YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbie and David Sable

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Lecture 320: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (CVI)**

In previous *shiurim* we saw King Chizkiyahu's efforts to fortify and expand Jerusalem, both through the building of walls and by securing a regular water supply for the city in a time of siege. All these were part of the king's preparations for a rebellion against Ashur, in parallel to increased reliance on Egypt.

In this *shiur* we will examine the attitude of the prophet Yeshayahu toward the alliance made with Egypt and its implications for the spiritual and social reality in Jerusalem. We saw in previous *shiurim* that the prophet Yeshayahu issued warnings already during the life of Sargon, and that he went about naked and barefoot to express his opposition to any support for the revolts in Ashdod, capped with the severe warning: "So shall the king of Ashur lead away the captives of Egypt, and the exiles of Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt" (*Yeshayahu* 20:4).

Following the visit of the delegation of Berodakh the son of Baladan, the king of Babylon, with Chizkiyahu, the prophet delivered an exceedingly harsh prophecy about exile to Babylon following the opening of the emergency warehouses of Yehuda before the Babylonian delegation and the exposing of the royal treasures including the ark and the tablets of the law in the sight of the Babylonians.

Regarding the issue of the alliance with Egypt, the prophet delivered harsh prophecies about the alliance itself and its difficult spiritual significance. Thus we read in chapters 30 and 31:

Woe to the rebellious children, says the Lord, that take counsel, but not of Me; and that form projects, but not of My spirit, that they may add sin to sin; that walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at My mouth; to take refuge in the stronghold of Pharaoh, and to take shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the stronghold of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your confusion…

The burden of the beasts of the South. Through the land of trouble and anguish, from whence come the lioness and the lion, the viper and flying serpent, they carry their riches upon the shoulders of young asses, and their treasures upon the humps of camels, to a people that shall not profit them. For Egypt helps in vain, and to no purpose; therefore have I called her arrogancy that sits still…

That say to the seers: See not, and to the prophets: Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy delusions; get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us…

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. But you said: No, for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall you flee; and: We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift…

And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have compassion upon you; for the Lord is a God of justice, happy are all they that wait for Him…

Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days, in the day that the Lord binds up the bruise of His people, and heals the stroke of their wound. (*Yeshayahu* 30:1-26)

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many, and in horsemen, because they are exceeding mighty; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord! Yet He also is wise, and brings evil, and does not call back His words; but will arise against the house of the evil-doers, and against the help of them that work iniquity. Now the Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses flesh, and not spirit; so when the Lord shall stretch out His hand, both he that helps shall stumble, and he that is helped shall fall, and they all shall perish together. For thus says the Lord unto me: Like as the lion, or the young lion, growling over his prey, though a multitude of shepherds be called forth against him, will not be dismayed at their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them; so will the Lord of hosts come down to fight upon mount Zion, and upon the hill thereof. As birds hovering, so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem; He will deliver it as He protects it, He will rescue it as He passes over. Turn you unto Him against whom you have deeply rebelled, O children of Israel. For in that day they shall cast away every man his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which your own hands have made unto you for a sin. Then shall Ashur fall with the sword, not of man, and the sword, not of men, shall devour him; and he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall become tributary. And his rock shall pass away by reason of terror, and his princes shall be dismayed at the ensign, say the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem. (*Yeshayahu* 31)

The prophet describes the movement of convoys going south from the kingdom of Yehuda and of the delegation going down to Egypt to ensure the assistance of the Egyptian army in the campaign against Ashur, as a movement opposite in its direction and in its meaning to the exodus from Egypt.

In the profound sense of the phrase, returning to Egypt means returning to the reality that preceded God's command: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2). In the Torah section dealing with the king, the Torah warns the king: "Only he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord has said unto you: You shall henceforth return no more that way" (*Devarim* 17:16). This was in continuation of the words of Moshe at the Sea of Suf: "For whereas you have seen the Egyptians today, you shall see them again no more forever" (*Shemot* 14:13). The deeper meaning of any return to Egypt to enjoy its protection is re-enslavement. *Chazal* in the *Mekhilta* compare Chizkiyahu's request for Egypt's aid to the actual descent of the remnant of Yehuda to Egypt, following the assassination of Gedalya, which led to the establishment of the large Jewish community in Alexandria in the days of Trajan who suppressed the rebellion which broke out across the Diaspora:

In three places, God warned Israel not to return to Egypt, as it is stated: "For whereas you have seen the Egyptians today, you shall see them again no more forever" (*Shemot* 14:13); and it is stated: "Forasmuch as the Lord has said unto you: You shall henceforth return no more that way" (*Devarim* 17:16); and it is stated: "And the Lord shall bring you back into Egypt in ships, by the way whereof I said unto you: You shall see it no more again" (*Devarim* 28:68). Three times they went back and three times they fell. The first time, in the days of Sancheriv, as it is stated: "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help" (*Yeshayahu* 31:1); the second time, in the days of Yochanan the son of Kareach, as it is stated: "Then it shall come to pass, that the sword, which you fear, shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine, whereof you are afraid, shall follow hard after you there in Egypt; and there you shall die" (*Yi**rmeyahu* 42:16). And the third time, in the days of Trajan. (*Mekhilta, Beshalach*)

In addition to the fact that the alliance with Egypt meant rebellion against God, it also involved a political mistake. When Ravshake arrives at the gates of Jerusalem and ridicules Chizkiyahu, he says among other things:

Behold, you trust upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it; so is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all that trust on him. (*Yeshayahu* 36:6)

In the end, following the alliance made with Egypt, the people also accept its idolatry, as is stated in the words of the prophet Yeshayahu:

And you shall defile your graven images overlaid with silver, and your molten images covered with gold; you shall put them far away as one unclean; you shall say unto it: Get you hence. (*Yeshayahu* 30:22)

The exaggerated and imaginary confidence in the strength of the wall is also an illusion:

Therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking comes suddenly at an instant. (*Yeshayahu* 30:13)

The prophet also relates in his vision to the meaning of redemption and universal repair. The cry of the people and their repentance will enable their redemption, and Israel will immediately be saved from Ashur. God's vengeance upon the Gentile nations will come as a flood of fire and brimstone, while the *Shekhina* will appear to Israel in streams of living water: "And there shall be upon every lofty mountain, and upon every high hill streams and watercourses, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall" (*Yeshayahu* 30:25). This is similar to what is stated in *Tehilim* 46: "Though the waters thereof roar and foam, though the mountains shake at the swelling thereof. Selah. There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God, the holiest dwelling-place of the Most High" (*Tehilim* 46:4-5). Not only will the remnant be saved, but the world will also be recreated, and the entire universe will be illuminated: "Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun" (*Yeshayahu* 30:26).

In chapter 31 the prophet reiterates his fundamental position, emphasizing that relying on Egypt is no substitute for seeking God. The reliance on horses, on material military might, is futile. In practice, only God can protect Jerusalem:

So will the Lord of hosts come down to fight upon mount Zion, and upon the hill thereof. As birds hovering, so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem; He will deliver it as He protects it, He will rescue it as He passes over. (*Yeshayahu* 31:4-5)

God's miraculous defense of Jerusalem proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that the alliance entered into with Egypt is futile.

### Deliverance on Pesach

The phrase, "He will rescue it as He passes over [*paso'ach*]," reminds us of Pesach and the Divine deliverance from Egypt. "Not by way an angel, and not by way of a seraph, and not by way of an agent, but by way of the Holy One, blessed be He, in all His glory." Indeed, Scripture describes the miraculous deliverance:

And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of Ashur a hundred fourscore and five thousand; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. (II *Melakhim* 19:35)

The Midrash in *Shemot Rabba* says that Ashur's fall took place on the night of the Seder:

And Israel and Chizkiyahu were sitting and reciting the Hallel, as it was the night of Pesach, and they were afraid to say: Now Jerusalem is being conquered by him [Sancheriv]. When they arose early in the morning to recite the *Shema* and to pray, they found their enemies all dead corpses. (*Shemot Rabba* 18, 5)

And so too the words of Yeshayahu:

You shall have a song as in the night when a feast is hallowed; and gladness of heart, as when one goes with the pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel. (*Yeshayahu* 30:29)

And as the Radak explains:

On that same day that plague shall strike the camp of Ashur, you the residents of Jerusalem shall enjoy song and gladness, like the night on which the feast is hallowed, namely, the night of the feast when you rejoice and recite song. Thus it will be for you on the day of the fall of the camp of Ashur, that you shall sing and praise God for having performed a great miracle for you. (Radak, *Yeshayahu* 30:29)

It is interesting to relate to another part of the prophecy: **"As birds hovering,** so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem; He will deliver it as He protects it, He will rescue it as He passes over" (*Yeshayahu* 31:4-5). According to the plain meaning, the prophet is saying that God will liberate the people of Israel from the siege and they will be able to fly like free birds. This is the God's special rescue of Jerusalem – "He will rescue it as He passes over." We are dealing here with a new Pesach, a miraculous deliverance by way of which the people of Israel are removed from the straits in which they are found; and by way of the passing over there is rescue and rebirth in the wake of the liberation from the yoke of the kingdom of Ashur.

In the end, when Sancheriv conquers the kingdom of Yehuda, he conquers Azaka and Lakhish, but he does not succeed in conquering Jerusalem.

Usually, a king boasts about his wars when he conquers a capital city. In the Assyrian inscriptions Sancheriv boasts about his successful conquest of 46 fortified cities, along with many smaller towns, taken in battle with his battering rams, and about how he took as plunder 200,000 people. "As for Chizkiyah, I shut him up like a caged bird in his royal city of Jerusalem." It is very possible that the prophet Yeshayahu wished to show that countering the image of a bird in a cage there is the image of rescue, deliverance, and liberation: "As birds hovering, so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem; He will deliver it as He protects it, He will rescue it as He passes over."[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the next *shiur* we will continue our discussion of the reign of Chizkiyahu.

1. I heard this idea from Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, and it is mentioned in his book, *Yeshayahu ke-Tziporim Afot*, pp. 272-273. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)