**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**Yechezkel: The Book of Ezekiel**

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

**“Clean water”**

The cleansing of the nation in *Sefer Yechezkel*, achieved by the sprinkling of purifying water upon them, parallels the process required for someone who has become ritually impure through contact with a corpse (*Bamidbar* 19), using “waters of ritual impurity” (*mei nidda*). Some scholars have also pointed out the similarity between the sprinkling of water in *Sefer Yechezkel* and the purification of the *leviim* in preparation for their service in the Sanctuary (*Bamidbar* 8:7), using “waters of sin offering” (*mei chatat*). Nevertheless, it should be noted that in contrast to the *mei nidda* and the *mei chatat* that are used for purification in *Sefer* *Bamidbar*, Yechezkel adopts a new and unique definition - “*mayim tehorim*” – for the water that will cleanse the nation. Since this expression appears nowhere else in Tanakh, we must try to understand and interpret it.

The description of the water as “*tehorim*” – pure, or clean – may be meant to emphasize the idea that this water does not contract impurity, in the same way that we find, “But a fountain or pit, in which there is a collection of water, shall be clean” (*Vayikra* 11:36). If so, it is reasonable to assume that the expression “*mayim tehorim*” is based on the expression “*mei nidda*,” but expands on and applies it. On the other hand, it may be that the water is referred to here as “clean” because it plays a role in a ceremony of cleansing. The language that Yechezkel uses here sits well with the general theme of the chapter, which describes a unique process of purification. From this perspective, the appearance of the expression “*mayim tehorim*” appears to be a deliberate departure from the more familiar “*mei nidda*” and “*mei chatat*”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Bamidbar 19**

The purification of the nation of all its defilement in *Sefer Yechezkel* may be better understood against the background of the ceremony of purification set forth in *Bamidbar* 19. The sins of the nation that are described in *Sefer* *Yechezkel*, such as the “*gilulim*,” are compared to the uncleanness contracted through contact with a dead body, and God’s sprinkling of water is likened to the purifying sprinkling that is performed by the Kohen. The importance of this metaphor lies in its highlighting of the fact that the impurity of the nation is so grave that it is compared to one of the central, major types of impurity treated in the Torah, requiring a lengthy and thorough process of purification. Both of these situations of purification are notable for the fact that the individual/nation cannot undertake the purification process independently; someone else is needed for it to happen.

Despite the similarity, however, there is an important difference between the two cases when it comes to the causes of impurity. Whereas in *Sefer* *Yechezkel* the sins that have brought about the nation’s impurity involve idolatry, including worship of the abominations and passing children through fire, the individual’s state of impurity is the result of contact with death. The description of the nation’s impurity resulting from idolatry is unique to *Sefer Yechezkel*. In addition, a distinction should be drawn in the way in which the purification is described. Both in *Sefer Bamidbar* (Chapters 8 and 19) and in *Yechezkel*, the purification ceremony involves water, but the verb used to describe the action is different in each instance: in *Bamidbar*, there is a sprinkling – *haza’ah* – of water, while in *Yechezkel* the verb *zerika* is employed.

**Shemot 24**

The fact that Yechezkel chooses to use the root “*z-r-k*” points in the direction of another biblical parallel which offers a fascinating perspective on Yechezkel’s prophecy. There are two places in Tanakh where the verb “*z-r-k*” does not involve the altar. One is our chapter in *Yechezkel*, and the other is Chapter 24 of *Sefer Shemot*, where the blood of the covenant is sprinkled over the nation. Both instances involve the sprinkling of a liquid over Am Yisrael in order to purify them. In *Sefer Shemot*, the ceremony marks the forging of a covenant between the nation and God, and the substance that is sprinkled is blood:

“And Moshe took half of the blood and placed it in basins, and half of the blood he sprinkled (*zarak*) upon the altar. And he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, ‘All that God has said – we shall do and we shall hear.’ And Moshe took the blood and he sprinkled (*va-yizrok*) upon the people, and he said, ‘Behold, the blood of the covenant which God has forged with you concerning all of these things.” (*Shemot* 24:6-8)

It would seem that the verb “*z-r-k*” is used here in relation to the second half of the blood (the portion sprinkled over the nation) because of its use in relation to the first half (the portion sprinkled upon the altar), and the use of the same verb emphasizes the connection between them. A comparison of this scene to Yechezkel’s prophecy illuminates the reason for the choice of this verb in our context. In *Sefer Shemot*, the focus of the ceremony was the moment when Moshe divided the blood of the peace offering in half: one half was then sprinkled upon the altar, representing God’s side of the covenant (see Seforno on this verse), while the other half is sprinkled upon the nation, in a most unusual departure. This blood is then referred to as the “blood of the covenant”.

In various places in Tanakh we see that the forging of a covenant is accompanied by a ceremony in which the partnership between the two sides finds expression. In the Covenant Between the Parts, in the time of Avraham, the animals are cut in half and a smoking furnace and burning torch pass between them (*Bereishit* 15:10). In the time of Tzidkiyahu, mention is made of a covenant to liberate the slaves which included the cutting of a calf in two and passing between the parts (*Yirmiyahu* 34:17-22). The description in *Sefer Shemot* is certainly similar: in this ceremony the blood is divided in half, with one half sprinkled towards God, as it were (represented by the altar), and the other sprinkled upon the nation.[[2]](#footnote-2) In each of these ceremonies there is something that is divided in half, but while only one of the parties to the covenant passes in between the halves of the animals in the first two instances, in the third instance the blood is sprinkled over both parties to the covenant, thereby reinforcing the symbolism of the partnership between them. In light of this we can now better understand the use of the root “*z-r-k*” in relation to the nation. As we have seen, the sprinkling of the blood is part of a sacrificial process, but here the emphasis is on reciprocity: just as the blood of the sacrifice is sprinkled on the altar, which represents God, so it is sprinkled also upon the nation – the other party to the covenant. Now it turns out that the sprinkling of a substance upon the nation within the framework of the covenant served as the model for our chapter in *Yechezkel*, in which clean water is sprinkled upon the people within the framework of the renewal of the bond with God.

However, these two covenantal ceremonies are not identical. The main difference is that in *Yechezkel* it is water that is sprinkled, while *Sefer Shemot* describes a sprinkling of blood. There are many possible reasons for this difference. Firstly, it would seem that *Sefer Shemot* involves blood because on the practical level, the covenant in *Shemot* involved burnt offerings and peace offerings, and the ceremony came after the sprinkling of the blood upon the altar; this preceding setup does not exist in *Yechezkel*. In addition, the sprinkling in *Sefer Shemot* does not include any element of purification, since that had already been a necessary precondition for the sacrifices. Beyond all of this, however, sacrifices are not an ideal or typical means of purification. In *Sefer Yechezkel*, the people are sprinkled with water, which is perhaps the most obvious purifying substance. In addition, there may be a rather technical reason for the difference: the chapter in *Yechezkel* is dealing with a situation in which there is no Temple, such that the offering of sacrifices and the use of blood are not a relevant option.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A review of *Sefer Yechezkel* as a whole suggests another significant possible reason for the difference between the ceremony described in *Sefer* *Shemot* and the purification described here. In *Sefer Yechezkel*, blood is generally representative of the deeds that lead to the destruction of the Temple and to exile,[[4]](#footnote-4) and this applies to our chapter, too: “So I poured My fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land…” (36:18). Thus, it is reasonable to posit that, in the absence of the Temple, the purification of the people will be carried out with water alone, which the prophet declares to be absolutely pure, such that the deeds of the nation – as severe as they are – cannot contaminate them.

Thus, a comparison between the ceremony of purification in *Sefer* *Yechezkel* and the ceremony of the forging of the covenant in *Sefer Shemot* shows that despite the difference with regard to the substance that is sprinkled over the nation, there is considerable similarity. In both instances the entire nation is present: in *Sefer Shemot* it is the entire generation that has just left Egypt, while Yechezkel is talking about the nation that has been gathered together from all the lands (36:24). In addition, both instances involve a covenant-forging ceremony: in *Sefer Shemot* there is explicit use of the word “covenant,” while in *Yechezkel* we find a different formulation which is commonly used in the context of reciprocal relations between God and the nation: “… and you shall be My people, and I will be your God” (36:28).

We might therefore sum up by saying that the essence of the ceremony of purification is the verse, “And I shall sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean; from all your uncleanness’s and from all your idols will I cleanse you” (36:25). The biblical background to this ceremony is twofold. On one hand, it recalls the ceremony whereby someone who has contracted ritual impurity is purified using the “*mei nidda*” (*Bamidbar* 19) – such that the sins of the nation are compared to the impurity of death, and God’s sprinkling of water is compared to the sprinkling of the purifying water that is performed by the Kohen. On the other hand, it also recalls the forging of the covenant in *Sefer Shemot*, at the center of which is the “ceremony of blood”. In this way Yechezkel reinforces the importance of this ceremony in which the nation is cleansed, and he emphasizes the severity of the deeds of the people by comparing them to the impurity entailed in contact with death – a severe form of impurity requiring a comprehensive process of purification. Yechezkel emphasizes that the future purification – like the covenant at Chorev – has historical significance, and will redefine the relationship between God and His people.

We have seen that in Chapter 36 we find the most detailed prophecy of redemption in *Sefer Yechezkel*. The prophetic units that speak of revival include common elements: God’s bringing the people out from among the nations; His gathering them in; sanctification of God’s Name in the eyes of the nations as a result of this gathering; God’s bringing the people back to their land; and their knowledge of God in the future. However, an overall view of the content of Yechezkel’s prophecies shows that they lack some classic elements: salvation and flourishing, on one hand, and expressions of sorrow, reconciliation, or consolation, on the other.

In closing, we note that this prophecy is read as the *haftara* for *Parshat* *Para*, to which it is connected both through its linguistic similarity to the expressions of redemption that appear in *Sefer Shemot* (Chapter 6),[[5]](#footnote-5) and through the conclusion with its description of Jerusalem: “Like the flock of sacrifices, like the flock of Jerusalem in her appointed times…”. Targum Yonatan translates, “Like the holy nation, like the nation that is purified and comes to Jerusalem at the time of the Pesach holiday….”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Support for the distinction between the expressions “*mayim tehorim*” and “*mei nidda*” is to be found in the Community Rule scroll (1QS), among the Dead Sea Scrolls; see Y. Licht, *Megillat ha-Serakhot mi-Megilot Midbar Yehuda*, Jerusalem 5756, pp. 78-79, column 3, lines 4-5, and also p. 80, line 9. The text indicates that its author assumes that the purification process includes both the sprinkling of ‘*mei nidda*’ and sanctification using ‘*mayim tehorim.’* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is difficult to imagine how the blood was actually sprinkled over the entire nation. Ibn Ezra proposes that the “elders represented all of Israel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is no coincidence that in a chapter in which the description of the process of redemption is extremely detailed, elements related to the Temple are absent. Their time will come only later (especially in Chapters 40-48), after the purification of the nation is complete. This is one of the ways in which Yechezkel “protects” the future Temple that he describes from recontamination. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 7:23; 9:9; 16:38; 22:2-6, 27; 33:25, and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The expressions of redemption share a common introduction: “Therefore say to Bnei Yisrael… I am the Lord” (36:22), and a similar conclusion: “And you shall be My people, and I shall be your God, and they shall know that I am the Lord” (ibid., 38). However, it should be noted that the expressions of redemption themselves are not identical: In Shemot 6 we find “I shall bring out” (*ve-hotzeiti*) (v. 6); “and I shall deliver” (*ve-hitzalti*) (v. 6), “and I shall redeem” (*ve-gaalti*) (v. 6), “and I shall take” (*ve-lakachti*) (v. 7). In Yechezkel 36 we find, “I shall take” (v. 24), “I shall gather” (*ve-kibatzti*) (v. 24); “I shall bring” (*ve-heveiti*) (v. 24), and “I shall sprinkle” (*ve-zarakti*) (v. 25). These differences would seem to emphasize the difference between the Exodus from Egypt and the return of the nation to its land in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)