

Never Too Early, Never Too Late

In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. On the fifth day of the month--it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin--the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel, son of Buzi. (Ezekiel 1:1-2)

Ancient sages reflected on why the book of Ezekiel begins with these verses instead of:

בֶּן-אָדָם עֶמֶד עַל-רַגְלֶיךָ וְאָדַבַּר אִתְּךָ (יחזקאל ב: א) וַיֵּשׂ אוֹמְרִים בֶּן-אָדָם חוּד חִידָה וּמִשָּׁל מִשָּׁל (יחזקאל יז: ב) זֶה הָיָה תְּחִילַת הַסֵּפֶר וְלָמָּה נִכְתָּב כֵּן? לְפִי שְׂאִין מוֹקְדָם וּמְאוּחָר בְּתוֹרָה.

Son of man! Stand on your own two feet and I will speak with you! (Ezekiel 2:1). Some say, Son of man! Riddle a riddle, imagine an image (Ezekiel 17:2) should have been the beginning of Ezekiel's book. Why, therefore, was the verse written in its place? Because there is no early or late in the Torah. (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Shirta, ch. 7)

For the poet, Yehuda Amichai, the concept of *no early or late* becomes a way of reading the text of a life:

וְכָל אָדָם הוּא סֶכֶר בֵּין עֶבֶר לְעֵתִיד.
כִּשְׁהוּא מֵת נִשְׁבֵּר הַסֶּכֶר וְהָעֶבֶר מִתְפָּרֵץ לְתוֹךְ הָעֵתִיד
וְאִין מְקֻדָּם וְאִין מְאַחֵר. וְהַזְמַן הוּא אֶחָד
כְּמוֹ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, זְמַנְנוּ אֶחָד.
וְזִכַּר הַסֶּכֶר לְבִרְכָה.

And every person is a dam between past and future.
When he dies the dam is broken and the past breaks through into the future
and there is no early or late. Time is one
like our God, our time is one.
And the memory of the dam is a blessing.

Yehuda Amichai
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