

**SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #09: Zekharia: Spiritual Visionary

Sefer Zekharia: An Introduction

As we mentioned last week, *Ezra* credits both Chagai and Zekharia with having inspired the Jews to complete the rebuilding process during the reign of Darius I. Having spent the last two classes examining *Chagai*, we will now begin to fill out the picture by turning to his colleague Zekharia. Given the length of *Zekharia* (14 chapters) and the messianic, esoteric nature of the book's final six chapters, we will focus the bulk of our attention on the first eight chapters, whose prophecies are more relevant to *Shivat Tzion*. We will begin with a brief overview of the contents of the entire book, which is easiest to present in outline form:

Chapter 1 – Opening call to repentance; vision of the colored horses
Chapter 2 – Vision of the four horns; vision of Yerushalayim's expansion
Chapter 3 – Vision of Yehoshua the high priest and the seven-eyed stone
Chapter 4 – Vision of the seven-pronged candelabra
Chapter 5 – Visions of the flying scroll and tub
Chapter 6 – Visions of the four chariots and the fashioning of Yehoshua's crown
Chapters 7-8 – Question and prophecy regarding the fast of the fifth month
Chapters 9-10 – Destruction of other nations and the restoration of Israel
Chapter 11 – Vision of the slaughtered sheep
Chapter 12 – Failure of the other nations to harm Israel
Chapter 13 – Elimination of false prophets; destruction and purification of nations
Chapter 14 – Eschatological war and the survival of the nations at the end of days

As is immediately evident, wholly unlike the straightforward *Sefer Chagai*, Zekharia's prophecy abounds with obscurity. Even our greatest commentators expressed their befuddlement at the book's difficulty. Rashi begins his commentary to *Zekharia*:

Zekharia is extremely closed off to interpretation, for it contains visions similar to a dream and we are unable to clarify its true meaning until the arrival of the righteous teacher. And to [the best of] our ability I will pay heed to resolve the verses following the most appropriate interpretation, and following [Targum] Yonatan's interpretation.

Even the greatest of commentators hesitated when it comes to Zekharia's reveries.

The opacity of Zekharia's visions, reminiscent of those of Daniel, who prophesied in Babylonia between the First and Second Temples, is reinforced by two elements that distinguish our *sefer* from others.

First, the verses emphasize that Zekharia's prophecies take place at night, heightening the sense of their imperviousness. Second, in each of his dreams, Zekharia does not interpret his visions on his own. Instead, an accompanying angel regularly provides the interpretations. Apparently, either Zekharia was less equipped than other prophets to interpret dreams, or his visions were even less clear than those of his predecessors. Radak (1:8) seems to propose the latter, noting the parallel to *Daniel*:

The visions of Zekharia are exceedingly obscure, like the prophecies of Daniel, unlike those of earlier prophets. For the power of prophecy was waning since the days of the exile. Therefore, they did not explain their words, nor understand the visions as they were.

As the prophetic period winds down, there is a gradual diminishment in the potency of *nevua*, manifest in the vagueness of Zekharia and Daniel's dreams.

In this sense, Chagai and Zekharia, while radically different – Chagai is straightforward and political, Zekharia quasi-mystical and spiritual – can in fact be seen as two sides of the same coin. Both differ qualitatively from their predecessors, each in his own way. Unlike that of other prophets, Chagai's message is primarily political, not spiritual. Zekharia's prophecies are so obscure as to at times border on the incomprehensible. Together, the records of their prophecies capture the fundamental changes afoot in the religious landscape at the dawn of the Second Temple period.

One final introductory note is in order. While Zekharia's prophecies are indeed difficult to interpret, by anchoring Zekharia's prophecies in the time period in which they were delivered, his prophecies become far easier to understand. Our background on the period of *Shivat Tzion* will prove crucial to our ability to make some sense of Zekharia's otherwise inscrutable visions.

Zekharia's Opening Prophecy: Return to Me and I Shall Return to You

We will now turn to the book proper, beginning with 1:1-6. The date of the *navi's* first prophecy is given as the eighth month of the second year of Darius' reign. This places us approximately two years before the dedication of the Temple, in between the first two prophecies of Chagai. According to *Sefer*

Chagai, the Jews had begun to resume the rebuilding process, but were not yet pushing hard toward completion.

The *nevua* opens with a phrase that, as we will see at the course's conclusion, carries literary and thematic parallels to *Malakhi*, the final prophetic work: the reciprocal call of "*shuvu eilai ve-ashuva aleikhem*," "return to me and I shall return to you." Zekharia's message, at least in this opening section, is plain. Your forefathers rebuffed the prophets' calls for repentance and came to regret it. You should choose more wisely than they.

Zekharia's broader message is a call to spiritual repentance, not physical activity. Strikingly, outside of the dating, nothing about this opening prophecy is particular to *Shivat Tzion*. By anchoring his opening discourse in the calls of prior prophets, Zekharia situates himself in the tradition of his forebears in a way that Chagai does not.

The theme of reciprocity is mirrored in the opening section's ABBA structure, which contrasts neatly with Chagai's one-sided, insistent ABCDABCD construction:

1. Reciprocal call for repentance ("*shuvu eilai*")
 - a. Don't follow your fathers' path.
 - b. Your fathers are no longer here.
2. Your parents regretted not listening ("*Va-yashuvu va-yomru*") and were punished accordingly.

Here too Zekharia's point is simple: Repent and all will be well. Fail to do so and you will suffer. Of course, this is very nearly the final straightforward prophecy in the book's fourteen chapters. As we will see later on, this simple equation also seems to shift as the book proceeds.

It is worth noting as well the parallels between Zekharia's prophecy and the description of the northern kingdom's exile to Assyria in *Melakhim II* chapter 17. That chapter, for instance, reports:

The Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet [and] every seer, saying: "Turn back from your wicked ways, and observe My commandments and My laws, according to all the teaching that I commanded your fathers and that I transmitted to you through My servants the prophets." (17:13)

The language – in particular, the charge of abandoning the words of the earlier prophets – closely resembles that of Zekharia. At first glance, the fact that Zekharia's language closely parallels the description of the exile of the northern kingdom is odd. After all, the Jews to whom Zekharia prophesied were those who had been exiled from Judea to Babylonia, not Samaria to Assyria. Why would

Zekharia choose to highlight the sins of a Jewish community that was not the progenitor of the people to whom he issued rebuke now?

It is possible that Zekharia's invocation of the northern kingdom's shortcomings is intentional. For a century, the Jews of Judea were able to write off the northern kingdom as sinners who had been justly punished, while exonerating themselves from any sense of wrongdoing. Zekharia therefore points precisely to the Jews who worshipped at Bet El, as if to say to the returnees: "You, who castigated the Jews of the northern kingdom and justified their exile to Assyria, are in danger of falling into their sins. If you do not repent, you will be no better off than those whom you judged guilty for so long." By turning the people's argument against themselves, Zekharia sought to more effectively convey his difficult prophetic message.

The Prophecy of the Colored Horses

Let us now briefly examine the conclusion of chapter one. On the 24th of Shevat, Zekharia witnesses a red horse, followed by a variety of colored horses, standing among the myrtles in the deep. Zekharia asks the angel as to the significance of the horses. The angel responds, "I will show you." In the meantime, the horse riders of the colored horses report to the man standing among the myrtles that they had roamed the earth and discovered it "dwelling in tranquility." Zekharia's angel thereupon turns to God, exclaiming, "O Lord of hosts! How long will you withhold pardon from Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, which you placed under a curse seventy years ago?" God responds with "kind, comforting" words. Borrowing from language in *Yeshayahu* (chapter 51), God reassures the angel that He will pour his wrath upon the nations, comfort Zion, and rebuild Jerusalem.

Clearly, there is much here that is obscure: the man, the horses and their colors, the myrtles, and the deep. In fact, there is a substantial mystical literature dating back to at least the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 93a*), which interprets the "*ish*" as somehow representing God Himself, who sought to spill blood among mankind but was heroically opposed by the angel. On this reading, the prophecy seems to be a meditation on the attributes of justice and mercy.

Irrespective of the identity of the mysterious rider, the larger point of the prophecy seems to be a cry for justice. How can it be that the other nations live in tranquility while Yirmiyahu's promise of restoration has not yet been fulfilled? Strikingly, the angel presents the prophecy of Yirmiyahu as one that has not yet been fulfilled. This is troubling. After all, Zekharia prophesies after Cyrus' call to return, which is described by *Ezra* (1:1-2) as a fulfillment of Yirmiyahu's seventy-year prophecy. How can the angel describe the prophecy as one that has not yet been fulfilled? Possibly, this serves as a basis for those who maintain (see class number two in this series) that there were in fact two separate prophecies of seventy years. Alternatively, as suggested by Radak (1:12 s.v. *asher*), the fact

that the Temple was not fully rebuilt and that the enemies continued to harass the Jewish community meant that in a larger sense the prophecy had not been fully carried out.

God's response to the angel recalls the message of Chagai: while things may appear grim at present, in the long run they will turn around dramatically. At the same time, what is perhaps most striking is, once again, the contrast to Chagai. Chagai calls for the Jews to roll up their sleeves and begin the work. Zekharia cries for repentance, suggesting that the rebuilding of Jerusalem will materialize regardless. It is almost as if, to be stereotypical about it, Chagai is the political Zionist and Zekharia the spiritual prophet. The fact that *Sefer Ezra* credits both with having inspired the reconstruction implies that both the political and religious messages are crucial for the time of *Shivat Tzion* – and ours.

Zekharia Chapter 2 – The Four Horns

Zekharia opens his eyes and sees four horns. The angel explains that these represent the horns that tossed Judah and Jerusalem. He then sees four smiths. This time, the angel explains that the smiths will frighten the horns and cut down the horns of the nations that threaten to harm the land of Judah.

At first glance, this prophecy does not seem to be rooted in the events of *Shivat Tzion*. A careful reading, however, reveals that in fact Zekharia seems to be hinting to the enemies who were a thorn in the Jewish community's side throughout *Ezra-Nechemia*. Whereas the horns are first described as tossing both Judah and Israel, presumably a reference to both the southern and northern kingdoms during the First Temple period, the smiths are described as hewing the horns of the nations that have come to harm Judah in particular. This would appear to be a reference to the local concerns of the contemporary, embattled Judean community. Indeed, the commentaries are divided as to the referent in the image of the smiths. The Talmud (*Sukka* 52b) sees the four smiths as alluding to four obscure messianic personalities, Mashiach ben David, Mashiach ben Yosef, Eliyahu, and Kohen Tzedek, who will redeem the Jews at the End of Days. Others (Ibn Ezra 2:4, s.v. *le-yadot*; Radak 2:3, s.v. *va-yareni*) interpret the vision as pertinent to the local concerns of *Shivat Tzion*. The smiths, in other words, will help cut down the Jews' enemies so that they may proceed with rebuilding the Temple.

This element in Zekharia's prophecy is typical in a few important respects. First, he is shown a striking visual image that is interpreted by an angel. Second, the meaning of the vision is ambiguous and subject to dispute among the commentaries. Third, as opposed to Chagai, who emphasizes the Jews' hands-on role in the building process, Zekharia stresses the divine role in the construction. Throughout his book, the Jews' role is to strive in matters of spirituality, and God will take care of the rest.

The Measuring Line

Next, Zekharia sees a man holding a measuring line. Its purpose, the angel explains, is to measure Jerusalem's length and width. Another angel chimes in with the symbolism, explaining that Jerusalem will be so expansive that it will not be able to contain its population with walls. God will be as a wall of fire, concludes the angel, and a source of honor ("*kavod*") for the city.

The expansive nature of the city is, of course, in sharp contrast to the meager numbers that plagued the community of returnees. Whereas Nechemia would eventually need to focus his efforts on completing the wall and providing protection for the city's population, Zekharia imagines a time in which the population would be brimming so that a wall could no longer contain the people of Jerusalem.

The word *kavod* is significant as well. Chagai emphasizes that the newly rebuilt Temple will restore God's *kavod* (*Chagai* 1:8). While those who witnessed the First Temple in its original *kavod* may dismiss the Second, God will shake up all the nations and fill the Second Temple with *kavod* (2:6). Ultimately, the *kavod* of the Second Temple will outstrip that of the First (2:9). Zekharia stresses a similar message, although he highlights the spiritual aspect of the *kavod*, emphasizing that God will surround the Temple with fire.

Flight From Babylonia

God then urges the Jewish People that although they have been spread throughout the four corners of the globe, they are to flee from Babylon, the land of the north. For God has been sent after the nations due to "*kavod*" (it is unclear whether the verse refers to God's honor or that of the Jewish People). The other nations will eventually be the loot of God, who will plunder them.

Finally, the daughter of Zion is told to rejoice, for the Divine presence shall dwell among her people. Other nations will join the Lord and become His people together with the Jews. God will take Judah as His portion in the holy land. All flesh must be silent before the Lord, for He has been awakened from His place of holiness.

The connection to *Shivat Tzion* is evident: God commands the Jews of Babylonia that the exile has ended, and they must now return to the holy city of Jerusalem. Eventually, the other nations will join the Jews in worshipping God in Jerusalem.