YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #315: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXV) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CI)**

### The King's Active Involvement in the International Arena

It is clear from Yeshayahu's prophecy in chapter 20 – in which he speaks of going about naked and barefoot for three years – that the prophet comes to issue a sharp warning against any political involvement on the part of Chizkiyahu against Ashur. The prophet warns that the king of Ashur will in the future deal with him as he will deal with Egypt: "And they shall be dismayed and ashamed, because of Kush their expectation, and of Egypt their glory" (*Yeshayahu* 20:5). No political alliance with other countries will help, because in the end he will become subjugated to Ashur.

The prophet Yeshayahu apparently discerns that Chizkiyahu is in some way in contact with the surrounding powers and that he may be tempted to enter into alliances and coordinate international positions against Ashur.

We will see later in this series of *shiurim* that Chizkiyahu will eventually make a pact with Egypt against Ashur, something which the prophet condemns in every possible way (*Yeshayahu* 30-31). In the end his position regarding this issue as well will be absolutely contrary to the position of his father, who totally subjugated himself to Ashur, both politically and spiritually. On these matters, the prophet's position is exceedingly consistent, as it was when he told Achaz when Retzin the king of Aram and Pekach ben Remalyahu the king of Israel went up to Jerusalem for the purpose of war:

And say unto 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 Remalya. (*Yeshayahu* 7:4)

And again later with regarding to the pact with Egypt:

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In sitting still and rest shall you be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength; and you would not. (*Yeshayahu* 30:15)

It is the clear position of the prophet that it is not the king's role to initiate or become involved in international political action to change the face of the region through alliances and wars, but rather he must focus on the spiritual reform of the kingdom and the establishment of righteousness and judgment in the land. In this context it makes no difference which political direction the king chooses – for or against Ashur. The prophet disapproves of any involvement in international affairs.

It is against this background that we must examine the full force of the prophet's decision to go about for three years naked and barefoot. On the one hand, the prophet attaches great fundamental importance to this spiritual position, and on the other hand to the spiritual dangers of over-involvement in the management of an active foreign policy.

### Chizkiyahu's Illness – The Timing

According to the plain sense of Scripture and according to the order of the chapters, Chizkiyahu took sick after the great miracle involving the fall of Sancheriv. But the formulation at the beginning of the chapter is: "In those days was Chizkiyahu sick unto death" (II *Melakhim* 20:1), and not: "After these things." It is therefore possible to understand that we are dealing with the period of the siege. Indeed, we find in *Seder Olam Rabba* as follows:

Prior to the fall of Sancheriv, Chizkiyahu was sick for three days. Rabbi Yose says: Sancheriv's fall was on the third day of Chizkiyahu's sickness, and the sun stood for him as it stood for Achaz. (*Seder Olam Rabba*, chapter 23)

Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun and Benny Lau[[1]](#footnote-1) argue that it is evident from the words of the king and the prophet about Chizkiyahu's sickness that the sickness appeared prior to the miraculous victory in Jerusalem.

Even for external reasons, such as Chizkiyahu's age, it is appropriate to locate this story in the middle of the period of the rebellions of the regional powers against Ashur, and in the course of the prophet's struggle with the king's idea of rebellion. Almost all of the commentators agree that the story is not located in its proper chronological place. Some locate the story only a few days before Sancheriv's campaign against Jerusalem, while others argue that it took place several years earlier.

### The Meaning of the Sickness

Clearly the timing of the sickness impacts upon its meaning. If Chizkiyahu became sick only after the fall of Sancheriv,[[2]](#footnote-2) the decree of death stemmed from disappointment in Chizkiyahu who did not recite a song or call out in the name of God because of the miracle. At that moment, Chizkiyahu hastens to pray, and by virtue of the additional chance that was afforded to him, he promises to visit the house of God.

If the sickness began at the time of the siege on Jerusalem, there is a connection between Chizkiyahu's personal illness and the national reality, "the sickness of all of Israel," in that generation. The prophet's declaration, "And I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Ashur; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for My servant David's sake" (II *Melakhim* 20:6), teaches that the Chizkiyahu became sick before the miracle and before the deliverance. This timing of the sickness, according to this understanding, could have been interpreted by the people as sharp criticism of their king. In this sense, it was a response to his failure in managing the war against Ashur. And it was a punishment for his military preparations for war instead of trusting in God and for the alliance that he had entered into with Egypt.

By the same token, Chizkiyahu's recovery was not only a personal reinforcement, but it purified the king from the failure and the sin and justified the war. Therefore, the promise came to save him from the king of Ashur and to defend Jerusalem.

If the sickness struck during the period of the quarrels of the cities of the region with Ashur, during the course of the prophet's struggle with the king's thoughts of rebellion, then the sickness gave significant expression to the severe disconnect between the king and the prophet.

At the beginning of his reign, when the king was eradicating the idolatry of Achaz, renewing the service in the house of God, and celebrating Pesach in a way that united the kingdom of Israel with the kingdom of Yehuda, it is very reasonable to assume that the prophet stood at the foundation of these blessed changes from the days of Achaz.

But when Chizkiyahu began to examine political cooperation with the neighboring powers, the prophet resolutely opposed his policy. In this sense as well, Chizkiyahu's sickness was the sickness of the entire kingdom. The struggle between these two great figures – the king and the prophet – revealed itself around the king's illness, and in particular according to the way that *Chazal* saw the issue.

Chizkiyahu's sickness is described in both the book of *Melakhim* and in the book of *Yeshayahu*. In the book of *Melakhim* we read:

In those days was Chizkiyahu sick unto death. And Yeshayahu the prophet the son of Amotz came to him, and said unto him: Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order; for you shall die, and not live. Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying: Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done that which is good in Your sight. And Chizkiyahu wept sore. And it came to pass, before Yeshayahu was gone out of the inner court of the city, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying: Return, and say to Chizkiyahu the prince of My people: Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up unto the house of the Lord. And I will add unto your days fifteen years; and I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Ashur; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for My servant David's sake. And Yeshayahu said: Take a cake of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered. (II *Melakhim* 20:1-7)

Scripture describes the great tension between the king and the prophet. When king Chizkiyahu lies on his deathbed, the prophet visits him and tells him: "You shall die, and not live." No reason is given for this decree. Chizkiyahu does not relate at all to the words of the prophet, but rather he turns to God in prayer and in great tears, and pleads with God that He should remember the fact that he walked before God in truth and with a whole heart and did that which was good in his eyes. God answers Chizkiyahu's prayer and tears up the decree. God appears to Yeshayahu and asks him to tell Chizkiyahu that He accepted his prayer and will add another fifteen years to his life. At the same time, He informs him that He will deliver him from the hand of the king of Ashur and protect the city of Jerusalem. The promise of salvation made to Chizkiyahu included both his personal salvation, his recovery from his illness and an additional fifteen years of life, and national salvation. In the end, King Chizkiyahu's direct appeal to God was answered, and the words of the prophet did not come true. Later the prophet suggests that Chizkiyahu take a cake of figs and place them on his boil and in that way he will heal. But the text in *Melakhim* teaches that Chizkiyahu asked for a sign from God:

And Chizkiyahu said unto Yeshayahu: What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up unto the house of the Lord the third day? And Yeshayahu said: This shall be the sign unto you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten degrees, or go back ten degrees? And Chizkiyahu answered: It is a light thing for the shadow to decline ten degrees; nay, but let the shadow return backward ten degrees. And Yeshayahu the prophet cried unto the Lord; and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down on the dial of Achaz. (II *Melakhim* 20:8-11)

Chizkiyahu's position is the exact opposite of that of Achaz who did not want a sign: "But Achaz said: I will not ask, neither will I try the Lord" (*Yeshayahu* 7:12).

[Yigal Yadin proposed an interesting explanation of the nature of the sign.[[3]](#footnote-3) He found a sundial in the Cairo Museum that accords with this prophecy. It is a flat structure from which steps descend to the east and to the west, and it is enclosed with walls at both ends. In the morning, the eastern wall casts its shadow on the steps that face it. As the sun rises in the sky, the shadow descends and with it the light of the sun from the highest step to the lowest one, until the afternoon when the light disappears entirely. In the afternoon, the western wall casts its shadow on the steps facing it, first on the lowest step and then toward evening the shadow ascends the steps and grows longer. It seems that in Chizkiyahu's device, there were ten stairs on each side, and it seems to have been attached to the southern or northern wall of a royal building.

It would appear that the prophet spoke to Chizkiyahu at noon when the shadow had already covered the ten steps to the east. The expected course was a lengthening of the shadow covering the ten steps to the west. Instead, Scripture attests: "So the sun returned ten degrees, by which degrees it was gone down" (*Yeshayahu* 38:8).

In the book of *Yeshayahu* it is the prophet who initiates the sign:

And this shall be the sign unto you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing that He has spoken: behold, I will cause the shadow of the dial, which is gone down on the sun-dial of Achaz, to return backward ten degrees. So the sun returned ten degrees, by which degrees it was gone down. (*Yeshayahu* 38:7-8)

The prophet also brings Chizkiyahu's song of thanksgiving:

The writing of Chizkiyahu of Yehuda, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness. I said: In the noontide of my days I shall go, even to the gates of the nether-world; I am deprived of the residue of my years. I said: I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord in the land of the living; I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. My habitation is plucked up and carried away from me as a shepherd's tent; I have rolled up like a weaver my life; He will cut me off from the thrum; from day even to night will You make an end of me. The more I make myself like unto a lion until morning, the more it breaks all my bones; from day even to night will You make an end of me. Like a swallow or a crane, so do I chatter, I do moan as a dove; mine eyes fail with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed, be You my surety. What shall I say? He has both spoken unto me, and Himself has done it; I shall go softly all my years for the bitterness of my soul. O Lord, by these things men live, and altogether therein is the life of my spirit; wherefore recover You me, and make me to live. Behold, for my peace I had great bitterness; but You have in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption; for You have cast all my sins behind Your back. For the nether-world cannot praise You, death cannot celebrate You; they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Your truth. The living, the living, he shall praise You, as I do this day; the father to the children shall make known Your truth. The Lord is ready to save me; therefore we will sing songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the Lord. (*Yeshayahu* 38:9-20)

In contrast to his first prayer, in which the king mentions his meritorious deeds, in this prayer of thanksgiving the king describes his fear of death. Here he gives expression to his smallness and to his submission to God.

In the next *shiur* we will consider Chizkiyahu's sickness as it was viewed by *Chazal*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Yeshayahu ke-Tziporim Afot*, pp. 209-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rav Yigal Ariel offers a fine analysis of the various possibilities in his book, *Ha-Mevaser – Iyyunim be-Sefer Yeshayahu*, pp. 475 and on, and we have followed in his footsteps. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yigal Yadin, *Ma'alot Achaz*, *Eretz Israel* 5 (1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)