YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
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SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION

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Shiur #07: Chagai: The Practical Prophet

As we discussed last week, the fourth chapter of *Ezra* records that the Temple construction came to a grinding halt following Artaxerxes' prohibition against rebuilding. Once Darius I had ascended the throne, however, Chagai and Zekharia urged the Jews to proceed with the work (*Ezra* 5:1-2). Indeed, *Ezra* (6:14) credits these prophets with having successfully spurred the project to completion. In light of that attribution, we will spend the next two lectures analyzing the book of *Chagai*, which records the prophet's exhortations to the people. We will then spend an additional three lectures examining the first eight chapters of *Zekharia*, which directly bear upon the events of *Shivat Tzion*.

Chagai: An Introduction

Chagai, the tenth of the twelve books of *Trei Asar*, spans less than four months during the second year of Darius' reign. The book summarizes Chagai's calls to the Judea-based leadership and Jewish community to proceed with the project of rebuilding the Temple. Urging that the crops will never yield bounty until the people prioritize the construction, Chagai communicates the optimistic, almost unimaginable prophecy that the glory of the second Temple will eventually outstrip that of the first. The work concludes with an obscure vision in which the Jewish governor Zerubavel is portrayed as God's chosen.

The work's authorship is not entirely clear, although it may have been composed by Chagai himself or someone in his circle. *Bava Batra* 15a attributes all of *Trei Asar* to the Men of the Great Assembly, in which Rashi (ibid., s.v. *anshei*) includes Chagai and others.

The significance of the name Chagai is also unknown, although similar names do appear in a few other places in the Bible (*Bereishit* 46:16, *Bamidbar* 26:15, *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 6:15). Chagai may be short for *chag Hashem*, a holiday of the Lord. As Chagai seems to have been a fairly common name at the time,[1] it may have been his birth name. Alternatively, some scholars suggest that it may be a later name reflecting Chagai's passionate call to rebuild the Temple, the destination of those who made the holiday pilgrimage.

[1] *Da'at Mikra*, p. 5, note 2.

The Opening Verse: Introducing Chagai, Zerubavel, and Yehoshua

It is noteworthy that already in the book's opening verse, Chagai is specifically termed "the Prophet" in a titular sense. While numerous other prophets are referred to by a similar title, it is noteworthy that Chagai receives this appellation the first five times his name appears. Similarly, it is interesting that Chagai's message is described as having been transmitted "in the hand of Chagai." Similar to "*ha-navi*," this phraseology also appears elsewhere in the Bible, but only from time to time. What are we to make of these unusual descriptors?

We can account for both observations with a single explanation: as opposed to many other prophets, Chagai experiences no visions. Instead, he receives a plain, clear message and conveys it to the people. This stands in especially sharp contrast to Chagai's colleague Zekharia. In similar fashion to Daniel, if perhaps slightly more accessible, Zekharia witnesses numerous visions conveying obscure meanings. Zekharia writes in poetry, Chagai in prose. For this reason, Chagai is called "the *Navi*." Literally, *navi* derives from the word *niv* or mouth. The *navi* serves as God's mouthpiece, much as God reassures Moshe that "*Aharon achikha yihiyeh neviekha*," "Aaron your brother shall serve as your mouthpiece" (*Shemot* 7:1). In a similar vein, Chagai's prophetic message is described as having been placed in his hand, symbolizing the accessibility of his message. We will further explore this theme as our analysis unfolds.

In addition to Chagai, the opening verse also references two seminal yet obscure personalities: Zerubavel the governor and Yehoshua the High Priest. On the one hand, these are clearly major figures. Both are singled out to receive Chagai's opening message, and each plays a prominent role in leading the first wave of *aliya* recorded in *Ezra*. Zerubavel and Yehoshua both figure prominently in *Zekharia*. Yehoshua makes a prominent appearance in *Malakhi*, and Chagai concludes his book by apparently declaring Zerubavel fit to serve as messiah.

Despite their familiarity and prominence, however, Zerubavel and Yehoshua remain shrouded in mystery. We know little to nothing of their personal backgrounds, only their father's respective names, Shaltiel and Yehotzadak. Perhaps motivated to fill in this lacunae, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 38a) asserts that Zerubavel is none other than Nechemia, who was known as Zerubavel because "*nizra be-Bavel*, he was planted in Babylonia," which presumably means that his leadership began in the exile. According to the accepted scholarly chronology, however, this identification is implausible, as Zerubavel and Nechemia did not operate at the same time.[2] Although the rabbis' identification does not fit the scholarly timetable, it does reinforce the point that it is difficult to see how such an obscure personality was anointed the Davidic dynasty's apparent heir.

[2] See R. Yaakov Emden, *Hagahot Ya'avetz Sanhedrin*, ibid.

The disparity between the lack of detail surrounding Zerubavel's biography and his prominent stature likely informed the seventh-century apocalyptic work *The Book of Zerubavel*. Describing a vision in which Zerubavel foresees an eschatological war between Armilus, leader of Rome, and Messiah ben Joseph, the *sefer* predicts that Messiah ben David will emerge as the redeemer. At the narrative's conclusion, Zerubavel witnesses the heavenly Temple descending to earth. Although there is more to say about *The Book of Zerubavel*, for our purposes the larger point is clear. Much as with Avraham's early years, as well as personalities including Chanokh and Pinchas, supernatural biographies are attempts to fill in the Biblical void.

This biographical void appears to reflect a larger intentional ambiguity shot through the book of *Chagai*, one closely resembling that of *Ezra* chapters 2 and 3. On the one hand, the people are "sitting closeted in [their] homes" (1:4), despondent over the halted progress of the construction. At the same time, Chagai foresees that "the honor of the latter Temple shall be greater than that of the former" (2:9). The younger Jews rejoice when the Temple foundations are laid; the older ones cry (*Ezra* 3:12-13; see *Chagai* 2:3). Much as in our contemporary reality in *Medinat Yisrael*, the ambiguity as to whether redemption has arrived and the tension between the current complex reality and the prophets' optimistic vision lies at the heart of the book. This equivocation is personified in the enigma surrounding Zerubavel in particular, an unknown champion who opens and concludes Chagai's recorded prophecies.

The people's hesitancy may illuminate an unusual turn of phrase in the second verse. Chagai informs Zerubavel and Yehoshua that "the people say, "It is not time for the coming of the time to build." Although the basic point is clear – the people claim that the time is not ripe for construction, and Chagai urges the opposite – the language seems oddly repetitive. Bothered by the unusual phrasing, Ibn Ezra points to a similar phrase invoked by Reuven when he discovered that his brother Yosef was no longer in the pit: "*Va-ani anna ani va*," "And where shall I go" (*Bereishit* 37:30). Still, the formulation seems awkward. In light of our observation regarding the people's ambivalence, however, it is plausible that the text means to dramatize the people's anxiety at the prospect of restarting the building project against Artaxerxes' explicit injunction. Due to their uncertainty, in other words, they speak with a symbolic stutter. Indeed, a similar suggestion may be made in the case of Reuven, who similarly stammered upon discovering his brother's absence.

Simu Levavkhem

Chagai continues (1:3-6):

> Then came the word of the Lord by Chagai the prophet, saying:
> Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell closeted in your houses, while this house lies in waste?

Now therefore so says the Lord of hosts:
Place your heart upon your ways.
You have sown much, and brought in little,
You eat, but you have not enough,
You drink, but you are not filled with drink,
You wear clothing, but there is none warm,
And he that earns wages earns wages for a bag with holes.

The theme of the passage is clear: if they abandon the building of God's house, the people cannot expect material comfort and success in their own homes. Variations on the phrase "*simu levavkhem al darkheikhem*," literally, "place your hearts upon your ways," appear a total of five times in *Chagai* (1:5, 1:7, 1:15 and twice in 1:18). Indeed, it appears to be a *leitwort* (key word) of our *sefer*. *Simu levavkhem*, in other words, seems to form the heart of Chagai's message: despite your uncertainty, place singular focus on the task of rebuilding the Temple and you will succeed in both the spiritual and material realms.

A number of observations are in order regarding this phrase. Notably, the language clearly evokes overtones of repentance.[3] Still, the phraseology in Chagai does not connote a generic call to repentance, but rather a specific charge to rebuild the Temple. In *Yoel* (2:13), by comparison, a similar phrase ("*ve-kiru levavkhem*," "rend your hearts") is used as a general exhortation toward repentance. This difference highlights Chagai's unique distinction: whereas most prophets emphasize personal repentance from moral shortcomings, Chagai calls for a national return to the task of rebuilding the Temple.

Indeed, Chagai's invocation of a national *teshuva* movement by way of restoration is echoed in Rav Kook's stirring vision of the return to Zion as national repentance (*Orot Ha-Teshuva* 15:11, 17:1-6; *Letters* 1:158). *Chagai* and the contemporary return to Israel, in other words, confront us with a radically different mode of repentance that is rooted in the unique challenges and opportunities facing a generation that has returned from exile.

A further examination of the parallels between *C*hagai and *Yoel* highlights another related difference between the books. In both works, we encounter the motifs of harvesting "grain, wine, and oil" (*Chagai* 1:11, *Yoel* 1:19) and "satisfying" hunger (*Chagai* 1:9, Yoel ibid.) as a reward for proper behavior on the part of the people. There is, however, a key distinction between the nature of the spiritual activity demanded by each prophet. Whereas in *Yoel* the Jews will be satisfied by way of God's supernatural intervention on behalf of their harvest, in *Chagai* the agricultural production comes by way of mundane human activity. In other words, *Yoel* teaches that if the Jews repent from their sins, God will miraculously shower upon them divine grace in the form of agricultural bounty. By

[3] Significantly, Chagai's opening prophecy is delivered on the first day of Elul. One wonders whether the rabbis saw Chagai as a scriptural basis for viewing the first day of Elul as ushering in the season of repentance.

contrast, *Chagai* teaches that if the Jews rebuild the Temple, their own toil in the fields will yield material success. In kabbalistic terms, Yoel, the First Temple prophet, envisions a time of *itareruta dileila*, divine initiative. Chagai, operating at the prophetic period's twilight, calls for an era of *itareruta diletata*, human initiative. Both prophets promise material success, but its production will come about in almost opposite manners.

The disparity in message between *Chagai* and earlier prophets – *Chagai* being a more practical book with more modest aims and a relatively upbeat message – is reinforced by another key distinction: the people actually obey Chagai's prophecy! From the *Nevi'im Rishonim* to nearly all the prophets of *Trei Asar*, the prophets' messages are almost universally disregarded by their audiences. The exception that proves the rule is, of course, Yona, who is obeyed by none other than the people of Ninveh. Arguably, the two major differences between Chagai and other prophets – the nature of his message and the people's response – are closely connected. Precisely because Chagai's message was more specific and optimistic, less radical and cataclysmic, his message was more readily embraced by the people than the doomsday scenarios prognosticated by his predecessors.

These distinctions point toward an even more fundamental observation regarding *Sefer Chagai*. Much as we have argued that *Ezra-Nechemia* marks the beginnings of a shift toward rabbinic leadership, Chagai is to be seen as a transitional work from the prophetic era to the post-prophetic period. In this sense, Chagai's message is less tumultuous and more practical, forward-looking, and pointed than that of his predecessors. Although he certainly qualifies as a full-fledged prophet in that he delivers an oracular message to the people, the waning of the prophetic period is well underway.[4] In this way, Chagai prefigures

[4] Seeing Chagai's role as transitioning to a post-prophetic era fits neatly with a number of rabbinic passages. In numerous instances Chagai is presented as an early source of halakhic traditions. According to *Kiddushin* 43a, for instance, Shammai the elder maintains that although as a general principle there is no halakhic category of agency (*shelichut*) for a sin, meaning that the appointed messenger is held responsible for his actions, agency does apply to one who hires a murderer. His source is a tradition from Chagai Ha-Navi. Similarly, in *Yevamot* 16a, Chagai is cited as having sat upon a particular seat and testified regarding halakhic aspects of levirate marriage, tithes, and conversion. *Zevachim* 62a asserts that three prophets came to Israel from the exile and gave testimony to three observations: the size of the altar, its location, and that one may offer sacrifices upon the altar even if the Temple is not rebuilt (as the Jews did in the time of Ezra). Rashi (ibid., s.v. *shelosha*) identifies the three prophets as Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi. (See also *Nazir* 53a and *Chullin* 137a for additional citations in the name of the three prophets.) This invocation of all three, and Chagai in particular, as early legal authorities, dovetails nicely with the motif of Chagai as a transitional figure featured in a transitional work. As we will see in the next lesson, it matches the quasi-halakhic question posed by Chagai to the prophets in chapter two.
A passage in a classic rabbinic commentary to *Pirkei Avot* points to a similar conclusion. *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (*Nusach* 1, 1:3) teaches that the prophets received the Torah from the Judges and transmitted the Torah to Chagai, Zekharia and Malakhi, who in turn passed it on to the members of the Great Assembly. The problem is obvious: weren't Chagai, Zekharia and Malakhi prophets as well? Apparently, although they were prophets, they were viewed as having operated in a

the practical Zionism of the Labor and Mizrachi movements, both of which emphasized the practical aspects of building a modern State.

The Chapter's Conclusion: Still a Prophet

In light of this analysis, we may turn to the chapter's concluding verses. Almost as if the text itself recognized the unusual elements in Chagai's prophecy, verses 12-13 are sure to emphasize that the people listened to Chagai **the prophet**. Verse 12 stresses that the people listened both to God and Chagai (see Ibn Ezra and Radak, who pick up on the seeming repetition), and verse 13 asserts that "Chagai the messenger of God said to the people with the message of God, 'I am with you.'" The recurrence of the term "messenger" (*malakhut*) accentuates the point that while Chagai may differ from other prophets and even his peer Zekharia, in the end he remains a full-fledged *navi*. Moreover, verse 12 invokes two phrases that carry overtones of Mosaic prophecy, the pinnacle of biblical *nevuah*: (a) "*ka'asher shelacho Hashem Elokeihem*," "as Hashem their God had sent him," echoing the penultimate verse of the Torah, which describes Moshe in similar terms. (b) Verse 12 concludes, "The nation feared God," closely paralleling the Jews' fear of God in the aftermath of the splitting of the Red Sea (*Shemot* 14:31). These clear allusions to Mosaic leadership underscore the wholly prophetic character of Chagai's message, one that requires emphasis precisely in light of its limitations.

The Chapter's Conclusion

Coming to the chapter's conclusion, verse 14 captures the transitional spirit between prophecy and post-prophecy that characterizes the entire chapter:

> And God stirred up the spirit of Zerubavel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Yehoshua the son of Yehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.

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qualitatively different fashion from the earlier *nevi'im*. At the same time, they were not deemed full-fledged members of *Anshei Kneset Ha-Gedola* either, which represents the post-prophetic period. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* thus positions Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi as having filled a key transitional role between the classic prophetic period and a post-prophetic era.

In light of the above, it is likely no coincidence that the precedent for Rosh Chodesh Elul launching the season of repentance – a quintessentially rabbinic calendrical date – finds its first biblical allusion in our book. The chapter similarly concludes by noting the date on which the people began working again: the twenty-fourth of Elul. Here too the date appears significant: assuming humanity was created on the first of Tishrei (see *Rosh Hashana* 11a), this is the day before the first day of creation. Indeed, R. Nissim (commentary on Rif, *Rosh Hashana* 3a), an outstanding Spanish medieval Talmudist, cites the practice of Barcelona and the surrounding communities to begin reciting penitential prayers on the twenty-fifth of Elul. As in the case of the prophecy's date, Rosh Chodesh Elul, here too the date appears significant, and would seem to reinforce the rabbinic repentance motif.

The term "*he'ir ruach*," "he awakened the spirit," seems to refer to divine inspiration that falls short of prophecy. In regard to Zerubavel (see *Zekharia* 4:7 – "*lo ve-chayil ve-lo ve-choach ki im be-ruchi*"), for example, this appears to refer to post-prophetic inspiration along the lines of what we term *ruach ha-kodesh*. This language, moreover, strikingly parallels the other outstanding individual possessed by divine inspiration during the period of *Shivat Tzion* – namely Cyrus, who was divinely inspired to build the Temple. Indeed, the Talmud (*Sota* 45b) terms Chagai, Zekharia, and Malakhi the "final prophets," adding that after their passing, "*ruach ha-kodesh*" ceased to exist. This richly ambiguous divine inspiration – not quite classical prophecy, but not fully rational either – perfectly captures the spirit of Chagai's prophecy in particular and *Shivat Tzion* generally.

Next week we will conclude our study of *Sefer Chagai*.