YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

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**Lecture 329: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXXIX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (CXV)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-328-history-divine-service-altars-cxxxviii-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-cxiv), we related to Chizkiyahu's response to Ravshakeh's blasphemies, his going up to the house of God to pray, and his turning to the prophet Yeshayahu for instructions about what to do. In this *shiur* we will move on to Yeshayahu's response, to God's salvation, and to Chizkiyahu's reaction.

### Yeshayahu's response to Chizkiyahu's appeal

Yeshayahu answers the delegation of senior officers that Chizkiyahu had sent to him as follows: "Thus shall you say to your master: Thus says the Lord: Be not afraid of the words that you have heard, wherewith the servants of the king of Ashur have blasphemed Me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, and he shall hear a rumor, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land. (*Yeshayahu* 37:6-7)

Sancheriv sends two emissaries to Chizkiyahu with books in their hands, that is to say, with written letters, and not just an oral message, as was the case with the first delegation. Once again they mock Chizkiyahu's confidence and their arguments are identical to the arguments made by the first delegation that we reviewed in the previous *shiur*.

Chizkiyahu prays, emphasizing that God is the exclusive master over all the earthly kingdoms. The prophet Yeshayahu sends Chizkiyahu a messenger to tell him that his prayer was favorably received. And this is his answer:

Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Ashur: He shall not come to this city, nor shoot an arrow there, neither shall he come before it with shield, nor cast a mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and he shall not come to this city, says the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake. (*Yeshayahu* 37:33-35)

The prophet emphasizes that God will defend Jerusalem for His own sake and for the sake of David, but not for the sake of Chizkiyahu. God's defense of Jerusalem stems from His selection of the city, as was already emphasized at the time of the division of the kingdom in the prophecy of Achiya the Shilonite:

For My servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel… that David My servant may have a lamp always before Me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen Me to put My name there. (I *Melakhim* 11:32-36)

### The Description of the miraculous salvation and Rescue

Following the prophet's reassurance about the future, Scripture describes the miraculous rescue of Jerusalem:

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)

In *Divrei ha-Yamim* the salvation is described in a very impressive way:

Thus the Lord saved Chizkiyahu and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sancheriv the king of Ashur, and from the hand of all, and guided them on every side. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:22)

This verse appears to be sending us to the account of the splitting of the Sea of Suf:

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea-shore. (*Shemot* 14:30)

In any event, it is clear that Scripture greatly intensifies the Divine salvation that saves Chizkiyahu, the entire kingdom of Yehuda, and the city of Jerusalem from the expected yoke of Ashur.

The verse in *Divrei ha-Yamim* adds:

And many brought gifts to the Lord to Jerusalem, and precious things to Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda; so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from thenceforth. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:23)

We are dealing here with a great deliverance from the strongest army in the world, from the country that controlled the world.

According to what is stated here, Ashur's defeat before Chizkiyahu greatly enhanced Chizkiyahu's international status. The direct result was that the nations of the world brought gifts to Jerusalem that were meant to give expression to Chizkiyahu's elevated status in the wake of his victory.

### Chizkiyahu's pride and arrogance

This reality brings Chizkiyahu to behave arrogantly toward the other nations. This is spelled out in greater detail in the continuation:

But Chizkiyau rendered not according to the benefit done to him; for his heart was lifted up; therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Yehuda and Jerusalem. Notwithstanding Chizkiyahu humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Chizkiyahu. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:25-26)

On the face of it, this is a description of Chizkiyahu's ingratitude toward God. The verse describes his arrogance before the messengers of Merodakh Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Bavel.

*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 52) notes that he showed the emissaries the treasures of the Holy of Holies. He opened the ark and showed them the tablets of the Law, and told them that it is with them that they go out to war and emerge victorious. To a great extent, according to this understanding, he attributes the victory to himself, and not exclusively or clearly to God.

The prohibition against arrogance is the clear prohibition of the Torah portion concerning the king:

That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left; to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel. (*Devarim* 17:20)

According to our approach, the prohibitions to multiply wives, horses, silver and gold, and the obligation to write a Torah scroll in addition to the one that must be written by every individual in Israel, and to keep it with him at all times, were meant to remind the king to steer clear of pride in the military sphere (horses), the social sphere (wives), and the economic sphere (silver and gold). Taking the Torah scroll wherever he goes is meant to remind the king who indeed is the exclusive King.

It is possible that Chizkiyahu, in the way that he perceives the deliverance from the army of Ashur, does not clearly and absolutely attribute the salvation to God because of that arrogance that gives him the feeling of partnership in the victory. Therefore, the result of the matter, according to *Chazal,* is that he shows the emissaries of the king of Bavel the ark of the Law, and tells them that it is with that that they are victorious.

### Chizkiyahu did not utter a song of PRaise (according to *Chazal*)

*Chazal* strongly criticize Chizkiyahu for his response to the miracle that had been performed for him. *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim* expounds as follows:

Chizkiyahu should have uttered a song of praise over the fall of Sancheriv… Chizkiyahu was a king and a righteous man, and you said that his heart was lifted up. Rather his heart was lifted up from uttering a song of praise. Chizkiyahu said: The Torah that I study atones for the song. Rabbi Levi said: Chizkiyahu said: Why do we have to speak about the miracles and mighty works of the Holy One, blessed be He? This is already known from one end of the world to the other! (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 4, 19)

Chizkiyahu's failure to utter a song of praise is a great display of ingratitude toward God. The comparison that we made between the formulation in *Divrei ha-Yamim* and the Divine deliverance at the splitting of the Sea of Suf sharpens the difference.

The account of the deliverance at the splitting of the sea continues with the Song of the Sea:

Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spoke, saying: I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea. (*Shemot* 15:1)

The parallels between the salvations emphasizes Chizkiyihu's failure to utter a song of praise in the wake of Sancheriv's defeat, a clear Divine salvation.

The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* states as follows:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Chizkiyahu as the Messiah, and Sancheriv as Gog and Magog; whereupon the Attribute of Justice said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe! If you did not make David the Messiah, who uttered so many hymns and psalms before You, will You appoint Chizkiyahu as such, who did not hymn You in spite of all these miracles which You wrought for him? (*Sanhedrin* 94a)

A different tone is sounded in *Midrash Eikha*:

Zavdi ben Levi opened: "The kings of the earth believed not, [neither all the inhabitants of the world, that the adversary and the enemy would enter into the gates of Jerusalem]" (*Eikha* 4:12). There were four kings; what the one requested, the other one did not. These are [the kings]: David, Asa, Yehoshafat and Chizkiyahu: David said: "Let me pursue my enemies, and overtake them" *Tehilim* 18:38). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I will do that. This is what is stated: "And David smote them from the twilight even to the evening of the next day" (I *Shemuel* 30:17). What is "of the next day"? Ri the son of Levi said: For two nights and the day between them. The Holy One, blessed be He, would illuminate for him at night with shooting stars and lightning. This is what is stated: "For You do light my lamp" (*Tehilim* 18:29)… Chizkiyahu stood up and said: I have not the strength to kill, or to pursue, or to utter a song of praise. Let me sleep in my bed, and You act. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: I will do that. 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).

This Midrash compares the attitude of four kings – David, Asa, Yehoshafat and Chizkiyahu - and the actions that they took in their various wars against the enemies of Israel.\

The Midrash first presents the image of King David, who, on the one hand, unequivocally attributes his salvation to God, but he acts and does everything in the war, knowing that God is doing everything through him. The last king to be presented is Chizkiyahu, who lacks the strength to fight or pursue or even to utter praise, and instead he sleeps while God acts on his behalf.

There is a great difference between the words of *Chazal*, according to which Chizkiyahu failed to utter a song of praise because of his arrogance and did not unequivocally attribute the deliverance to God, but rather to a certain extent to himself; and the words of *Chazal*, according to which he did nothing, and God did everything, but he lacked the strength to utter a song of praise.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We have cited three sources in *Chazal*, and all testify to the fact that despite the great salvation in which the Assyrian army was smitten by an angel of God, Chizkiyahu failed to utter a song of praise. Even if the tone and the reasons are different, all of the sources agree that in fact he did not utter a song of praise.

### Divine Deliverance, measure for measure?

When we consider the great salvation that took place, it should be emphasized that in the end all of Chizkiyahu's preparations with regard to Ashur were of no avail; neither the fortifications, nor the quarrying of a tunnel that led water from the spring outside the city into the city, helped in any way. Likewise, the global alliance with Egypt, Babylon and other countries, against Ashur, which was made in clear opposition to the position of the prophet Yeshayahu, did not help at all. The deliverance came about in miraculous manner, without any human help, and therefore this was in a certain sense an instance of measure for measure.

In addition, the miraculous salvation testifies that God defended Jerusalem for Himself and for David his servant, despite the actions of Chizkiyahu and not because of them.

It is clear that, on the one hand, Chizkiyahu's answer and his prayer and his appeal to the prophet constitute a certain repair of his earlier deeds, but, on the other hand, his other actions, such as showing the ark to the emissaries of Merodakh Baladan, son of Baladan king of Bavel, indicate that he still did not attribute the deliverance exclusively to God.

### The Deliverance itself – A renewed Exodus from Egypt

Regarding the timing of the deliverance, *Chazal* expound that it took place on the night of Pesach. This is the way that the verse in *Yeshayahu* is interpreted:

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)

What is the significance of the fact that the deliverance took place precisely on the night of Pesach? The prophet Yeshayahu says in the next chapter:

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* 31:5)

A description is given of the future deliverance and the miraculous victory over the army of Sancheriv. The use of the phrase, "He will rescue it as He passes over," can be understood either as skipping and leaping, or as mercy for Jerusalem. But in any event it seems to be alluding to the deliverance in Egypt, to God's passing over the soldiers of the kingdom of Yehuda and miraculously smiting the army of Ashur.

It may be suggested that Scripture describes God's deliverance of the people of Israel in the days of Chizkiyahu parallel to the deliverance and exodus from Egypt. This salvation takes place while King Chizkiyahu puts his trust in Egypt, the broken staff, that it will deliver the kingdom of Yehuda from the king of Ashur.

What we have here is a renewed exodus from Egypt, both in the sense of the deliverance from the army of Ashur, and in the total removal of the deliverance from any connection with Egypt. If the alliance with Egypt in the most essential sense of the word means a return, as it were, to the reality that preceded God's command: "I am the Lord your God that took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2), the deliverance here expresses a renewed exodus from Egypt that comes to repair Chizkiyahu's actions, and to remove once again the kingdom of Yehuda from Egypt, in both a realistic and a symbolic manner.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We also find an interpretation according to which Chizkiyahu attributes everything to God and refrains from acting in order that God's action should be revealed in full strength. This understanding is the very opposite of arrogance. We have adopted the understanding according to which King David was at the highest level, and Chizkiyahu at the lowest. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)