YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The spiritOF THE DRY BONES**

Harav Yaakov Medan

Translated by Yoseif Bloch

# “I Will Make Breath Enter You, and You Will Come to Life”

# Yechezkel’s famous vision of the Dry Bones (37:1-14) reads as follows:

The hand of the Lord was on me, and He brought me out by the Spirit (*ruach*) of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones (*atzamot*).He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Lord God, you alone know.”

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Lord God says to these bones: I will make breath(*ruach*) enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone (*etzem*) to bone.I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Lord God says: Come, breath, from the four winds (*ruchot*) and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’”So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army.

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Lord God says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”

# This is a prophecy of which we are fond throughout the year, but it acquires special significance on Yom Ha-Atzmaut. It is read in public, though not as part of our formal prayer service. Instead, it bridges two momentous days, taking us from the conclusion of the Memorial Day for Israel’s Fallen to the beginning of our Independence Day. It evokes a hope for the resurrection of all who have been killed serving the State of Israel, who gave their lives on our behalf. Metaphorically speaking, it expresses the national resurrection of the People of Israel in its land upon the return from exile.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Stages of Resurrection**

In this prophecy, the desiccated and scattered bones are analogous to the Israelites, dispersed and hopeless in exile after the Destruction of the Temple. Each Jew is alone, without a national common denominator or vision. The process of the bones being drawn together; of being covered by flesh, bound by tendons and sheathed in skin; and of breath entering them — this constitutes a metaphor for the rebuilding of the Jewish nation. Reading between the lines, we get the impression that such an event is no small feat, but rather akin to resurrecting the dead. Indeed, it is unprecedented in human history for such a revivification to take place for any people.

Moreover, we may glean from this prophecy that the resurrection of the dead is one of the basic tenets of the Jewish faith, as we learn that the prophet is familiar with it. The power of this faith allows us to believe in the redemption of Israel as well.

In addition, we may note that there are three distinct stages of this vision. Initially, the bones come together; next, they are covered with tendons, flesh and skin; finally, breath enters them. Thus, the miracle begins with the bones coming together, the ingathering of exiles and the unification of the various tribes. Tradition says that the Second Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred (Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 9b), as the Jewish nation was split once again in Jerusalem during the days of the Great Revolt (although the tribalism had nothing to do with the sons of Yaakov). Consequently, the future redemption demands that these bones be rejoined, that all the factions of the Nation of Israel come together. The breath as well comes from the four winds, becoming one living spirit. (The Hebrew term *ruach* encompasses many meanings, including breath, wind, and spirit.)

The second stage is that of flesh coming upon the bones. This means that what had been an assortment of isolated individuals now becomes a newborn nation. However, there is still no *ruach*; this comes only during the third stage. The reunification of the factions of the Jewish People returning from exile is, in itself, the initial stage of redemption, even without the *ruach* of God being manifest within the nation. This divine spirit cannot rest upon scattered bones, but only upon a whole body. It is not our place to rearrange these stages of redemption.

**Whose Dry Bones?**

I would like to make another observation about Yechezkel’s prophecy, based on the words of R. Yoel Bin-Nun.

It is unlikely that this prophecy relates to those who were exiled to Babylonia, such as Yechezkel himself, beginning in the days of King Yekhonya of Judea, during the last days of the First Temple. Such recent exiles could not rightly be described as dry bones, because they still resided in relatively cohesive Jewish communities. It is more likely that Yechezkel’s prophecy refers to the Ten Tribes of Samaria, exiled by the Assyrians a century and a half earlier. Many of them return after the Proclamation of Cyrus, much like their Judean brothers. The Persian Empire of Cyrus, after all, includes both Assyria and Babylonia.

Indeed, the idea of the dry bones being a metaphor for the exiles of Samaria is quite fitting, based on the Babylonian Talmud’s statement about them (*Yevamot* 17a):

R. Yochanan said: Why were all of these [locations populated by Samarian exiles] listed? In order to declare them as being unfit [for marriage]. When, however, I mentioned the matter in the presence of Shemuel, he said to me: “Your son” (*Devarim* 7:4) implies that whoever is descended from an Israelite woman may be called “your son,” but “your son” who is descended from a heathen woman is not called “your son,” but her son.

But, surely, there were also daughters, and Ravina had said: From this it may be inferred that your daughter's son born from [a union with] a heathen is called “your son”'! There is a tradition that the women of that generation were infertile.

Others read: When I mentioned the matter in the presence of Shemuel, he said to me: They did not move from there until they had declared them to be perfect heathens; as the verse says (*Hoshea* 5:7), “They have dealt treacherously against the Lord, for they have begotten foreign children.”

The Samarian women of that generation were unable to conceive. Thus, the sages of the generation (including the prophet Hoshea) ruled that all Samarian children were to be considered non-Jews, since their mothers could not been Jewish.

Nevertheless, Yechezkel promises a renaissance or the exiles of Samaria when they return to the land to reunite with the exiles of Judea.

**From *Etzem* to *Etz***

Indeed, we may prove this contention by considering the next prophecy, the second half of chapter 37 (vv. 15-28), the vision of the Two Sticks:

The word of the Lord came to me:“Son of man, take a stick of wood (*etz*) and write on it, ‘Belonging to Yehuda and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Belonging to Yosef – that is, to Efrayim – and all the Israelites associated with him.’ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.

“When your people ask you, ‘Won’t you tell us what you mean by this?’ say to them, ‘This is what the Lord God says: I am going to take the stick of Yosef — which is in Efrayim’s hand — and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Yehuda’s stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.’ Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on, and say to them, ‘This is what the Lord God says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land.I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

“‘My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever.My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’”

The prophecy deals with two sticks that become one: the stick of Yosef and the stick of Yehuda, which represent the Kingdom of Samaria and the Kingdom of Judea respectively. Their unification will be under one monarch, a scion of David, recreating the united kingdom of the twelve tribes of Israel over which David and Shelomo presided before the split. This convergence has a prerequisite: the resurrection of the dry bones – the return of the tribes of Samaria to the Land of Israel along with their Judean brothers.

There is one solution for both wood (*etz*) and bone (*etzem*): the ingathering of exiles. This has two meanings. Every member of the nation must be restored to the Land of Israel and all of their tribes must be united. The miracle of the unification of the Nation of Israel comes together with the miracle of the revivification of the dry bones; indeed, there is nothing greater than it.

The prophecy of Yechezkel teaches us the sequence of redemption: it begins with our becoming one nation in the land and continues with the re-establishment of a state and the Davidic monarchy. Only then can we speak of walking in the ways of God and following His laws.

1. Indeed, this prophecy also recalls our national anthem, *Ha*-*Tikva*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)