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 #20: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (9)**

**Yeshayahu’s reaction to the fortification of Jerusalem (Chapter 22)**

Yeshayahu goes out in Jerusalem and observes the city’s hustle and bustle. Onlookers are gathering on the eastern side of the city to watch the diversion of the Gichon spring; others are heading to the northern side to follow the renewed construction of the great wall. At night, banquets of meat and wine are held on the city’s rooftops. People are convinced that victory is around the corner – and if not, they console themselves, at least they will die with a full stomach. It is in the midst of this vibrant atmosphere that Yeshayahu declares his prophecy:

The burden concerning the Valley of Vision. What ails you now, that you are wholly gone up the housetops,

You who are full of uproar, a tumultuous city, a joyous town? Your slain are not slain with the sword, nor dead in battle.

All your rulers have fled together, without the bow they are bound; all that are found of you are bound together, they have fled afar off.

Therefore I said: Look away from me, I will weep bitterly; do not strain to comfort me, for the destruction of the daughter of my people. (*Yeshayahu* 22:1-4)

This chapter is located near the end of the series of “burden” prophecies concerning the nations (chapters 13-23), and is the only chapter in the series that is addressed to Yehuda. Instead of referring to Jerusalem by name, Yeshayahu prefers to call it the “Valley of Vision.” He observes society engaging in debauchery on the rooftops, and he weeps bitterly. Unlike the busy, zestful nation, he is already envisioning the enemy forces atop the city walls:

For it is a day of trouble and of trampling and of perplexity, from the Lord, the God of hosts, in the Valley of Vision; Kir shouting, and Shoa at the mount.

And Elam bore the quiver, with troops of men, even horsemen, and Kir uncovered the shield.

And it came to pass, when your choicest valleys were full of chariots, and the horsemen set themselves in array at the gate,

And the covering of Yehuda was laid bare, that you looked on that day to the armor in the house of the forest. (Ibid. 5-8)

Yeshayahu calls Chizkiyahu to account for his huge initiative of fortifying Jerusalem and preparing water reservoirs for the city:

And you saw the breaches of the city of David, that they were many, and you gathered together the waters of the lower pool.

And you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall;

You also made a basin between the two walls for the water of the old pool – but you did not look to Him Who had done this, nor did you have respect for Him that fashioned it long ago. (Ibid. 9-11)

The houses of Jerusalem have become construction materials for the new wall; their inhabitants have been trampled, like the farmers in the Kidron Valley whose plots have dried up in the wake of the diversion of the Gichon. And instead of soul-searching, the city is overcome with delirious euphoria:

And on that day, the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and for lamentation, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth,

And behold – joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine, “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die!”

And the Lord of hosts revealed Himself in my hearing: Surely this iniquity shall not be expiated by you until you die, says the Lord God of hosts. (Ibid. 12-14)

**The prophet castigates “Shevna who is over the house” (Chapter 22)**

After raising a cry over Jerusalem and its preparations for war, Yeshayahu prophesizes against the steward, “Shevna who is over the house,” who Yeshayahu perceives as a symbol of the city’s ills.

We have not heard before of “Shevna who is over the house,” and must glean details about this man, his role, and his actions from Yeshayahu’s words here.

At the end of the prophecy, Yeshayahu promises that Shevna’s special robe and turban will be removed and the keys of the house of David will be taken from his hands, to be given to Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu, who “shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (*Yeshayahu* 22:22). It is clear from this description that Shevna’s role is not a minor one; rather, he is the senior minister appointed over the house of David, like “a peg in a sure place.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The same impression arises from the composition of the venerable delegation that goes out to receive Ravshakeh, the senior emissary of Sancheriv, who calls upon Jerusalem to surrender: “And there went out to him Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu, who was over the house, and Shevna the scribe.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It is not clear whether “Shevna the scribe” is the same Shevna who was demoted, but what is clear is that Chizkiyahu acted in accordance with the prophet’s instructions and replaced the chief officer who had been “over the house.” What was the background to this harsh prophecy?

It turns out that this chief officer, a key figure in Jerusalem, took advantage of the delirious excitement that pervaded the city to carve himself a fancy grave in the area reserved for the most honored. This was an ideal time to exploit public works for private purposes; engineers and building contractors were everywhere, working in the service of the kingdom. Shevna made sure to profit from this activity, at a time of national emergency, and in view of this lack of solidarity Yeshayahu could not hold back. Watching the kingdom preparing for war, while the people caroused, Yeshayahu wept and mourned, while in response to Shevna’s actions, he protested with a bitter prophecy:

Behold, the Lord will hurl you up and down with a man’s throw, and will wind you round and round;

He will violently roll and toss you like a ball into a large country; there you shall die, and there shall be the chariots of your glory – you, the shame of your lord’s house.

And I will thrust you from your post, and from your station shall you be pulled down.

And it shall come to pass on that day that I will call my servant Elyakim, son of Chilkiyahu,

And I will clothe him with your robe, and bind him with your girdle, and I will commit your government into his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Yehuda. And I will lay the key of the house of David upon his shoulder, and he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him as a peg in a sure place, and he shall be for a throne of honor to his father’s house. (Ibid. 17-23)

The Sages of *Eretz Yisrael* offer a fantastic interpretation according to which “Shevna” was the head of the party that opposed the rebellion and favored surrendering to Assyria:

R. Berakhia said in the name of R. Abba bar Kahana: What did Shevna and Yoach do [who came out to Sancheriv with Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu (*Yeshayahu* 36:3)], but who were not loyal as he was? They wrote a note and tucked it into an arrow, and sent it out of the window to Sancheriv. What did they write? “We and all of the children of Israel seek to make peace with you; Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu do not wish to make peace with you.” And this is what David foresaw with Divine inspiration, when he said (*Tehillim* 11:2), “For behold, the wicked bend the bow; they have made ready their arrow upon the string, that they may shoot in darkness at the upright in heart” – referring to the two upright [leaders]; who were they? Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu. (*Vayikra Rabba* 5)

According to this understanding, Shevna acted within Jerusalem as a pro-Assyrian “fifth column,” following the policy of Achaz and undermining Chizkiyahu’s leadership. It was for this that Yeshayahu castigated him. This midrash is expanded upon in the Gemara, becoming a political drama with a head-on collision between the leaders of the “parties”:

Shevna taught [Torah] to 130,000 people; Chikziyahu taught to 110,000.

When Sancheriv came and laid siege to Jerusalem, Shevna wrote a note and shot it with an arrow to the king of Assyria: “Shevna and his party surrender; Chizkiyahu and his party do not surrender.” …

Chizkiyahu was concerned. He said [to himself]: “Perhaps, God forbid, God will agree with the majority [who opposed the revolt]. If the majority of the nation surrenders, I too will be handed over into their hands.” The prophet came and said to him, “Do not say: A conspiracy […] for it is a conspiracy of wicked people, and a conspiracy of wicked people is not counted [i.e., they are not considered the majority even if there are many of them].” (*Sanhedrin* 26a)

This aggadic interpretation makes use of different sources from Tanakh, especially from *Sefer Yeshayahu*, adapting them to the politico-historical reality of the time. The verse from which Yeshayahu derives his message to Chizkiyahu – not to surrender – is drawn from the context of Achaz: “Do not say, ‘A conspiracy,’ concerning everything whereof this nation says, ‘A conspiracy’…” (*Yeshayahu* 8:12). These words (at least according to the plain meaning) were directed against the rebellious faction that sought to join the coalition of “conspiracy” led by Pekach ben Remalyahu and Retzin, king of Aram, against Assyria. *Chazal* borrow the verse and place it in the mouth of Yeshayahu as he speaks against Shevna, the head of the party that apparently supported surrendering to Assyria. In truth, Yeshayahu favored neither surrender nor revolt, and had no patience for the whole controversy in this regard. However, once Chizkiyahu had already joined the revolt, and Sancheriv’s army was laying siege to Jerusalem (in the midrashic description), Yeshayahu prayed for the safety and wellbeing of the city (as elaborated upon in *Yeshayahu* 37). He did not stand passively on the sidelines, even though he had foreseen the trouble. The “party” of Shevna was no less detestable to him than the conspiracy of the rebels, especially at a time of “trouble and rebuke and insult” (*Yeshayahu* 37:2), and he encouraged Chizkiyahu to stand strong and not yield, assuring him that ultimately God would save Jerusalem. Indeed, after Chizkiyahu’s prayer in the Temple, God conveyed via Yeshayahu a firm and decisive response to Sancheriv’s threats and his blaspheming of the Lord God of Israel (37:21-32).

The *midrash* views Yeshayahu’s words in the two parts of Chapter 22 as being directed against the preparations for rebellion and against submission, a continuation of his position in the past.

**Mikha of Morasha joins Yeshayahu’s protest**

At this stage, with Jerusalem overtly engaged intensively in fortifications, but with society falling apart, the prophet Mikha joins Yeshayahu in his protest. The dispute over principle that had raged in the *beit midrash[[3]](#footnote-3)* now gave way to a powerful joining of forces whose impact was felt all the way to the royal palace. There was no dispute between Yeshayahu and Mikha over the fact that the survival and status of Jerusalem depended not only on fortification, but rather on moral and social resilience:

Hear this now, you heads of the house of Yaakov, and rulers of the house of Israel, that abhor justice and distort all equity,

Who build up Tzion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity;

Its heads judge for reward, and its *kohanim* teach for hire, and its prophets divine for money, yet they would lean upon the Lord and say, “Is not the Lord in our midst? No evil shall come upon us.”

Therefore on your account Tzion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest. (*Mikha* 3:9-12)

A superficial reading of this chapter leaves the reader in the dark as to which political and social reality the prophet is addressing. It seems at first that this criticism is well suited to what we heard from Yeshayahu concerning the period of Uziya, but less so to the reality of the reign of Chizkiyahu. After all, we know that the latter period was characterized by a widespread religious revival. How is it possible to imagine the time of Chizkiyahu as being characterized by bribes to the rulers of Jerusalem, the office of the *Kohen Gadol* being sold for money, and prophets prophesizing to please the regime? However, we have evidence in the form of discourse of Jerusalem’s inhabitants, from about a hundred years after Chizkiyahu’s time, in which Mikha’s prophecy is quoted. It is to be found in Chapter 26 of *Yirmiyahu*, where the prophet is put on trial and faces a death penalty for having dared to state openly that Jerusalem was not immune to the threat of destruction.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the midst of the chapter, we hear the voices of the elders of the city, who still remember the distant past:

And there rose up certain of the elders of the land, and spoke to all the assembly of the people, saying:

Mikha of Morasha prophesied in the days of Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, and he spoke to all the people of Yehuda, saying, So says the Lord of hosts: Tzion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the Temple Mount like the high places of a forest.

Did Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda – and all of Yehuda – then put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord, and entreat the favor of the Lord, and the Lord relented with regard to the evil which He had pronounced against them? Thus we perpetrate great evil against our own souls. (*Yirmiyahu* 26:17-19)

It turns out, then, that the prophecy recorded in Chapter 3 of *Sefer Mikha* was uttered in the time of Chizkiyahu. We have no choice but to conclude that even under the reign of a king as righteous and upright as Chizkiyahu, bribery blinded the eyes of the wise and perverted the words of the righteous. Corruption can make dangerous inroads even under the best of rulers. The fortification works that Chizkiyahu instituted, with the digging of the tunnel and the diversion of the spring, all required massive manpower. Perhaps, given these circumstances, there were a great many elements and forces that came between the king and the people, exploiting the fact that the king was entirely occupied with preparing for the siege. Yeshayahu’s prophecy against Shevna serves to reinforce this hypothesis. Of course, the corruption harmed those who are always the victims – the weakest groups in society. Mikha did not hesitate to criticize Chizkiyahu and his ministers. This is the first time in Tanakh that a prophet stands up and speaks openly of the danger of Jerusalem being destroyed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However, the elders of Jerusalem in the time of Yirmiyahu remembered not only the prophecy of Mikha, but also the *teshuva* (repentance) of Chizkiyahu*.* The king had prayed and beseeched God to have mercy on the city. The memory of the elders connected that which was going to happen in the time of Sancheriv’s campaign with the pervasive corruption, and attributed the city’s deliverance to Chizkiyahu.

From the description of how Shevna “who was over the house” was replaced by Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu, as per Yeshayahu’s demand, we learn that Chizkiyahu not only prayed but also undertook an anti-corruption initiative that removed some of the most problematic elements that had been active in the city. Thus, Chizkiyahu became one of the very few kings of Israel and Yehuda who paid attention to the criticism of the prophets and acted to effect repair.

**Chizkiyahu’s response to the protest of the prophets**

The prophecy of Yeshayahu and Mikha could not be ignored, nor silenced. Even Chizkiyahu does not trivialize their message; he holds a special assembly of the people with the captains of war, as described in *Divrei Ha-yamim* immediately after the stopping of the water sources and the fortification of the walls and towers in anticipation of Sancheriv’s arrival:

And he set captains of war over the people, and gathered them together to him in the broad place at the gate of the city, and spoke encouragingly to them, saying:

Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid or dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him, for there is [One Who is] Greater with us than with him.

With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people had hope in the words of Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:6-8)

These verses are written as a sort of dialogue with the prophet. Yeshayahu’s accusation, “You did not look to Him that had done this, nor did you have respect for Him that fashioned it long ago,”[[6]](#footnote-6) was painful for Chizkiyahu. He wanted to make it clear to the people that Sancheriv was coming with “an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles.” This is a clear continuation of Chizkiyahu’s prayer to God during his illness. The king never expresses remorse or regret concerning the revolt against Assyria and the preparations for war, but since the prophet pointed out a serious flaw in the level of faith reflected in the general approach to the situation, and described banquets of “eating and drinking,” Chizkiyahu immediately takes steps to instill a different spirit – one of faith and trust in God. This is a difficult and unique moment in Chizkiyahu’s story: he listens to the prophet and shows him real respect; at the same time, however, he owns fully his responsibility and decisions as a leader, convinced that it is God’s will that he wage a physical war – not just a religious effort – against the Assyrian conqueror. Can such dual loyalty be maintained? Is it possible to respect the prophet while at the same time undermining his guidance and his authority?

**“Ah, Ariel, Ariel”: the people of Jerusalem serve God outwardly (*Yeshayahu* 29)**

As an extension of the “burden of the Valley of Vision,” and in response to the assembly of the people in which Chizkiyahu declared trust in God as the guiding principle for all the preparations against Assyria, let us read Chapter 29, in which the prophet continues to mourn over the impending siege and to rebuke the people of Jerusalem.

At the beginning of the chapter, Yehuda is in a very low place. Yeshayahu excoriates its inhabitants and its king. This prophecy provides us with additional images of the atmosphere in Jerusalem at the time:

Stupefy yourselves, and be stupid! Blind yourselves, and be blind! You who are drunken, but not with wine; that stagger, but not with strong drink.

For the Lord has poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes; the prophets, and your heads, the seers, He has covered.

And the vision of all this has become for you like the words of a writing that is sealed, which men deliver to one who is learned, saying, “Read this, I pray you,” and he says, “I cannot, for it is sealed.”

And the writing is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, “Read this, I pray you,” and he says, “I am not learned.” (*Yeshayahu* 29:9-12)

The energetic flurry that has seized the inhabitants of Jerusalem appears to Yeshayahu like a kind of drunkenness that is followed by deep sleep; there is no one awake enough to take in the message and the vision of the prophets. Yeshayahu recalls the “hiding of God’s face” in the days of Achaz, concerning which he had said:

Bind up the testimony; seal the instruction among My disciples. And I will wait for the Lord, Who hides His face from the house of Yaakov, and I will look for him. (*Yeshayahu* 8:15-16)

That had been a time of a “sealed writing” that no one could read. Chizkiyahu had been one of the children upon whom the prophet had pinned his hopes for the great light that would emerge from the darkness – but now, the writing has once again become sealed and “the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the prudence of their prudent men shall be hidden” (29:14).

Here the prophet adds another interesting aspect:

And the Lord said, Although this people draws near, and with their mouth and with their lips they honor Me, they have removed their heart far from Me and their fear of Me is a commandment of men learned by rote.

Therefore, behold, I will again perform wonders among this people, marvels and wonders, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the prudence of their prudent men shall be hidden.

Woe to them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord and their works are in the dark, and they say, “Who can see us? Who can know?”

O your perversity! Shall the potter be esteemed as clay, that the thing made should say of him that made it, “He made me not,” or the thing framed of him that framed it, “He has no understanding?”

Is it not yet a very little while, and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest?

And on that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness.

And the humble shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the neediest among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. (29:13-19)

After the great assembly, people in Jerusalem had begun to talk about trust in God, in the spirit of Chizkiyahu’s encouragement.[[7]](#footnote-7) There can be no questioning the genuine faith of Chizkiyahu, as reflected in his direct prayers to God even during his sickness and during the siege of Sancheriv. But what about the masses who started quoting him? Did their faith in God flow from their hearts, or was it just lip service to appease the prophet?

Yeshayahu’s response teaches us a great lesson. The fear of God is not measured by loud proclamations at the gates or resounding speeches with only superficial effect. Such phenomena reflect “the commandment of men learned by rote”; it is not genuine and does not come from the heart.

Some years had passed already since Chizkiyahu’s campaign of purification. Religious life and Temple ritual were seemingly being conducted properly – but they were hollow. Deep inside, people asked themselves, “Who can see us? Who can know?” Yeshayahu decries their empty religiosity: “O your perversity! Shall the potter be esteemed as clay?” – *How can you not understand the difference between God’s word and your own words?* – “…that the thing made should say of him that made it, ‘He made me not’, or the thing framed of him that framed it, ‘He has no understanding...’”

In contrast, Yeshayahu describes his vision of the future and the light that will emerge from within the darkness: “And on that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness” – and then, “the humble shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the neediest among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.” Only one who walks humbly and constricts his place in the world will be able to encounter God; only the “neediest among men” will rejoice in Him.

The king completed his task and the city was ready for the Assyrian invasion. No one knew from which direction to expect its arrival. On one hand, the Assyrians had conquered the lowlands of Philistia, and thus could advance from the west, moving eastward. On the other hand, they already controlled the kingdom of the north, Shomron, and could move from the north southward. The city waited in tense expectation. The prophets secluded themselves with their disciples in the *beit midrash*, while the soldiers of the Assyrian army polished their swords for the great campaign to Philistia and Yehuda.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Yeshayahu* 22:23. We find a similar expression in connection with Achav, who was served by Ovadyahu “who was over the house” (*Melakhim* I 18:3-6). However, the Sages of *Eretz Yisrael* provide a slightly different interpretation (*Vayikra* *Rabba*, *Parashat* *Vayikra*, 5): “If the anointed *kohen* [sins, so as to bring guilt upon the people] (*Vayikra* 4:3) – This refers to Shevna, concerning whom it is written (*Yeshayahu* 22:15), ‘Go, come to this steward [to Shevna, who is over the house]’. R. Elazar said: He was the *Kohen* *Gadol*. R. Yehuda said in the name of Rebbe: He was an officer.” The *midrash* goes on to explain what Shevna’s sin was, in accordance with each opinion: “According to R. Elazar, who says that he was the *Kohen Gadol*, [Shevna] benefitted from the sacrifices. According to R. Yehuda in the name of Rebbe, who says he was an officer, [Shevna] benefitted from the consecrated items.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Yeshayahu* 36:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *shiur* #19 in this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This shocking episode is described in detail in B. Lau, *Yirmiyahu – Goralo shel Chozeh*, Tel Aviv 5770, pp. 117-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the description by M. Broshi, “*Minyan Toshaveha shel Yerushalayim ha-Keduma*,” *Bein Chevron le-Sinai: Yad le-Amnon*, Jerusalem 5737, pp. 65-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Yeshayahu* 22:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “And the people had hope in the words of Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 32:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)