YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #311: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XCVII)**

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-310-history-divine-service-altars-cxx-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-xcvi) we dealt with the reign of Chizkiyahu. We looked at the early years of his rule, during which time a dramatic change occurred in comparison to his father's reign. He dragged the bones of his father Achaz on a rope bier, the house of God was rededicated, Passover was celebrated together with the kingdom of Israel, and he crushed the brazen serpent. In this *shiur* we will continue to examine Chizkiyahu's deeds as they are described in the Baraita in *Pesachim* 56a.

### Hiding the book of Remedies

What is the "Book of Remedies"? The Ramban, in his introduction to the Torah, writes as follows:

And King Shelomo, whom God bestowed with wisdom and knowledge, had it all from the Torah, and from it did he learn, until he knew the secret of all things, even the powers of the plants, to the point that he even wrote about them a Book of Remedies. (Ramban, Introduction to his Commentary to *Bereishit*)

That is to say, Shelomo, with his Divine wisdom, authored the Book of Remedies which is sort of a pharmacological text. According to this understanding, those who were sick would immediately recover and there was no longer any need for this book. When a person treats his illness in a natural manner he need not understand that the illness itself is from God, and that its appearance was meant to invite him to turn to God and mend his ways.

The Rambam, in his Commentary to the Mishna in *Pesachim*, rejects the notion that the Book of Remedies is a book of natural healing, but rather it is a book of magical and therefore disqualified medicine:

The Book of Remedies was a book containing a series of cures, the use of which would have been improper…. For example, that which the authors of talismans think that if they prepare a talisman in a certain order it helps for a particular illness, and the like of prohibited things. Its author wrote it only as part of a study of the nature of the world, and not to use anything included in it. This is permitted, as it has been explained to you, that things which God prohibited to do are permitted to be studied and to be known, because God said: "You must not learn to do," and it was learned by tradition, "but you may learn in order to understand and to issue rulings." But when people sinned, and healed themselves with it, it was hidden away.

It is possible that it was a book that described the preparation of harmful drugs, e.g., that a particular drug is prepared in a certain way, and people are made to drink it in a certain way, and it causes this illness or that, and its antidote is this or that, so that when a doctor sees those illnesses he will know that the person was given to drink a certain drug, and he will give him something to counteract it and save him. And when people sinned and would kill each other with it, it was hidden away.

I have gone on at length about this because I heard and it has been explained to me that Shelomo wrote this Book of Remedies, so that if a person ailed with a certain illness, he would turn to it and do what it says and he would be cured. And when Chizkiyahu saw that people would not trust in God regarding their illnesses, but rather on the Book of Remedies, he arose and hid it away.

And besides the nullity of this and its hallucinatory nature, they have attributed to Chizkiyahu and those who agreed with him inanity, the likes of which should be attributed only to the worst of the masses. According to their corrupt and stupid thinking, if a person was hungry and he turned to bread and ate it, which undoubtedly healed him from that great discomfort – should we say that he removed his trust from God? These people should be told: You are fools, for just as I thank God when I eat the food which He provided me to remove my hunger and to reinvigorate me and to sustain me, so I should thank Him for making available a cure that cures my illness when I use it. I would not have had to reject this deficient understanding were it not for its notoriety. (Rambam, Commentary to the Mishna, *Pesachim* 4:10)

The Rambam writes that there are those who explain that Chizkiyahu hid away the Book of Remedies because people stopped trusting God and when they became sick they put their trust in the Book of Remedies as a substitute for God. The Rambam objects to this explanation: If a hungry person eats bread, does this mean that his trust in God is deficient? Just as a person thanks God for providing him with the food that keeps him alive, so too he should thank Him for providing him with a cure for his illness. It may be asked: What happened in the time of Chizkiyahu that brought him to hide the Book of Remedies? It may be suggested that his father Achaz had in great measure succeeded in bringing the people to forget God. Thus, with his negative attitude to prophecy, thus with his closing of the Temple, thus with his service of Molekh and idol worship, thus with his total disengagement from the Torah. Therefore, it may be understood that in order to repair this absolute detachment from God, Chizkiyahu chose the opposite approach, with his total trust in and dependence upon God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rav Kook relates to the significance of Chizkiyahu's hiding the Book of Remedies:

Rabbi Levi adds that not only did [Chizkiyahu] strive for the moral good in accordance with the time in national matters, but also with regard to the state of people's personal lives he tried to make up for the fundamental deficiency of alienation from the knowledge of God in a manner that was inappropriate for permanent leadership. I refer to the fact that he hid the Book of Remedies, so that they would seek [God's] mercy, as explained by Rashi. This, despite the fact that the Rambam went on at length to reject this, [saying] that the practice of medicine does not attest to diminished trust [in God], but rather to added trust in and recognition of He who, in His wisdom and His lovingkindness, prepared the mind to investigate and make use of the foundations of medicine. However, when [Chizkiyahu] saw that the name of God was being forgotten because of the trespass of Achaz, he found that the people would gain more in their moral betterment by training themselves to ask for their needs, i.e., God's healing of disease through prayer, than what they would lose by not searching for natural cures. Therefore this is what is good in the eyes of God, and it accords well with his request to be healed by way of a supernatural miracle, so that it be a sign for Israel to repent and seek God, until their minds are uplifted to know God also in the ways of nature which are all the handiwork of God. Now, according to this, if we merit, the redemption could be natural, and it could come about through our efforts, though the miracles will in any event come for that part of humanity that is generally far from knowing God… or also to perfect us and bring us to a higher and more distinguished level. (*Ein Aya*, *Berakhot* 1, 143)

Rav Kook explains that even on the personal level – in this case medical matters – the people would gain more in their moral betterment by accustoming themselves to pray to God to fulfill their needs, e.g., overcoming illness, than what they would lose by not seeking natural cures. In this way he explains why when Chizkiyahu became ill (II *Melakhim* 20) he wanted to be healed by way of a supernatural miracle. Here too the objective is the same – so that he may serve as a sign for Israel to repent and seek out God.

### Emphasis on the Miraculous event

In this context, let us once again read the verses in *Melakhim*:

He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Ashera; and he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moshe had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called Nechushtan. He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Yehuda, nor among them that were before him. For he cleaved to the Lord, he departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord commanded Moshe. (II *Melakhim* 18:4-6)

According to our proposal, we can see in these verses a series of actions, the intention of which was to create a new spiritual alternative in place of the spirit of Achaz. Removing the *bamot* means abandoning the worship of God in all places and restricting it to the house of God in Jerusalem. The destruction of the pillars and the cutting down of the Asherot means the eradication of idolatry and the turning of all worship directly to the God of Israel. Chizkiyahu's trust in God, which was greater than the trust of all the kings of Yehuda after him ,is connected to his desire to radically change the people's attitude in the wake of the events in the days of Achaz.

In this context, let us examine a Midrash in *Eikha Rabba*, which compares the attitudes of four kings of Yehuda – David, Asa, Yehoshafat and Chizkiyahu – to their trust in God:

Zavdi ben Levi opened: "The kings of the earth believed not" (*Eikha* 4:12) – There were four kings, what the one requested, the other did not request, and they were as follows: David, Asa, Yehoshafat and Chizkiyahu. David said: "Let me pursue my enemies and overtake them" (*Tehilim* 18:38). The Holy One, blessed is He, said to him: I will do that. This is what is stated: "And David smote them from the twilight unto the evening of the next day [*le-macharatam*]" (I *Shemuel* 30:17). What is "*le-makharatam*"? R. Yehuda ben Levi said: For two nights and one day, the Holy One, blessed is He, would illuminate the night for him with shooting stars and lightning. As we have learned there in the Mishna: On witnessing shooting stars, earthquakes, and lightening…. This is what is stated: "For You light my lamp" (*Tehilim* 18:39). Asa stood up and said: I don't have the strength to kill them; rather I will pursue them and You do it. He said to him: I will do it, as it is stated: "And Asa… pursued… before the Lord, and before His host" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:12). It is not written here: "and before Asa," but rather "before the Lord, and before His host." Yehoshafat stood up and said: I don’t have the strength to kill or to pursue them. Rather, I will sing song and you do it. The Holy One, blessed is He, said to him: I will do it, as it is stated: "And when they began to sing and praise" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 20:22). Chizkiyahu stood up and said: I don't have the strength to kill, to pursue, or to sing song. Rather, I will sleep on my bed, and You do it. The Holy One, blessed is He, said: I will do it, as it is stated: "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of Ashur" (II *Melakhim* 19:35). (*Eikha Rabba Petichta* 30)

There are two approaches to the interpretation of this Midrash: The first approach sees in David who trusts in God the highest level, in which there is on the one hand absolute trust in God, but at the same time, David does everything for himself and knows that all of his actions are from God. After that the Midrash lists in descending order from David on (Asa, Yehoshafat and Chizkiyahu), with Chizkiyahu lacking the strength to kill, or to pursue, or even to sing praise, but rather: "I will sleep on my bed, and you will do it." Chizkiyahu does nothing for himself, and makes everything dependent on God. According to this understanding, there is a close connection between man's strivings and actions and his trust in God. The highest level is maximum activity in which the person understands that God reveals Himself through that activity.

The Ramchal follows this approach in his *Mesilat Yesharim* in his explanation of the attribute of cleanliness:

David was watchful and completely cleansed of all these. He would, therefore, go out to battle with unwavering confidence, saying: "I will pursue my enemies and overtake them, and not turn back until they are consumed" (*Tehilim* 18:38). Yehoshafat, Asaf, and Chizkiya would not make suck requests, as they never attained such blamelessness. This is the sense of what he himself said in the same passage: "The Lord will reward me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands he will recompense me" (*Tehillim* 18:21). (Ramchal, *Mesilat Yesharim* 10)

Rabbi Yigal Ariel in his book on Yeshayahu notes that the source for this is found in the *Zohar* to *Parashat Miketz*:

King David always took extra care regarding such sins and, when he went to battle, he searched for them. He therefore was not afraid to wage war. Come and see: There were four kings, each of whom asked for a different thing. David said: "Let me pursue my enemies, and overtake them: neither let me turn back till they are consumed" (*Tehilim* [18:38)](https://www.chabad.org/16239#v38). Why did he say that? Because he was careful about those sins [that people take lightly] and this gave no [spiritual] opening to his enemies to defeat him. He therefore pursued them continuously, and they couldn’t pursue him to catch him, and extract punishment for his sins. Asa [the king] was more fearful. Although he searched for his sins, he was not as King David [who actually killed his enemies]. (*Zohar* I, 198b)

According to the second approach, there is a direct connection between man's actions and his trust in God. The more that a person does, the less is his trust in God. According to this understanding, the highest level among the four kings was that of Chizkiyahu. Everything depends absolutely on God. This is maximum trust, and therefore Chizkiyahu does nothing. God does it all. One who does everything on his own, like David, demonstrates a lack of trust in God.

This is the approach of the *Or ha-Chayyim* in his commentary to the Torah:

The highest level of all is that which Chizkiyahu asked, for he said: I don't have the strength to kill, to pursue, or to pray. Rather, I will sleep on my bed, and You do it. And this is what God did, as it is written in II *Melakhim*: "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went forth." And this is the level about which Moshe said: "And you shall remain silent." That is, you don't have the strength even for prayer. (*Or ha-Chayyim*, *Shemot* 14:4)

We are more persuaded by the first approach. According to the Midrash, each of the kings says: "I don't have the strength." It is difficult to see one who lacks strength as representing the highest level of trust in God.

In any event, certainly according to the second understanding, Chizkiyahu is the character who is cast in the most positive light, and it is he who trusts in God absolutely.

Rav Kook in *Ein Aya* on *Berakhot* 10a relates to the Midrash cited above, saying:

Now we can understand that in accordance with the moral state of Israel after the time of Achaz, which required great work because of his evil aspirations to cause the people to forget the name of God and His Torah, [Chizkiyahu] found that even with respect to the national effort which is praiseworthy in ordinary times, the time required that he institute that all trust be placed in God, as He will not abandon His people, so that the people once again feel the hand of God upon them. Therefore, at the time of the collapse of Sancheriv he said: I don't have the strength to kill, or to pursue. Rather, I will sleep on my bed, and You do it. And this refraining from exercising his strength was a moral act for Israel at that time, as he would only reach his objective through a manifest miracle with no human effort. So too the future redemption, it may begin with miracles and wonders, as in the days of the exodus from the land of Egypt, or it will have a natural beginning, as *Chazal* said in several places, that Israel's success will come little by little. According to what we have said, this will depend on Israel's spiritual state. For if we piously cling to the observance of the *mitzvot* and the study of Torah, thereby correcting our character traits and filling our hearts with faith and the knowledge of God, then it will be considered great perfection if we occupy ourselves in this *mitzva* of raising the horn of Israel. And it will certainly be great glory and national splendor for us if we occupy ourselves with the building of the house of Israel… If, however, the state of Israel is at a low point, they being far from Torah and the knowledge of God, it will not be possible to reach the objective through natural redemption, and the future good will have to come at first through miraculous redemption. Natural steps will not succeed in such a situation, lest they cause excessive destruction of the moral state which is the objective. (*Ein Aya*, *Berakhot* 1, 143)

Rav Kook explains that in the spiritual reality that Achaz created, one of forgetting God and His Torah, national effort came to be seen as a noble thing. At such a time what was needed to repair the damage was a manifest miracle. One of the ways to emphasize a manifest miracle is to refrain from all conventional action. This is what Chizkiyahu did in practice in order to highlight the miracle and to restore the people's firm faith in God.

This is how he explains the wording of Rabbi Yehuda and what is meant by: "I did that which is good in Your eyes," in connection with joining redemption to prayer:

Now joining redemption to prayer teaches us that our redemption will arrive only through the hand of God. And we must know this because the lofty knowledge of God that will come with the redemption is its ultimate objective. Therefore we must know that the redemption depends on prayer and finding God's favor. However, when we are at an elevated level of service and perfection, the redemption is joined in our minds to prayer, as it truly is, even when it arrives naturally and through our efforts. But when our state is low owing to our sins and our distance from perfect knowledge of God, then the redemption is joined to prayer in our judgment only when it arrives miraculously. Therefore Chizkiyahu strived to do what is good in the eyes of God, that is, that which leads to the moral objective, even if according to human understanding it is not good, namely that he joined redemption to prayer, for in his time this joining was necessary in order to reduce natural efforts totally, until he reached the supreme level of trust. (*Ein Aya*, *Berakhot* 1, 143)

Rav Kook expands there on the relationship between human effort and miracles, explaining that it all depends on the moral and spiritual reality of the people. Thus, when the people of Israel first embarked on their journey miracles were important in order to bring the people closer to knowledge of God and being close to Him. Thus, for example, he compares the battle at Ai in the book of *Yehoshua*, when the people were used to miracles, and it was appropriate for them to act on their own to achieve success, to the days of Gidon when the spiritual state of the people was not good and therefore it was necessary to limit natural human effort.

So too with Chizkiyahu at the beginning of his reign. In order to heighten the people's awareness of the hand of God, he did things to highlight the miraculous nature of reality and God's manifest appearance in the world. Thus, with his crushing of the brazen serpent, thus with his hiding of the Book of Remedies, thus with his joining of the redemption to prayer, and thus with his attitude toward war.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to examine the reign of Chizkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Rav Yigal Ariel in his book, *Mikdash Melekh*, in his chapter on Chizkiyahu, has a fine discussion of Chizkiyahu's trust in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)