YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #23: The Story of Chizkiya and His Illness – Part II**

1. Introduction

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-22-story-chizkiya-and-his-illness-%E2%80%93-part-i)*,* we reviewed the story of Chizkiyahu’s illness in the Bavli (*Berakhot* 10a-b). In contrast to the biblical account, which focuses on Chizkiyahu’s feelings in the wake of his illness and his subsequent recovery, the midrashic story has a different focus: it presents a fundamental difference of opinion between Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu, as revealed in the discussion between them concerning the reason for the illness. In this *shiur,* we will further elaborate on the idea expressed in the midrashic story in the Bavli. Thereafter, following in the footsteps of the study by O. Meir,[[1]](#footnote-1) we will review parallel sources to the story, and then conclude our discussion by looking at the context of the story within the *sugya* in *Berakhot*.

We recall that the central part of the Bavli’s story was the following dialogue:

[Chizkiyahu] said to [Yeshayahu], ‘Why such [harsh punishment]?’ He said to him, ‘Because you did not engage in procreation.’ He said to him, ‘The reason was because I saw, through a Divine vision, that the children issuing from me would not be worthy.’ He replied, ‘Why do you involve yourself with the secrets of the Almighty? That which you are commanded, you are obligated to do; let the Holy One, blessed be He, then do as He sees fit.’ He said, ‘Then give me now your daughter; perhaps by my merit and your merit, worthy children will emerge from me.’ He replied, ‘The decree has already been issued.’ [Chizkiyahu] said, ‘Son of Amotz – finish your prophecy and go. The tradition that I have from my ancestor’s house is that even if a sharp sword is placed against a man’s neck, he should not desist from [praying for] mercy.”

1. The disagreement between Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu

As noted, in the wake of Yeshayahu’s rebuke, which lies at the center of the chiastic structure, Chizkiyahu experiences a turnaround. Originally, his position had been that if he knew that his progeny would be wicked, then by refraining from procreation he might prevent this vision from realization. However, Yeshayahu tells him that this view and the actions arising from it are sinful.

Chizkiyahu’s original position recalls – *lehavdil* – the view characterizing the heroes of Greek tragedies. They treat the gloomy prophecies that they hear as a sort of preordained fate, and try to prevent their realization. Perhaps the most famous example is the story of King Oedipus, who is destined to kill his father and marry his mother. His father tries to evade this fate by condemning the infant Oedipus to death, but ultimately the prophecy is fulfilled. Oedipus grows up unaware of his true identity; he kills his father, the king, and marries the queen – his mother.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is precisely this sort of strategy that Yeshayahu rejects: Chizkiyahu is not meant to concern himself with the prophecy of the future and the secret ways of God. He is meant to do what he, like every other Jew, is commanded to do, as a servant of God. What will come of this in the future is God’s concern, not man’s business.

Chizkiyahu, upon whom this message makes a strong impression, goes even further. Indeed, a person should carry out his religious obligations and not try to evade a bitter fate by neglecting his duty. However, in the wake of man’s attempt to build a better spiritual reality, there is a possibility that the harsh decree will indeed be “sweetened” and transformed. This new position expressed by Chizkiyahu is an absolute rejection of the Greek perception. A Divine prophecy is not “fate.” There is no way of avoiding “fate.” A prophecy, in contrast, is the word of God, Who operates in the world via different attributes, including both the attribute of justice and the attribute of mercy. There are decrees issuing from the attribute justice whose reasons, at least in some cases, are quite unintelligible to man. However, the right actions by man may activate the attribute of mercy, which can nullify even the harshest of decrees. Chizkiyahu proposes that he marry Yeshayahu’s daughter. He now wants to do that which is incumbent upon him – to bear children – but he wants to go about it in the most optimal way, hoping thereby to influence the decree. Attention should be paid to his choice of words: “Perhaps by my merit and your merit worthy children will emerge from me.” This is not an attempt to forcibly change or evade his fate; rather, it is the hope of perhaps causing the decree to be nullified.

Yeshayahu, as noted, cannot accept Chizkiyahu’s new view of reality. As a prophet, he stands by his prophecy, telling Chizkiyahu, “The decree against you has already been issued.” As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the meaning of this statement is ambiguous: it may refer to either the birth of wicked progeny, or Chizkiyahu’s imminent death from his illness. Either way, Chizkiyahu protests: “Son of Amotz, finish your prophecy and go! For I was taught….”

The two views expressed in this discussion appear earlier, in slightly different form, in a well-known midrash that appears in several sources. We quote here from the Yerushalmi, *Makkot* 2:6 (31d):

“Rabbi Pinchas said, ‘Good and upright [is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way (*Tehillim* 25:8)]’: Why is He ‘good’? Because He is ‘upright.’ And why is He ‘upright’? Because He is ‘good’; “therefore He guides sinners in the way” – meaning, He shows them the path of repentance. Wisdom was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It replied: Evil pursues sinners. Prophecy was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It answered them: A soul that sins will die. The Torah was asked, ‘What is the punishment for a sinner?’ It answered: ‘Let him bring a guilt offering and be atoned for.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, was asked: ‘What is the punishment for a sinner?’ He said: ‘Let him repent, and he will be atoned for.’” (Yerushalmi, *Makkot* 2:6)

“Prophecy” knows that which is prophesied: “A soul that sins will die.” But God offers a path that “bypasses” Torah, prophecy, and wisdom. This is the path of the attribute of mercy: “Let him repent and he will be atoned for.” Chizkiyahu repents; he is ready to bear children, despite the risk that he might have a wicked son. At the same time, he turns directly to God in prayer, hoping that at least there might be some chance for the attribute of mercy.

Ultimately, Chizkiyahu does indeed merit the manifestation of God’s attribute of mercy, and he recovers from his illness – but the son born to him turns out to be wicked. However, at the end of his lifetime, Menashe himself also repents for all his wicked deeds. Here, too, there is prayer to God, and ultimately it is answered (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 33:12-16):

“And when [Menashe] was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God… And prayed to Him, and He received his entreaty and heard his supplication and brought him back to Jerusalem, to his kingdom. Then Menashe knew that the Lord was God… And he removed the strange gods, and the idol out of the House of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mountain of the House of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. And he repaired the altar of the Lord and sacrificed upon it peace offerings and offerings of thanksgiving, and commanded Yehuda to serve the Lord God of Israel.”

Perhaps Menashe drew the strength and fortitude to undertake such repentance, after a lifetime of idolatry and bloodshed, from the example set for him by his father, Chizkiyahu.[[3]](#footnote-3) It appears that Chizkiyahu showed that there is room for repentance and prayer even in the most hopeless situations, and this same principle is implemented – in a different way – by his son, Menashe. As we know, *Chazal* find it very difficult to accept the prayer and repentance of Menashe within the “regular” framework of the Divine attribute of mercy; nevertheless, the power of his repentance was apparently so great that God created a special “opening” for it, as it were:

“Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: What is the meaning of the verse (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 33), ‘And He received his entreaty’… This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, made a sort of opening in the heavens in order to accept him in his repentance, on account of the attribute of justice [which would ordinarily have ruled out any such possibility].”

1. **Parallel in the Yerushalmi**

The Yerushalmi offers a parallel to the story of Chizkiyahu’s illness, with the narrative told in a slightly different way. It is part of the story of Menashe, in *Massekhet Sanhedrin* 10:2, which follows the Mishna that counts Menashe among the kings who have no place in the World to Come, according to the Sages:

“There are three kings and four regular individuals who have no place in the World to Come. The three kings are Yerov’am, Achav, and Menashe. Rabbi Yehuda says, ‘Menashe does have a place in the World to Come, as it is written (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 33), ‘And he prayed to Him and He received his entreaty, and heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom.’ They answered [Rabbi Yehuda]: ‘It says that he was brought back ‘to his kingdom’, but not to life in the World to Come….’

The story in the Yerushalmi, which discusses Menashe’s sin, begins with Chizkiyahu’s illness:

“And what did Menashe do? It is written, ‘In those days Chizkiyahu fell deathly ill…’ [and Yeshayahu told Chizkiyahu] ‘You will die, and you will not live’ – ‘You will die’ – in this world, ‘and not live’ – in the time to come.

He said to him, ‘Why [such harsh punishment]?’ He said to him, ‘Because you did not wish to have children.’ [And Yeshayahu] said to him, ‘Why did you not wish to have children?’ He answered him, ‘I saw that I would have a son who was wicked; for that reason, I did not wish to have children.’ [Yeshayahu] said to him, ‘Take my daughter [in marriage]; perhaps from me and from you there will issue a good man.’ Nevertheless, there issued a wicked man” (Yerushalmi *Sanhedrin* 10:1, 28b).

In the Yerushalmi, in contrast to the Bavli, it is Yeshayahu who suggests that Chizkiyahu might marry Yeshayahu’s daughter, with the hope that perhaps a worthy son will be born. In other words, in the Yerushalmi there is no conflict between the king and the prophet; rather, both are on the same side. They both want to try to proceed in a way that fulfills the religious obligation to procreate, while still leaving some hope for a change in the harsh decree. Ultimately, despite their hopes and efforts, Menashe is born and in time becomes a truly wicked king. Later on, the Yerushalmi describes how Menashe persecuted his grandfather, the prophet Yeshayahu, and eventually commanded that he be executed in a particularly cruel manner.

We cannot know with certainty how this significant difference between the tradition in the Yerushalmi and that in the Bavli developed. In any event, there is literary benefit to be drawn from the comparison between them. A reading of the argument between Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu in the Bavli, bearing in mind the tradition of their cooperation and agreement in the Yerushalmi, casts in stark terms the debate in the Bavli over what can be done when “the decree has already been issued”, and about the power of genuine supplication in prayer.

1. **Teachings about the ‘*kir’* (wall) in the Yerushalmi**

In the Yerushalmi, following the dialogue between Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu, there are other fragments that parallel the story in the Bavli.[[4]](#footnote-4) One of these fragments is the midrashic interpretation of Chizkiyahu turning his face to the wall. In the Bavli we encountered two opinions: that of Resh Lakish, who understood the verse as an allusion to “praying from the inner chambers of his heart”; and that of R. Levi, who compares Chizkiyahu to the Shumanite woman who built a small “chamber” for Elisha, and merited to have her son revived. Chizkiyahu’s ancestor, Shlomo, built an entire Temple for God, and thus – logically - his descendant should be worthy of being granted a recovery. The Yerushalmi offers two more opinions, and Resh Lakish’s view is cited in the name of the Sages, with slight differences:

“Thereupon ‘he turned’ – as it is written, ‘Chizkiyahu turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord.’ To which wall did he lift his eyes [i.e., turn in supplication]?

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: [it alludes] to the wall of Rachav, ‘for her house was on the town wall and she dwelt upon the wall’. [Chizkiyahu] said, ‘Master of all the worlds: Rachav saved two souls for You, and see how many souls You saved for her [see *Yehoshua* 2]… Surely, then, on account of my forefathers, who brought all these proselytes close to You, You should certainly spare my life.’

R. Shemuel bar Nachman said: ‘He raised his eyes to the wall (chamber) of the Shunamite… He said, ‘Master of all the worlds: the Shunamite prepared just one chamber for Elisha, and [on account of it] You revived her son. Surely, then, on account of my forefathers who uttered such praise to You, You should spare my life.’

R. Chinena bar Papa said: ‘He set his eyes upon the walls of the Temple. […]

And the Sages said: ‘He set his eyes to the chambers of his heart, as it is written, ‘My bowels, my bowels; I am shaken in the chambers of my heart; my heart moans within me, I cannot hold my peace…’. He said, ‘Master of all the worlds: I have searched the two hundred and forty-eight limbs that You have given me, and have not found [any instance in] which I angered You through any one of them. Surely, then, You should spare my life.”

In the Yerushalmi, too, the different opinions illuminate different aspects of prayer. The final opinion (that of the Sages) seems to parallel that of Resh Lakish in the Bavli, but if we look closely we see that they are not identical. The opinion of the Sages in the Yerushalmi is formulated in accordance with the uniform model for all the various opinions here: “He lifted/set his eyes upon….” This model comes in response to the question that prompted these answers: “To which wall did he lift his eyes?” The question establishes in advance that the various answers will offer insights leading to the conclusion that Chizkiyahu is worthy of salvation and recovery. Thus, in the first two teachings, Chizkiyahu looks to Rachav and to the Shunamite woman, whose deeds rendered their descendants deserving of salvation; he argues that he must be even more worthy of being saved, considering the much greater deeds of his own forefathers. In the third teaching, Chizkiyahu compares his prayer to that of his forefathers.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the fourth teaching, Chizkiyahu offers no comparison at all; he looks to his own deeds and concludes that he is worthy of salvation in his own merit. Thus, the Yerushalmi presents a gradual progression from the outside inward: from two different foreign or unrelated women, to his forefathers, to inward contemplation of himself. In terms of the location of the “wall” (or “chamber”) there is a similar progression: the first walls that are mentioned are distant ones, both geographically and historically (the wall surrounding Yericho, in the case of Rachav, and the wall of the Shunamite woman’s home); in the third teaching, the reference is to the wall of the Temple, and in the fourth the “chamber” is a metaphoric reference to Chizkiyahu’s own innermost being. Common to all four interpretations is the idea that “turning his face to the wall” connotes contemplation of something that points to Chizkiyahu’s merit.

In the Bavli, the question is posed in more general terms: “Which ‘wall’?”, or, “What does this ‘wall’ refer to?” This allows for a different formulation of the answer that is given by Resh Lakish: “He prayed from the inner chambers of his heart, as it is written, ‘My bowels, my bowels; I am shaken in the chambers of my heart.’” This explanation does not turn our attention to something that could serve as the basis for an argument as to Chizkiyahu’s merit, but rather addresses his prayer experience directly. Resh Lakish’s teaching describes a profound inner feeling that arises from the depths of the soul (represented by the ‘bowels’ and the ‘chambers of the heart’) and envelops his entire inner being. Here Chizkiyahu teaches us not only what sort of arguments might be offered in order for one’s prayer to be accepted, but also demonstrates the inner movement of the worshipper.

1. **The broader context of the story in the Bavli**

We now come to the question of the context in the Bavli (*Massekhet* *Berakhot*). For the purposes of comparison, in the Yerushalmi, the connection between Chizkiyahu’s illness and the *sugya* surrounding it is more readily apparent: the subject is Menashe and his wicked deeds. The story of Chizkiyahu’s illness offers the background of Chizkiyahu’s fears about bearing such a wicked son, and his attempts to avoid this outcome.

In the Bavli, the unit preceding the story deals with a subject that seems altogether unrelated: there is a discussion between two *Amoraim* concerning David’s recurring expression in *Tehillim*, “Bless the Lord, O my soul” (*Tehillim* 103-104). In order to understand the connection, we must look at the sugya more broadly. In the wake of the Mishna, which deals with the time for recitation of *Shema* in the morning, a *beraita* is cited, recording the practice of the ‘*vatikin,’* who complete their recitation of *Shema* immediately prior to sunrise, “so as to juxtapose redemption and prayer.” This leads to a discussion about this juxtaposition. Part of the discussion deals with various verses from *Tehillim*, especially from Chapters 103-104. Therefore, the most obvious connection between the story and the *sugya* would seem to be found at the end of the discussion, which interprets Chizkiyahu’s words in his prayer – “And I have done that which is good in Your sight” – as a reference to his having “juxtaposed redemption to prayer.” From this perspective, the story represents a return to the original subject of the *sugya* – the juxtaposition of redemption to prayer, as indeed Rashi explains it.

We might regard this as a merely technical, associative link: since the subject of the discussion is the juxtaposition of redemption and prayer, the *sugya* brings the story of Chizkiyahu, in which mention is made of this subject.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, the connection appears to go deeper than that. Firstly, Chizkiyahu – according to this interpretation – is worthy of recovering from his illness by virtue of that very “juxtaposition of redemption to prayer.” Thus, the story joins the preceding statements about the importance of having redemption and prayer together. Secondly, the story would seem to make a substantial contribution to the development of this idea. Chizkiyahu, in his argument with Yeshayahu, recalls the teaching that he received from his forefathers – that even a person in the most desperate, seemingly hopeless situation should not despair of Divine mercy. Rashi explains that by “fathers,” Chizkiyahu refers to David: even when he saw an angel brandishing a sword (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 21:16), he did not withhold himself from seeking Divine mercy. Indeed, in that instance, God relented of the evil (at least concerning Jerusalem – v. 15) and stopped the angel. This would seem to be the “redemption” that he juxtaposes to his “prayer” – or, to put it differently, the redemption upon which his prayer rests. This sheds light on the essence and meaning of the juxtaposition: mention of redemption serves as a basis for prayer, because it lends the worshipper confidence and belief that his prayer may indeed be effective. Without that confidence, based on incidents and experiences in the past, it would be difficult for anyone facing any sort of dire situation to gather the strength to engage in prayer.

Furthermore, we might also draw a connection between the story and the unit immediately preceding it in the *sugya*. As stated, this unit discusses David’s repetition of the expression, “Bless the Lord, O my soul”:

“Rav Shimi bar Ukva (some way it was Mar Ukva) was often in the company of R. Shimon ben Pazi, and would arrange *aggadot* before R. Yehoshua ben Levi. He said to him, ‘What is the meaning of the verse (Tehillim 103), ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me – bless His holy Name’?

He replied: ‘See how the capacity of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not like the capacity of human beings. A human being is capable of drawing a figure on a wall, but he cannot imbue it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so: He draws one form in the midst of another, and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. And this is what Channa said: “There is none holy as the Lord, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock (*tzur*) like our God” (*Shmuel* I 2). What is the meaning of the words, ‘There is no rock like our God’? [It hints to the idea that] there is no artist (*tzayar*) like our God. What is the meaning of the words, ‘for there is none besides You’? R. Yehuda ben Menasia said: ‘Do not read “There is none like You” (*ein biltekha*), but rather “There is no attrition of You” (*ein levalotekha*). For the capacity of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not like the capacity of human beings. It is the nature of a human being to be outlived by his works, but the Holy One, blessed be He, outlives His works.’

He said to him, ‘This is what I mean to say to you: To whom did David refer in these five instances in which he said, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul’? He was alluding only to God and to the soul. Just as God fills the entire world, so the soul fills the entire body. Just as God sees but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not seen. Just as God nourishes the entire world, so the soul nourishes the body. Just as God is pure, so the soul is pure. Just as God dwells in the innermost space, so the soul dwells in the innermost space. Let that which possesses these five traits (i.e., the soul) come and offer praise to Him Who possesses these five traits.”

We might point to several connections between this unit and the story of Chizkiyahu’s illness, even if they are not as readily apparent as the “juxtaposition of redemption to prayer.” Firstly, the verse in question is “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me – bless His holy Name.” This verse mentions the participation of “all that is within me” – the worshipper’s entire inner being – in the blessing. This is strongly reminiscent of Resh Lakish’s teaching about the “wall” – which, we recall, appears only in the unit in the Bavli. The midrashic interpretation of the verse in the unit cited above is also connected to the story: “A human being is capable of drawing a figure on a wall (*kotel*), but he cannot imbue it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so: He draws one form in the midst of another, and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines.” The ‘*kotel’* mentioned here recalls the ‘*kir’* to which Chizkiyahu turned his face in prayer. The midrash draws a distinction between a physical, material wall, featuring the empty, lifeless drawing made by a human being, and the wondrous human body created by God, which contains a soul. Once again we are reminded of Resh Lakish, who interprets the verse that speaks of Chizkiyahu’s turning to a physical wall, in the sense of turning to his inner being – the chambers of his heart.[[7]](#footnote-7)

R. Shimi’s teaching is also connected to our story. It deals with David – who, as mentioned above, is alluded to in Chizkiyahu’s words: David is one of the ancestors from whom Chizkiyahu learned to pray even “if a sharp sword is placed at his neck.” Specifically, the unit addresses David’s repetition of the expression, “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” The content of the teaching is even more interesting in relation to our story. The teaching enumerates points of similarity, as it were, between God and the soul. *Inter alia*, mention is made of the soul filling the entire body and dwelling in the innermost space. It is this soul, dwelling in his innermost self, that is addressed by David - the ancestor of Chizkiyahu: “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” This tells us that David not only taught his descendants about the possibility of and need for prayer in times of crisis; he also taught them an important lesson about the quality of prayer. Genuine, valuable prayer arises from the innermost recesses of the soul; the worshipper’s entire inner being participates in it.

We may therefore describe the structure of the *sugya* as follows: the *sugya* deals with the juxtaposition of redemption and prayer, and then looks at significant verses relating to prayer from *Sefer Tehillim*. Thus the discussion comes around to a description of how David views prayer and its essential quality, the quality of the soul at prayer, and the soul’s “similarity” or closeness to God. In the story that follows immediately afterward, Chizkiyahu – a descendant of David – withdraws (according to Resh Lakish) into those inner recesses of his soul and pleads for his life. The story ends with Chizkiyahu “juxtaposing redemption to prayer.” Thus the circle of the *sugya* is closed in such a way as to illustrate the importance of this juxtaposition, by virtue of which Chizkiyahu is indeed saved.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Meir’s article was cited also in the previous *shiur*. See O. Meir, “*Sippur Machalato shel Hizkiyahu*,” *HaSifrut* 30-31 (1981), pp. 109-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The similarity between this Greek tragedy and the story of Chizkiyahu (*lehavdil*) lies in Chizkiyahu’s attempt to prevent the birth of a son who will grow up to be wicked. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As far as we are aware, this idea is not suggested anywhere by *Chazal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although, as Meir points out, in the Yerushalmi these are separate fragments that simply appear one after the other, rather than as a single, coherent story as in the Bavli. See her comments on pp. 126-127. Meir also addresses another parallel which is similar to the Yerushalmi, in Midrash Kohelet Rabba; see p. 119 onwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The midrash as formulated here in the Yerushalmi is difficult to understand. Kohelet Rabba (as cited by Meir) offers a parallel that is worded slightly differently; the scope of our discussion does not allow for comparison here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Meir’s view, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As my editor, Rachel Grossman, remarked, - The interpretation of the wall as the drawing on the wall, may be connected to the end of the story, where Chizkiyahu realizes that though humans can give birth to other humans ("drawing a figure"), humans cannot choose the "spirit" with which they imbue their children - that is up to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)