

## The Prophet Ezekiel, Ethel French, and Rabbi Yehudah ben Betayrah

**(Alef) My Virginia Jewish childhood:** Like many southern Jewish families, a black woman worked for the Siegels several hours a day from before I was born in 1944 to several years after I had graduated from college. Ethel French, born 1913 in Virginia, was the great-granddaughter of Frederick French, a slave freed by Abraham Lincoln.

**(Bet) Ethel and me:** I think it is fair to say that much of who I became as a person in a result of being raised by three people — my parents and Ethel. She was a very real daily presence, and her down-to-earth wisdom and insights about Life have served me well. At least twice, I went with Ethel to her Methodist church: for the funeral service for one of her sons, and on Mother's Day, sometime after my own mother had died. I was familiar with Gospel music from a few occasions in public school, on the radio (particularly when Mom or Dad drove me to Hebrew school Sunday morning with the car radio tuned to old-time-religion preaching and singing), and at Ethel's (naturally back then) all-Black church. (Many of our own congregations should only sing as enthusiastically!) It felt like spirituals were "in the air" all around me.

These past few days I kept hearing in my head one of them in particular: "O, Mary, Don't You Weep, Don't You Mourn". The words of the song continue: "Pharaoh's army got drowned/O, Mary, don't you weep". (Bruce Springsteen's version is particularly beautiful and powerful.) One verse goes like this, "If I could, I surely would/stand on the rock where Moses stood". That *really* got me thinking. I asked myself, "At which of the Great Biblical Moments would I have wanted *personally* to be present?" I did not pick standing with Moses on Mt. Nebo looking longingly into the Promised Land, nor to be among the Children of Israel the night of the Exodus or standing at Mt. Sinai. I thought about all of them, but decided instead — finally and without hesitation — to stand right beside the prophet Ezekiel, prophesying among the Israelite exiles in Babylonia as he gazed at a vast valley filled with dry bones.

**(Gimel) The valley, the bones:** For centuries, sages and commentators have offered various opinions about the meaning, implications, and possible truths of Ezekiel's astonishing prophecy in chapter 37, verses 1-14. The words describe a valley covered with **וְהָיָה רַבּוֹת מְאֹד** *וְהָיָה רַבּוֹת מְאֹד* *very many bones* **וְהָיָה יְבֹשֶׁת מְאֹד** *and they were very dry*. ("הנה" is emphatic.) Following my usual method of text-study, I went to Midrash described in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 92b*) for clarification and "leads". As expected, on that page the Sages' opinions differ. Rabbi Eliezer stated that, after the bones formed skeletons, were covered by flesh and skin, and were revived by God's life-giving breath, they stood up, sang a verse about life, death, and resurrection, and then died again. Rabbi Yehoshua said that it was only a visionary metaphor and never really happened. Rabbi Yehudah ben Betayrah said, that those who were resurrected went to the land of Israel, gave birth to sons and daughters, and *he himself was one of their descendants*.

**(Dalet) Some thoughts:** God tells Ezekiel (*verse 14*) that the bones are all the Israelites, who are in despair about finally ending the Babylonian Exile. God assures them, **הֲנֵה אֲנִי פֹתֵחַ אֶת־קְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵעֲלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם** *הֲנֵה אֲנִי פֹתֵחַ אֶת־קְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם וְהֵעֲלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם מִקְבֻרֹתֵיכֶם עִמִּי וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם* *Listen! (הנה) I will open your graves, O My people, and I will lift you out of your graves, and take you to The Land of Israel.*" One phrase the bones use is **הֲתִקְוֶה תִּקְוַתְנוּ** *וְאָבְדָה תִּקְוַתְנוּ* *veAvdah tikvataynu*-our hope is lost, which is exactly why in *התקווה/Hatikvah* we sing, **עוֹד לֹא אָבְדָה תִּקְוַתְנוּ** *od lo avda Tikvataynu*, We have **not** lost our (two thousand years of) hope". I can't help but wonder how Jews in The Middle Ages felt — 1,000, 1,500, 2,000 years and more into the Exile, or for that matter, Herzl's and the other early Zionist dreamers' thoughts. And I can't help but imagine what Jews everywhere felt on November 29, 1947, when the United Nations voted to end the British Mandate and to partition Palestine. Even more so, on May 14, 1948, what was going through David Ben Gurion's mind when he proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel?

*(Hay) Some thoughts I had while standing right beside Ezekiel:* (1) We simply should not ignore astonishing thoughts, ideas, intuitions, insights, imaginings, visions (even dreams) — even if they seem wild, outrageous, or unreal — however and whenever we might encounter them. Even if we miss “the point”, there is much to gain from the discovery itself. To the contrary, we should pay special attention; (2) Also, we should certainly pay closer attention to people who are, think, or act differently than “the norm”. For example, Einstein, intimately connecting mass and energy, Sir Alexander Fleming, noticing an aggressive mold in a petri dish — which led him to discover penicillin, Edward Jenner, who used cowpox microbes to cure smallpox, and the Wright brothers — mere bicycle shop owners — who believed and proved that people could fly in machines. Imagine that the next time you board a Boeing Superliner; (3) Verse 9 refers to the bones as **חַרְגֵימִים/harugim**, those who were killed (in some indeterminate war), and, in verse 10 — if we translate **חַיִל/chayil** as “army” — then **חַיִל גָּדוֹל מְאֹד מְאֹד**, the bones were a “very, very great army”. I think we would naturally call to mind Israel’s **יוֹם הַזִּכְרוֹן/Yom HaZikaron**-Memorial Day — when the entire country stops as sirens go off — which commemorated in 2021 the 23,928 soldiers and victims of terror who had had been killed since 1948. Working backwards in time, we well might think of the victims of the Crusades, Inquisition, Chmelnitzky massacres, Russian pogroms, and the Shoah. **Who would not want all of them to be restored to life?** (4) If, as written in Genesis 3:9, the ultimate fate of human beings is **וְאַל-עָפָר תָּשׁוּב**-*You are dust and you shall return to dust*, then certainly — like Ezekiel’s bones — resurrection is possible; (5) In particular, as the months of COVID drag on and the number of infections and deaths climbs horribly, many people have had the deeply unsettling feeling that they may never see their friends and family again, and, finally, (6) individually and personally, there is the possibility of a life after death. Some would say that this is sentimental or naïve thinking — but, in my opinion, that’s all right. It is human to do so.

*(Vav) Returning to the valley:* I know there is much more to learn from Ezekiel 37:1-14. I consider this Dvar Torah only the beginning of my thinking about this grand, nothing-short-of-fantastic, unique, and inspiring prophecy. This passage is one of our Biblical texts which I believe will continue to yield more and more depth and meaning — if we would but put our hearts, minds souls, and might into returning to it again and again.