YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

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**Lecture 328: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXXVIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (CXIV)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-327-history-divine-service-altars-cxxxvii-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-cxiii) we examined the words of Ravshakeh to the delegation sent by Chizkiyahu. In this *shiur* we will consider his words to the men the defending the city wall.

### The words of Ravshakeh to the men on the city walls

In the wake of Ravshakeh's words regarding Chizkiyahu's reliance on Egypt and the trust in God after Chizkiyahu destroyed the *bamot* and the altars at which the people of Israel had worshipped Him, Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu, Shevna and Yoach ask Ravshakeh to speak in Aramaic rather than in Hebrew in the earshot of the people standing on the city wall. Aramaic served then as an international language, and they asked that the negotiations not be conducted in Hebrew so that the people at large not understand what was being said. In the wake of this request, Ravshakeh answers them that he was sent by Sancheriv to speak to the people on the wall, and therefore he was deliberating directing his words to them. He speaks in the name of the great king, the king of Ashur, and he argues once again that Chizkiyahu is incapable of saving them.

It is reasonable to assume that he is referring to the words of Chizkiyahu cited in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

And he set captains of war over the people, and gathered them together to him in the broad place at the gate of the city, and spoke encouragingly to them, saying: Be strong and of good courage, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Ashur, nor for all the multitude that is with him; for there is a Greater with us than with him. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:6-7)

He tells the people not to listen to Chizkiyahu, and he proposes that they leave the confines of the walls of Jerusalem: "And eat you every one of his vine, and every one of his fig-tree, and drink you every one the waters of his own cistern" (*Yeshayahu* 36:16). He promises them peace, security, and rest, similar to what is stated about King Shelomo: "And Yehuda and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree" (I *Melakhim* 5:5), and he explains to them that he will exile them to a land of corn and wine.

He lists a series of lands that the king of Ashur captured and whose gods were of no help to the conquered peoples. Not the god of Chamat, not the god of Arpad, and not the god of Sefarvayim. Similarly, the God of Shomeron did not save Shomeron from the king of Ashur. It is clear, therefore, that just as all these lands together with their capital cities were not saved, but rather they were conquered by the king of Ashur, so too there is no chance that the God of Israel will save Jerusalem from his hand. On the other hand, from the Biblical perspective, what led to the destruction of the kingdom of Shomeron were the sins of the kingdom, as the prophet spells out in detail in II *Melakhim* 17:8-23.

Once again we see how Ravshakeh engages in psychological warfare, using an argument that was meant to convince the army of Yehuda. But in a different way from the prophetic perspective, he mocks them for the fall of Shomeron, the argument being that God did not defend them and that He lacked the power to stand up to the force of the king of Ashur.

The soldiers who were defending the wall of Jerusalem did not say anything, because Chizkiyahu had commanded them not to answer; even Chizkiyahu's ministers remained silent. They rent their garments over Ravshakeh's harsh blasphemies, and returned to Chizkiyahu to report to him about Ravshakeh's words.

Chizkiyahu hears what was said and he too rends his garments, covers himself in sackcloth and goes to the house of God.

In the parallel description of this event in *Divrei* *ha-Yamim*, Ravashkeh says:

Now therefore let not Chizkihyahu beguile you, nor persuade you after this manner, neither believe you him; for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people out of my hand, and out of the hand of my fathers; how much less shall your God deliver you out of my hand? And his servants spoke yet more against the Lord God, and against His servant Chizkiyahu. He wrote also a letter, to taunt the Lord, the God of Israel, and to speak against Him, saying: As the gods of the nations of the lands, which have not delivered their people out of my hand, so shall not the God of Chizkiyahu deliver His people out of my hand. And they cried with a loud voice in the Jews' language to the people of Jerusalem that were on the wall, to terrify them, and to affright them; that they might take the city. And they spoke of the God of Jerusalem, as of the gods of the peoples of the earth, which are the work of men's hands.

And Chizkiyahu the king, and Yeshayahu the prophet the son of Amoz, prayed because of this, and cried to heaven. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:15-20)

In the account in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, Ravshakeh repeats several times the full comparison between the gods of all the nations and the God of Israel, who is also referred to here as the God of Jerusalem.

The Radak notes here: "There is no greater blasphemy than the comparison between the Creator of all things and the gods of wood and stone" (Radak, II *Melakhim* 18:36). Scripture notes that there were additional insults and words of blasphemy against Chizkiyahu and against God that were not recorded here, and that they did not content themselves with oral attacks, but also wrote letters in which they continued to insult and blaspheme and those texts were delivered to Chizkiyahu, his ministers and the soldiers defending the wall of the city.

#### Chizkiyahu's prayer

Chizkiyahu's reaction to the terrible desecration of God's name, and to the blasphemies and intimidations of Ravshakeh and the Assyrian delegation, was to rend his garments as a sign of sorrow and mourning. In addition, he goes to the house of God and prays there. This is one of the instances in which it is explicitly stated that the purpose of a king's going up to the house of God was to pray. When King Shelomo dedicates the house of God, he emphasizes in his words in an exceedingly clear manner that the primary purpose of the house of God was that God should answer the prayers of Israel in every situation:

Yet have You respect unto the prayer of Your servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You this day; that Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place whereof You have said: My name shall be there; to hearken to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place. And hearken You to the supplication of Your servant, and of Your people Israel, when they shall pray toward this place; yea, hear You in heaven Your dwelling-place; and when You hear, forgive. (I *Melakhim* 8:28-30)

King Shelomo emphasizes that the house of God is the primary place of prayer for each individual in Israel and for the entire people of Israel, in all different situations of distress, in the reality of sin or defeat in war, in drought and starvation, and in battle.

During the First Temple period we do not find many kings going up to the house of God to pray, apart from Shelomo himself who prays at the dedication of the Temple (I *Melakhim* 8:12-53). Another example is King Yehoshafat, who prays to God before the people of Moav and Amon come to wage war against Israel (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 20:3-18).

Like the kings Shelomo and Yehoshafat, Chizkiyahu as well prays in the wake of the great distress in which he finds himself. This behavior undoubtedly attests to Chizkiyahu's righteousness and repentance, which becomes evident in Chizkiyahu's prayer itself:

And Chizkiyahu prayed before the Lord, and said: O Lord, the God of Israel, that sits upon the *keruvim*, You are the God, even You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; You have made heaven and earth. Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear; open Your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear the words of Sancheriv, wherewith he has sent him to taunt the living God. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Ashur have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone; therefore they have destroyed them. Now therefore, O Lord our God, save You us, I beseech You, out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are the Lord God, even You only. (II *Melakhim* 19:15-19)

The language used by Chizkiyahu, "the God of Israel, that sits upon the *keruvim*," comes to emphasize the supreme kingdom of God, who dwells in His palace, the house of God, on the royal throne, the *keruvim*.

This image is significant in light of the blasphemies of Ravshakeh who absolutely denied God's kingship, and indeed, Chizkiyahu continues his prayer, saying: "You are the God, even You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth." In contrast to the pagan concept presented by the representatives of the king of Ashur, according to which every kingdom has a god of its own, Chizkiyahu prays with a deep understanding that God controls, oversees and directs all of the kingdoms on earth. Indeed, Ravshake was right when he said that the kings of Ashur destroyed the nations and their lands, but the reason for this is that, contrary to what he said, their gods are not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone.

### The appeal to Yeshayahu

Upon hearing the words of Ravshakeh, and after rending his garments, covering himself in sackcloth and going to the house of God, Chizkiyahu sends a delegation to the prophet Yeshayahu:

And they said to him: Thus says Chizkiyahu: This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of contumely; for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth. It may be the Lord your God will hear the words of Rav-Shakeh, whom the king of Ashur his master has sent to taunt the living God, and will rebuke the words which the Lord your God has heard; wherefore make prayer for the remnant that is left. (*Yeshayahu* 37:3-4; II *Melakhim* 19:3-4)

Chizkiyahu's appeal to Yeshayahu testifies to the extent to which from Chizkiyahu's there is currently no way out. Until Sancheriv's invasion of the kingdom of Yehuda, Chizkiyahu believed that he could, with the help of the alliance with the various countries in the region, overcome the kingdom of Ashur. With the invasion of Sancheriv and his conquest of Lakhish and Azeka, Chizkiyahu surrendered to the king of Ashur and even paid him a heavy tax, including treasures from the house of God. Now he turns to the prophet who had harshly criticized him for having entered into an alliance with Egypt and for the grave spiritual significance of this step towards God.

This is Chizkiyahu's situation, and to a large extent the opposite of that which Yeshayahu had described. The prophet who had always preached: "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), finds himself now in a situation in which the Assyrian army is camped in the heart of the kingdom of Yehuda after all of his warnings and criticisms.

The verse in *Divrei ha-Yamim* states: "And Chizkiyahu the king, and Yeshayahu the prophet the son of Amotz, prayed because of this, and cried to heaven" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:20). In this time of trouble, both the king who had entered into an alliance with Egypt, and the prophet who had strongly opposed this course of action, pray together for salvation from the kingdom of Ashur and from Sancheriv, after he conquered Lakhish and Azeka, and sent a delegation to the defenders of the wall of Jerusalem.

(Translated by David Strauss)