and upon the garments of his sons with him, and he shall be sanctified, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons’ garments with him.” (Shemot 29:21)

“And he shall sprinkle (*ve-hizah*) of the blood of the sin offering…” (Vayikra 5:9)

“And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle (*ve-hizah*) it with his finger upon the covering eastward, and before the covering shall he sprinkle (*yazeh*) of the blood with his finger seven times.” (Vayikra 16:14)

Sprinkling (*haza’ah*) of the blood is usually performed with the finger (Vayikra 4:6,17; 14:15,27 and elsewhere), and sometimes by means of some object – for example, the hyssop (Vayikra 14; Bamidbar 19). Both the liquid itself and the object of the sprinkling (i.e., that which is sprinkled upon) change in accordance with the situation. The liquid that is sprinkled may be blood, the anointing oil, or the water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer. The objects of sprinkling include the kohanim, leviim, the veil, the covering over the Ark, and/or the altar, as well as an impure house, vessel, or person. Common to all of these situations is the conceptual context of cleansing, purification and sanctification. In each instance, the sprinkling is part of a ceremony that symbolically expresses transcendence, progress, and perhaps a transition to a higher status or plane.

In contrast to this sprinkling, the purpose of ‘*zerika*’ is to have the blood upon the altar (Vayikra 1:3,8,9,17),[[2]](#footnote-2) and this is achieved, one way or another, using all the blood. For this reason, the Torah instructs the sprinkling of “the blood”, rather than “of the blood”: “And you shall sprinkle the blood…” (Shemot 29:20); “And the sons of Aharon, the kohanim, sprinkled its blood (Vayikra 1:11), and more. This sprinkling is part of the normative process of offering sacrifices, which comprises several stages (leaning of hands, slaughter, sprinkling of blood and offering on the altar). In contrast to “*haza’ah*”, where the symbolism of the act is related to the conceptual world of purification or sanctity, “*zerika*” is part of the sacrificial ceremony only. The reason for the pouring of the blood on the altar may be induced, *inter alia*, from the verse,

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes an atonement for the soul.” (Vayikra 17:11)

This indicates that this pouring of the blood upon the altar is an important part of the sacrificial service, since this act brings atonement.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, we encounter a problem with the mixture of both roots “*z-r-k*” and “*n-z-h*” in Bamidbar 19. In order to solve this difficulty, we propose that the main verb in this context is “*haza’ah*” and not “*zerika*”. The central verses of this unit – the actual command – use the verb “*n-z-h*” (vv. 18-19) and the individual who performs the action is referred to as “*mazeh*” (v. 21). The verb “*z-r-k*”, in contrast, appears in passive form (vv. 13,20), as part of a description of the punishment of one who enters the Sanctuary in a state of ritual impurity. Further support for the view of the root “*n-z-h*” as more central to this description of purification is to be found in the chapter dealing with the purification of the leviim, which speaks of a sprinkling (*haza’ah*) of the waters mixed with ashes.

The reason that the two verses in the unit on the red heifer include the verb “*z-r-k*”, in its various forms, would seem to be that along with the connection that exists between “*zerika*” and the sacrifices, as discussed above, this verb can also serve in a more general sense, without specific reference (as opposed to “*haza’ah*”, which has a clear and precise meaning). Therefore, when the text speaks of sprinkling the waters within a different legal context, such as the punishment of someone who is ritually impure and enters the Sanctuary, it uses the more general and neutral term “*z-r-k*”, in passive form, without invoking the more specific “*haza’ah*”.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. There is one exception, discussed above: “And they shall come there, and they shall take away all the detestable things of it, and all the abominations of it from there” (11:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are two exceptions to this rule, which appear in Shemot 24 (the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant) and Bamidbar 18 (the waters of the red heifer); they will be discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further clarification of the distinction between the two types of “sprinkling” in light of the details of the laws involved, lies beyond the scope of the present discussion. We have therefore focused on the fundamental distinction as arising from a plain reading of the biblical text. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)