YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #304: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXIV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XC)**

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-303-history-divine-service-altars-cxiii-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-lxxxix), we began to describe the reign of Achaz, by relating to the military and political reality of his time, with the kingdom of Yehuda surrounded by enemies - from the north Aram and Israel laying siege to Jerusalem, from the south Edom, and from the west the Pelishtim. *Divrei ha-Yamim* presents us with an exceedingly harsh description of the war between the kingdom of Yehuda, and the kingdoms of Israel and Aram:

The Lord his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Aram; and they smote him, and carried away of his a great multitude of captives, and brought them to Damascus. And he was also delivered into the hand of the king of Israel, who smote him with a great slaughter. For Pekach the son of Remalyahu slew in Yehuda a hundred and twenty thousand in one day, all of them valiant men; because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers. And Zikhri, a mighty man of Efrayim, slew Maaseya the king's son, and Azrikam the ruler of the house, and Elkana that was next to the king. And the children of Israel carried away captive of their brethren two hundred thousand women, sons, and daughters, and took also away much spoil from them, and brought the spoil to Shomeron.

But a prophet of the Lord was there, whose name was Oded; and he went out to meet the host that came to Shomeron, and said to them, Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was wroth with Yehuda, He has delivered them into your hand, and you have slain them in a rage which has reached up to heaven. And now you purpose to bring the children of Yehuda and Jerusalem into subjection for bondmen and bondwomen to you; but are there not even with you acts of guilt of your own against the Lord your God? Now hear me therefore, and send back the captives, that you have taken captive of your brethren; for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you.

Then certain of the heads of the children of Efrayim, Azarya the son of Yehochanan, Berekhyahu the son of Meshilemot, and Yechizkiyahu the son of Shalum, and Amasa the son of Chadlai, stood up against them that came from the war, and said to them, You shall not bring in the captives hither; for you purpose that which will bring upon us guilt against the Lord, to add to our sins and to our guilt; for our guilt is great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel. So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the princes and all the congregation.

And the men that have been mentioned by name rose up, and took the captives, and with the spoil clothed all that were naked among them, and arrayed them, and shod them, and gave them to eat and to drink, and anointed them, and carried all the feeble of them upon asses, and brought them to Jericho, the city of palm-trees, to their brethren; then they returned to Shomeron. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:5-15)

As stated, God, in the wake of Achaz's sins, visits him with a great calamity. The kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Aram kill 120,000 people in Yehuda, among them Maasiyahu, the king's son, Azrikam, the ruler of the house, and Elkana, who was second to the king; and they take two hundred thousand of their brethren captive, including women, sons and daughters, and also much spoil. The prophet Oded appears before those who came to Shomeron and tells them that it was owing to God's anger with Yehuda that He delivered them into their hands. But he also exhorts them to send back the captives, as indeed they do.

In any event, we are dealing with a terrible price of civil war between the kingdom of Yehuda and its sister, the kingdom of Israel, with the kingdom of Israel entering into a pact with a foreign power – Aram – against the kingdom of Yehuda. Let us consider the position of the prophet Yeshayahu within the context of this impossible situation.

In a move that parallels the campaign of the kings of Aram and Israel against Jerusalem, we learn from Assyrian documents that the Assyrian king Tiglat Pileser conducted an Assyrian campaign against Chanun the king of Azza and Peleshet. Thus, on the eastern axis, the king of Aram passes through the Gil'ad on his way to Eilat, and on the central axis, Pekach the son of Remalyahu, king of Israel, turns toward Jerusalem, and on the western side, along the sea highway, Tiglat Pileser, king of Ashur, turns toward Peleshet. While they were preparing for their journey, Yeshaya stands up to Achaz:

Then said the Lord to Yeshayahu, Go forth now to meet Achaz, you, and She'ar-Yashuv, your son… and say to him, Keep calm, and be quiet; fear not, neither let your heart be faint, because of these two tails of smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Retzin and Aram, and of the son of Remalyahu. Because Aram has counselled evil against you, Efrayim also, and the son of Remalyahu, saying, Let us go up against Yehuda, and vex it, and let us make a breach therein for us, and set up a king in the midst of it, even the son of Tav'el; thus says the Lord God, It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass. For the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Retzin; and within threescore and five years shall Efrayim be broken, that it be not a people. And the head of Efrayim is Shomeron, and the head of Shomeron is Remalyahu's son. If you will not have faith, surely you shall not be established. (*Yeshayahu* 7:3-9)

The first thing that the prophet says to the king is (and this is a fundamental element in the prophetic outlook): "Keep calm, and be quiet; fear not." That is to say, do not think that the confrontation with the enemies you are facing depends on certain immediate actions that you must make in order to influence the political and military reality. It is better at this stage to keep calm, to be quiet, and not to fear, but rather to trust in God that He will protect you and bring you salvation.

He refers to Retzin and Pekach as "two tails of smoking firebrands." They are tails which lack the power to fan the flames, and therefore there is no reason to fear, seeing that they will soon be gone.

The text appears to note the purpose of the journey: the breach of Jerusalem by Pekach and Retzin was intended to lead to the coronation of the son of Tav'el, whom many identify with the dynasty of the house of Tuviya in the Gil'ad. According to this understanding, this Tav'el, were he to rule as king in Jerusalem, would allow for the uprooting of the kingdom of the house of David and the raising of a leader who is hostile to Ashur, which would make possible the building of an anti-Assyrian coalition that would take control of Yehuda and Jerusalem.

The prophet tries to strengthen Achaz's resolve, and informs him that the kings who now threaten the king of Yehuda will not enjoy protracted reigns.

The very fact that the prophet Yeshaya's son, She'ar Yashuv, was brought to the meeting with King Achaz was intended to allude to him that if he continues to surrender, many will be exiled, and in the end the people will be exiled from their land, and only She'ar Yashuv (lit., "a remnant would return") would remain.

In contrast to the son of Tav'el's party, the Assyrian army led by Tiglat Pil'eser threaten with their sheer force. They are on the way to Peleshet, and they can easily conquer the kingdoms of Israel and Yehuda.

The prophet does not support the Assyrians, nor does he support their opponents, and so too Achaz must refrain from taking a position, to keep calm, be silent, and not fear. The prophet Yeshayahu tries to give Achaz a sign:

And the Lord spoke again to Achaz, saying, Ask you a sign of the Lord your God: ask it either in the depth, or in the height above. But Achaz said, I will not ask, neither will I try the Lord. And he said, Hear you now, O house of David, Is it a small thing for you to weary men, that you will weary my God also?Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Curd and honey shall he eat, when he knows to refuse the evil, and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land whose two kings you have a horror of shall be forsaken. (*Yeshaya* 7:10-16)

The prophet heralds the birth of Immanuel as a sign that God sent to strengthen Achaz's resolve. The prophet now foretells that in a very short time Israel and Aram will fall.

Achaz, however, is not willing to accept a sign from the prophet: "I will not ask; neither will I try the Lord." Shadal notes here that according to the plain meaning of the text Achaz seems to be a God-fearing person, who is not interested in testing Him. But according to the cantillation notes, he is saying: "I will not ask the Lord; neither will I try Him." That is to say, Achaz is truly uninterested in knowing, and he certainly does not want to act in accordance with God's will. He does not believe the words of the prophet, and he does not want to hear them at all. It becomes clear at this stage that Achaz has essentially decided to rely on Ashur and to surrender to it. The sharpest formulation of this position is brought in II *Melakhim*:

So Achaz sent messengers to Tiglat Pileser, king of Ashur, saying, I am your servant and your son; come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, who rise up against me. And Achaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent it for a present to the king of Ashur. And the king of Ashur hearkened to him; and the king of Ashur went up against Damascus, and took it, and carried the people of it captive to Kir, and slew Retzin. (II *Melakhim*  16:7-9)

The phrase "I am your servant and your son" expresses a request for protection and absolute submission to Ashur, both on the military-political level, and on the spiritual level (as we shall see in the continuation). Once again the silver and gold found in the house of God together with the treasures of the house of the king are a simple solution for the king to bribe the king of Ashur. Indeed the king of Ashur captures Damascus and kills Retzin the king of Aram.

On the one hand, the king totally refuses to obey the voice of God and the words of the prophet to accept a sign from God and to act in accordance with the word of God. On the other hand, in order to deal with the difficult military and political reality, he chooses to absolutely submit himself to the rising world power, the kingdom of Ashur.

The prophet warns the king that his reliance on Ashur will in the end bring Ashur to conquer the kingdom of Yehuda:

The Lord shall bring upon you, and upon your people, and upon your father's house, days that have not come, from the day that Efrayim departed from Yehuda; even the king of Ashur. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Ashur. And they shall come, and shall rest all of them in the rugged valleys, and in the holes of the rocks, and upon all thorns, and upon all brambles. In that day shall the Lord shave with a razor that is hired in the parts beyond the River, even with the king of Ashur, the head and the hair of the feet; and it shall also sweep away the beard. And it shall come to pass in that day, that a man shall rear a young cow, and two sheep; and it shall come to pass, for the abundance of milk that they shall give, he shall eat curd; for curd and honey shall every one eat that is left in the midst of the land. And it shall come to pass in that day, that every place, where there were a thousand vines at a thousand silverlings, shall even be for briers and thorns. With arrows and with bow shall one come thither; because all the land shall become briers and thorns. And all the hills that were digged with the mattock, you shall not come thither for fear of briers and thorns, but it shall be for the sending forth of oxen, and for the treading of sheep. (*Yeshaya* 7:17-25)

The prophet describes the Assyrian kingdom's takeover of the kingdom of Yehuda.[[1]](#footnote-1) The first metaphor is that of swarms of bees and flies in each and every corner. The bee and the wasp were Egyptian symbols of kingship. Therefore the Egyptians are flies and Ashur is the bee, the dominant power. From here the prophet alludes that all the attempts to rely on Egypt ("the staff of this bruised reed" [II *Melakhim* 18:21] in the words of Ravshakeh to Chizkiyahu's officers), will not help and indeed Ashur will conquer and take control of the entire area.

The second image involves shaving. The Semite peoples cultivated their beards, and therefore shaving them was considered a severe humiliation.

After the abandonment of the vineyards and the destruction of the fields, the third image relates to the fact that the few who will remain in Eretz Israel will eat the butter and honey that will be produced from what is left in the country.

The final image in chapter 7 describes the destruction that will come over the developed agricultural land. Wild vegetation will turn all the crops into brier and thorns, and in addition to the destruction caused by the wild vegetation, the cattle and sheep will trample whatever crops will grow. Thus, ultimately all the attempts to derive agricultural blessing from the crops will be of no avail.

The Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Yehuda will turn it into a totally desolate place. The whole idea that submission to Ashur will save the kingdom will not help because in practice it itself will turn into barren wilderness.

In the next *shiur* we will continue with the account of the position of the prophet Yeshayahu. We will then examine the spiritual factors that led to the siege laid by Pekach and Retzin and the war with its terrible cost, as well as the severe spiritual consequences of Achaz's surrender to the king of Ashur.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Rav Yoel Bin Nun and Rav Binyamin Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu – Ke-Tziporim Afot*, explain these images at great length (pp. 123-134). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)