YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #16: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (5)**

**The rebellion of Ashdod and the “naked and barefoot” prophecy (*Yeshayahu* 20) (713-711 B.C.E.)**

Chizkiyahu sparked hope in the heart of the prophet, who began to view the king as a potential Mashiach. Chizkiyahu’s efforts to strengthen ties with the exiles of Efraim who had come to Jerusalem and with the remnant that had remained in the Galilee and the Shomron, the celebration of Pesach, and the unification of the kingdom under the house of David, all pointed to his potential as one who might re-establish the throne of David over all of Israel. There was just one thing Yeshayahu wanted to avoid: another rebellion against Assyria. Assyria would undoubtedly fall by the hand of God, and the king of Yehuda would do well to focus on the internal work of repairing society, pursuing righteousness and justice, and strengthening the spirit of the people.

But Chizkiyahu’s power grew, and it was only natural that he began to take in interest in foreign policy. Intense political activity was happening all around him, and he had to decide whether to join a new coalition that was organizing itself with the aim of removing the Assyrian vise from the region, or whether to remain loyal to Assyria (like Achaz, his father) and run the risk of a schism with neighboring nations. This quandary is documented in a brief, opaque chapter – the only chapter in all of *Sefer Yeshayahu* that mentions Sargon’s name explicitly.

**Understanding the political background: “In the year that the turtanu came to Ashdod”**

In the year that the turtanu came to Ashdod, when Sargon, king of Assyria, sent him, and he waged war against Ashdod and captured it. (*Yeshayahu* 20:1)

Already in Sargon’s third year, immediately after the exile of Shomron, he had captured Gaza and – according to one of his inscriptions – “seized with his own hands” Khanon, king of Gaza, and deported him to Ashdod. In the years that followed, he enslaved Arab tribes near the border of Egypt and established an Assyrian commercial colony (in the region of today's El-Arish). (The Assyrian kings viewed Philistia as a strategic target, owing to its proximity to Egypt.[[1]](#footnote-1))

Sargon’s inscriptions describe Ashdod's rebellion against him, as well as its suppression (which led to the conquest of the city).[[2]](#footnote-2) On the basis of this information, we can piece together the main events:

In Sargon's 8th year (715 B.C.E.), the king of Ashdod (Azuri) rebelled against Assyria. He refused to continue paying tribute to Assyria and plotted against it, sending messengers to neighboring rulers with a view to forming a coalition.

In Sargon's 10th year (713 B.C.E.), the ‘turtanu’ (a title given to the Assyrian “commander-in-chief”) was dispatched to subdue the rebels. Azuri was deposed and his brother Akhimiti, who was loyal to Assyria, replaced him.

In Sargon's 12th year (711 B.C.E.) the Assyrians had to return to Ashdod because Akhimiti had been dethroned and replaced by Yamani, a warrior who fortified Ashdod, forged covenants with neighboring nations, and had a defense pact with Egypt. Sargon himself undertook this campaign, to ensure an end to the uprising. He left Ashdod in ruins, carried off its inhabitants, and stationed Assyrian soldiers there.

The rebellious Yamani fled to Egypt and forged a treaty with its king. At that time, a dynasty of Ethiopian kings came to dominate both Upper (southern) and Lower Egypt; their rule lasted about seventy-five years. The Egyptian ruler who was the patron of Yamani of Ashdod was assassinated, and Piye, founder of this dynasty of Black Pharaohs (the 25th dynasty of Egypt), sent the head of Yamani to the Assyrians as a gesture of friendship.[[3]](#footnote-3)

All of this is background to Yeshayahu's prophecy:

At that time, the Lord spoke through Yeshayahu ben Amotz, saying, “Go and loose the sackcloth from off your loins, and take your shoe off your foot.” And he did so, walking naked and barefoot.

And the Lord said, “As My servant, Yeshayahu, has walked naked and barefoot for three years to be a sign and a wonder about Egypt and about Ethiopia,

So shall the king of Assyria lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.

And they shall be dismayed and ashamed, because of Ethiopia their expectation, and of Egypt their glory.

And the inhabitants of this coastland shall say on that day: Behold, that was our expectation, to which we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria; how, then, shall we escape?" (*Yeshayahu* 20:2-6)

**Jerusalem fears the arrival of the turtanu**

During the first Assyrian campaign against Ashdod (“in the year that the turtanu came” – 713 B.C.E.), God addresses the prophet and tells him, “Go and loose the sackcloth from off your loins.” The prophet is commanded to remove the sackcloth that he had previously donned. But why was the prophet wearing sackcloth? And why was he commanded to remove it? Afterwards, he is commanded to remove his shoes and to go “naked and barefoot” through the streets of Jerusalem for three years. What was this spectacle meant to convey to the king and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem?

The Rambam’s answer to this question, in line with his general approach, is that all of this took place in a prophetic vision (*Guide of the Perplexed* 46). The Rambam maintains that anyone who thinks that the prophet actually walked around Jerusalem for three years naked and barefoot, at God’s command, is “of weak reason.” There is logic to this argument: it is difficult to imagine Yeshayahu, a member of the royal family, conducting himself in this way for such a long time without anyone stopping him.

However, close study of the chain of historical events serves to paint a picture that allows us to view the above verses as describing real action, not merely as a metaphor or imagery.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The sackcloth that Yeshayahu was wearing before the turtanu’s arrival was not necessarily a sign of mourning (over the exile of Efraim and Menashe), as Radak suggests. Admittedly, there are instances in Tanakh where sackcloth is indeed a sign of mourning,[[5]](#footnote-5) but it can also signify prayer and supplication to be saved from death,[[6]](#footnote-6) and this would seem to be the case here.

So why was Yeshayahu wearing sackcloth? One of Sargon’s inscriptions describes the instigator of the rebellion of Ashdod appealing to the neighboring kings: “Azuri, king of Ashdod, schemed in his heart no longer to deliver tribute, and he sent messengers to the neighboring kings.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Did the king of Ashdod send to the king of Yehuda too? We have no evidence regarding such a possibility; there is no indication at this point of Chizkiyahu’s involvement in foreign affairs. However, it may be that Ashdod’s efforts created an initial, tentative stirring in this direction, as would happen later with the messengers of Merodakh-Baladan and the pact with Egypt.

Yeshayahu observed the germination of this political development and was distraught. Twenty years earlier, he had stood before Achaz and tried to persuade him to stay out of the war games of Israel and Aram against Assyria. All his attempts had come to naught; Achaz had become an Assyrian vassal, and Jerusalem had been defiled and sullied by pagan idolatry during the years that Achaz was “the servant and son of Tiglat-Pileser.”

After that difficult period, Chizkiyahu, Achaz’s son, had come along and freed Jerusalem from its chains. These years were characterized by a return to the service of God and the tradition of the forefathers; the expansion of Jerusalem and its walls; and reunification with the remnant of the tribes of Israel that had remained in the land. All this restored glory to the city and hope to the prophet, who thought that perhaps this king would indeed be found worthy to sit on the throne of David, his ancestor, since he adhered to God and His teachings with calm and confidence.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Was this king, too, now going to be drawn into regional politics and ill-fated pacts? Would Yeshayahu have to explain all over again that a rebellious regional coalition was a chimera and ran contrary to what God wanted? What support was Ashdod relying on for the coalition? Egypt, which promised help but was in the midst of an internal war between the south (Upper Egypt), ruled by Ethiopia, and the north (Lower Egypt)?

The turtanu’s expedition to Ashdod was not a secret. As he approached, everyone knew it was a time of danger and trouble. In the absence of actual testimonies, we can only imagine the fright that seized the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Assyrians were coming to subdue the uprising in Ashdod – but who could guarantee that they would not also seek to punish those who had allied themselves with Ashdod, or perhaps even those who “just” received their messengers?

The Assyrian army waged its battle against Ashdod, and Jerusalem held its breath. Yeshayahu wore sackcloth and prayed for God’s deliverance from the sword of Sargon. When did he start wearing sackcloth and fasting? Most likely when he heard that the turtanu’s expedition had set off and was on the way. Yeshayahu’s active opposition to Chizkiyahu’s involvement in the political intrigue was set aside in favor of prayer and supplication.

**Between one campaign and the next: the meaning of removing sackcloth and shoes**

At the conclusion of the turtanu’s expedition to Ashdod, Jerusalem breathed a sigh of relief. The prophet, too, loosened his sackcloth. But at that very moment, he received a Divine command not only to remove the sackcloth, but also to take off his shoes; he was asked to go about “naked and barefoot.” A strange, jarring picture: all of Jerusalem is celebrating, while the prophet walks naked and barefoot near the king’s palace.

In order to understand this command, let us recall the political reality prevailing in Ashdod after the turtanu left. Yamani, who had been placed on the throne by the people of the city after they ousted the ruler appointed by the Assyrians, immediately set about putting together a coalition including Philistia, Yehuda, Edom, and Moav to continue the rebellion. This coalition enjoyed the conspicuous, elaborate patronage of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.[[9]](#footnote-9)

When Sargon realized that Ashdod had not been subdued, he set off to punish the city and destroy it. This was the three-year period (713-711 B.C.E.) during which Yeshayahu went about naked and barefoot, in an attempt to warn Chizkiyahu against joining the rebellion. The prophet observed bloody battles in Egypt between the Ethiopian rulers and Lower Egypt, and cried out in his prophecy: “And they shall be dismayed and ashamed, because of Ethiopia their expectation, and of Egypt their glory.” This prophecy deliberately mixes up “Ethiopia” and “Egypt,” in an accurate reflection of the complex reality. Yamani had forged a covenant with one, and then, finding himself in trouble, turned to the other ruler for help. The new king handed him over without batting an eyelid. The prophecy foretells that not only will Ashdod be destroyed, but Egypt itself will also suffer grave damage: “So shall the king of Assyria lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot….”

The image of the prophet in this shameful state was meant to bring home, to everyone who saw it, what would happen to those who would fall into Sargon’s humiliating captivity. Yeshayahu’s audacious, theatrical protest lasted three years. So long as there was instability in Jerusalem, Yeshayahu stood out as a lone player, at God’s command, to halt Chizkiyahu’s misguided new-old vision of joining a coalition against Assyria. Chizkiyahu’s dream of regional power-building became Yeshayahu’s nightmare.

Translated Kaeren Fish

1. Ch. Tadmor, "*Chet'o shel Sargon*," *Eretz Yisrael* 5 (5719); G. Galil, "*Ha-Yechasim Bein Yehuda le-Ashur bi-Yemei Sargon ha-Sheni*," *Tzion* 57 (5752), pp. 113-133; N. Ne'eman, “*Mediniutam shel Achaz ve-Chizkiyahu Klapei Ashur bi-Yemei Sargon*,” *Tzion* 59 (5754), pp. 5-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some of Sargon's inscriptions were discovered on the walls of the palace in his capital, Dur-Sharrukin (7-6 B.C.E.). His "Great Summary Inscription," found at Nineveh, likewise describes Ashdod's rebellion against him. See Ne'eman, above, n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *National Geographic Israel* vol. 117 (February, 2008) is devoted to the revolution of the Black Pharaohs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The analysis that follows is proposed by Yehuda Elitzur, “*B-Shenat Bo Tartan Ashdoda*,” in his collection of articles, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, Ramat Gan 5760, pp. 192-200. See also S. Vargon, “*Nevuat Yeshayahu al Reka ha-Mered shel Ashdod be-Sargon ha-Sheni ve-Dikuyo*,” *Beit Mikra* 152 (5758), pp. 1-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example: “And Yaakov tore his garments and placed sackcloth upon his loins, and he mourned for his son many days” (*Bereishit* 37:34); “And I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation, and I will bring up sackcloth upon all loins, and baldness upon every head, and I will make it as the mourning for an only son, and its end as a bitter day” (*Amos* 8:10); “You have turned my mourning into dancing for me; You have loosened my sackcloth [i.e., put an end to my mourning] and girded me with joy” (*Tehillim* 30:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example: Ben-Haddad’s words in *Melakhim* I 20:31-32; Achav’s actions in *Melakhim* I 21:20 and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot Historiot*, Jerusalem 5764, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. *Yeshayahu* 30:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Ch. Tadmor, above, n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)