YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #314: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXIV) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (C)**

In last week's *shiur* we discussed Chizkiyahu's desire to unite the two kingdoms, Israel and Yehuda, under his rule. Today we would like to examine his foreign policy with respect to the world powers that surrounded him.

We already mentioned that Achaz had turned to the king of Ashur, asking that he save him from the kings of Aram and Israel, Retzin the king of Aram and Pekach ben Remalyahu the king of Israel, who had joined together to fight against him. In the process he became totally subjugated to the king of Ashur: "I am your servant and your son" (II *Melakhim* 16:7). This subjugation was both political and spiritual. This reality found clear expression in the construction of an altar to the god of Damascus in the house of God in Jerusalem, an exact replica of the altar in Damascus, and in the cutting off of the borders of the bases, and the removal of the laver from off them and the removal of the sea from off the brazen oxen that were under it (which symbolized the removal of the Divine chariot), and in the closing of the house of God (II *Melakhim* 16).

Chizkiyahu's conduct in this area stood in contrast to Yeshayahu's expectation that Chizkiyahu would occupy himself first and foremost in the repair of the kingdom and the restoration of social justice, and that he would certainly refrain from any involvement in regional wars and struggles.

In order to understand the background to Yeshaya's prophecy in chapter 29 (which we will bring below), we wish to describe the events in the order in which they occurred.[[1]](#footnote-1) Following the exile of Shomeron, in the third year of Sargon's reign, he conquered Aza and exiled its king to Ashur, and establish in the region of El-Arish an Assyrian commercial settlement.

In all periods of history, Peleshet was considered a strategic target owing to its proximity to Egypt, and because through it passed the Via Maris, the Sea Highway, the ancient trade route that connected the southern empires, Egypt and Kush, with the northern empires, Aram, Ashur, Babylon and Persia.

In this context, Ashur's reaction to and repression of Ashdod's rebellion against Sargon is understandable.

### Ashdod's Rebellion and Sargon's conquest

 In the eighth year of Sargon's reign (715 BCE) the king of Ashdod rebelled against Assyrian rule. He tried to establish an alliance of kings against Ashur. In the tenth year of Sargon's reign (713 BCE), Tartan, a senior general in the Assyrian army was sent to conquer the rebellious Ashdod. Azuri, the king of Ashdod, was ousted, and his brother Achimati, who was loyal to Ashur, was established as king in his place. In the twelfth year of Sargon's reign (711 BCE), the Ashdodites deposed their king, and crowned in his place Yemani who fortified the city and entered into an alliance with Egypt and other countries in the region.

 Sargon himself went out to suppress the rebellion. He destroyed the city, exiled its inhabitants, and settled the area with Assyrian soldiers.

 The rebellious king of Ashdod fled to Egypt and made a pact with it. At that very same time the kings of Kush had taken control of Upper and Lower Egypt, starting a period of black Pharaohs which lasted for seventy five years. The Egyptian ruler who was the king of Ashdod's patron was murdered, and King Piye, the founder of the dynasty of black Pharaoh's, handed over Yemani's head to Ashur as a token of friendship. This is the background to Yeshayahu's prophecy in chapter 20:

In the year that Tartan came into Ashdod, when Sargon the king of Ashur sent him, and he fought against Ashdod and took it; at that time the Lord spoke by Yeshayahu the son of Amoz, saying: Go, and loosen the sackcloth (*u-fatachta ha-sak*) from off your loins, and put your shoe from off your foot. And he did so, walking naked and barefoot. And the Lord said: Like as My servant Yeshayahu has walked naked and barefoot to be for three years a sign and a wonder upon Egypt and upon Kush, so shall the king of Ashur lead away the captives of Egypt, and the exiles of Kush, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. And they shall be dismayed and ashamed, because of Kush their expectation, and of Egypt their glory. And the inhabitant of this coast-land shall say in that day: Behold, such is our expectation, where we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Ashur; and how shall we escape? (*Yeshayahu* 20)

### The meaning of "Loosening the sackcloth"

What is the significance of the fact that the prophet donned sackcloth already before Tartan's arrival in Ashdod? The Radak explains (ad loc.):

"And loosen the sackcloth" – Because he wore sackcloth because of the exile of the ten tribes and he mourned them, he was told to loosen the sackcloth that was tied around his loins and to remove his shoes, and to walk about naked and barefoot. (Radak, *Yeshayahu* 20:2)

There are indeed verses which create a direct connection between the wearing of sackcloth and mourning. Thus we find with Yaakov: "And Yaakov rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days" (*Bereishit* 37:34); in Amos: "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 the end thereof as a bitter day" (*Amos* 8:10); and in Psalm 30: "You did turn for me my mourning into dancing; You did loosen my sackcloth, and gird me with gladness" (*Tehilim* 30:12). Yehuda Elitzur comments in connection with the Radak's remark[[2]](#footnote-2)that the sackcloth worn by the prophet was a mourning practice over the exile of the ten tribes, that Shomeron had been destroyed ten years earlier, and it is difficult to assume that the prophet practiced mourning rites for ten years. Rashi follows in the footsteps of Targum Yonatan who understands *u-fatachta ha-sak* to mean that Yeshaya was told to tie sackcloth. Why is the action described as *u-fatachta*, which usually means "to open, to untie"? Rashi explains:

The meaning of *u-fatachta* is like: "graven [*mefutachot*] with the engravings of a signet" (*Shemot* 39:6). To wear sackcloth tightly on his body so that it appear etched on his flesh. (Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 20:2)

This is a very difficult interpretation of the meaning of *lefate'ach*. In: "Let not him that girds on his armor boast himself as he that takes it off [*ki-mefate'ach*]" (I *Melakhim* 20:11); and "to loosen [*pate'ach*] the fetters of wickedness" (*Yeshayahu* 58:6), *lefate'ach* does not denote wearing, but loosening and taking off. This is certainly the plain meaning of our verse: "and loosen (*u-fatachta*) the sackcloth from off your loins." This does not mean that he should wear the sackcloth tightly, but just the opposite.

There are those who interpret the sackcloth in the wake of what is stated in *Zekharya*: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be brought to shame every one through his vision, when he prophesies; neither shall they wear a hairy mantle to deceive" (*Zekharya* 13:4). Sackcloth is another term for a hairy mantle, a garment that was regularly worn by prophets, and *pitu'ach* of that garment means removing it, similar to: "and put your shoe from off your foot." It is, however, difficult to accept this, because nowhere do we find that sackcloth and a hairy mantle are one and the same thing. Were this the case, it should have said: "and remove your garment from upon you." Why is reference made to sackcloth? R. Yosef Kara explains (v. 2, s.v., *u-fatakhta*): "This teaches that he went about in sackcloth, and similarly you find among all the prophets that they would go about in bitterness and heated spirit (see *Yechezkel* 3:14), when they saw calamity approaching Israel." Regarding the wearing of sackcloth, Prof. Elitzur brings a proof from I *Melakhim.* When Ben Hadad suffers defeat at the hand of Achav and runs away to the city that was destroyed, his army is routed, and he himself is handed over to Achav, and it says:

And his servants said unto him: Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings; let us, we pray you, put sackcloth on our loins, and ropes upon our heads, and go out to the king of Israel; peradventure he will save your life. So they girded sackcloth on their loins, and put ropes on their heads, and came to the king of Israel, and said: Your servant Ben Hadad says: I pray you, let me live. And he said: Is he yet alive? he is my brother. (I *Melakhim* 20:31-32)

Here the sackcloth is a sign of the heartbreak of submission, of surrender, of hope for mercy; not mourning. The mourning will arrive after the calamity; the sackcloth here is before the calamity. It is put on in the hope and on the chance that the calamity will be cancelled. So too in the next chapter: "And it came to pass, when Achav heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly" (I *Melakhim* 20:27). Here too we are before the calamity, only that the prophet prophesied about a calamity and Achav truly submitted: "And the word of the Lord came to Eliyahu the Tishbite, saying: Do you see how Achav humbles himself before Me? because he humbles himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (I *Melakhim* 21:28-29)

The sackcloth here is a clear expression not of mourning but of subjugation and supplication in order to forestall the evil, in the hope of its cancellation and being saved. Thus, also in the book of *Esther*: "Now when Mordechai knew all that was done, Mordechai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry" (*Esther* 4:1). Mordechai wore the sackcloth before the calamity in order to prevent it. He did not come to peace with the calamity, nor did he despair of salvation; rather, he did everything in his power to prevent the evil.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We mentioned that the initiator of the Ashdod rebellion turned to some of his neighbors. Azuri, the king of Ashdod, decided not to send additional gifts to Ashur, but he sent them to the other kings. We do not know whether he turned also to Chizkiyahu the king of Yehuda. Yeshayahu was consistent in his policies, as he was in the days of Achaz, that the king of Yehuda should not become involved in the international diplomatic moves that were taking place around him.

The prophet understands the regional coalition in which the rebellious Ashdod is relying on Egypt which is promising its help, but at the same time is occupied with internal wars between the south, Upper Egypt, which is ruled by Kush, and the north, Lower Egypt. This coalition is but a mirage that is contrary to the will of God. It is very reasonable to assume that the period of Tartan's campaign against Ashdod was a time of trouble and panic in Jerusalem. Ashur came to suppress the revolt in Ashdod, but who could guarantee that he would not want to continue on to the kingdom of Yehuda? Yeshayahu put on sackcloth and prayed for God's salvation from the sword of Sargon. It would appear that he began with his sackcloth and fasting when he first heard about Tartan's campaign. With the conclusion of his campaign against Ashdod, Jerusalem breathed a sigh of relief and the prophet removed his sackcloth. He is then ordered to remove his shoes and go naked and barefoot. The people of Jerusalem celebrate, while the prophet walks around the house of the king naked and barefoot. [There are differing views among the *Rishonim* whether this took place in a prophetic vision, as argued by the Rambam,[[4]](#footnote-4) or whether this actually took place, not as a parable or in the prophet's imagination.]

We mentioned that Yemani who was crowned as king by the people of Ashdod after they overthrew the king who had been appointed by Ashur immediately tried to form a coalition to continue the rebellion against Ashur consisting of Peleshet, Yehuda, Edom and Moav, under the patronage of Pharaoh king of Egypt. When Sargon understood that Ashdod was not conceding defeat, he went out and destroyed it. These are the three years during which time Yeshayahu went about naked and barefoot, at least every time delegations arrived to Chizkiyahu, to warn the king against joining this rebellion. The prophet saw the bloody wars in Egypt between the people of Kush and Lower Egypt, and he cried out in his prophecy: "And they shall be dismayed and ashamed, because of Kush their expectation, and of Egypt their glory" (*Yeshayahu* 20:5).The prophecy blurred the difference between Kush and Egypt. The prophecy announced that it was not only Ashdod that would be destroyed, but even Egypt would be harmed. "So shall the king of Ashur lead away the captives of Egypt, and the exiles of Kush, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt" (*Yeshayahu* 20:4). The naked and barefoot prophet came to warn about the situation of those who would fall into the humiliating captivity of Sargon. It is very possible that when Azuri the king of Ashdod rebelled against Ashur, he sent emissaries to Chizkiyahu the king of Yehuda, who supported the revolt against Ashur.

As the Assyrian army drew closer, the prophet donned sackcloth with humility and heartbreak, pleading for the salvation of Jerusalem. Following the surrender of Ashdod and the departure of the Assyrian army, Jerusalem was indeed saved. However, right afterwards the prophet is commanded to remove the sackcloth and go about naked and barefoot because the danger has not passed but has even increased. The prophet warns the people not to join the revolt that broke out in Ashdod, which had sent emissaries to Peleshet, Yehuda, Edom and Moav, based on its confidence in the power of Egypt. It is clear that at that time there was a debate in the kingdom of Yehuda whether or not to support the rebellion of Ashdod. During the three years, the prophet tried to rise above the considerations of the moment and to herald the strengthening of Ashur and the fall of Egypt (as was actually the case some forty years later in the days of Asrachadon).

This chapter is instructive in understanding the role and mission of the prophet in relation to the king and the entire kingdom. The prophet clearly represents the word of God in this world and its implications for practical life and royal policy. His personal involvement leads him to do things that are by no means simple, acting as the emissary of God who loves his people and seeks to warn them against falling for illusions in the international arena. The king's mission is to establish his kingdom on the principles of justice and righteousness, and in that way he fulfills his role in the world. He must, however, understand that international events are God's concern. He runs the world and the king must not interfere. Any involvement on his part is liable to impair the primary mission of his kingdom which is justice and righteousness.

In the coming *shiurim* we will see the extent to which Chizkiyahu did not internalize the dramatic actions of the prophet who had warned him how the king of Ashur would relate to the captivity of Egypt and the captivity of Kush. An essential element of a king's service of God is to obey the prophet and govern his country based on his prophecy and in accordance with God's will.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to examine Chizkiyahu's kingdom, focusing on his illness and its significance.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In this section, I follow Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun and Benny Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu ke-Tziporim Afot*, pp. 202-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yehuda Elitzur in his book, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, "*Bi-Shenat Bo Tartan Ashdoda* (*Yeshayahu* 30)," pp. 192-200). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Similarly, *Yonah* 3:8-9; II *Melakhim* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Guide for the Perplexed* II, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)