YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

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**Lecture 331: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXLI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (CXVII)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-330-history-divine-service-altars-cxl-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-cxvi)we began to summarize the reign of Chizkiyahu. We dealt mainly with the perspectives on his kingdom presented by the prophets Yeshayahu and Yirmeyahu. In this *shiur* we intend to continue with our summation of his reign.

The book of *Melakhim* describes Chizkiyahu's reign from the perspective of the end of the First Temple period. The book describes him with exceedingly lavish praise:

He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Yehuda, nor among them that were before him. For he cleaved to the Lord, he departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord commanded Moshe. (II *Melakhim* 18:5-6)

This assessment may be primarily directed at everything related to the service of God, and according to this, the juxtaposition to the previous verse is understandable:

He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Ashera; and he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moshe had made; for to those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called Nechushtan. (II *Melakhim* 18:4)

Throughout the book of *Melakhim*, one of the most important criteria used in summing up the reigns of the various kings is whether or not the *bamot* were removed. It would appear that the reference is to the *bamot* that were used in the kingdom of Yehuda for the service of the God of Israel, just not in the house of God, but at *bamot* throughout the land.

Chizkiyahu was, indeed, the first king to remove the *bamot* throughout the country. This was a dramatic step, unlike anything ever attempted by the kings who preceded Chizkiyahu, and that was taken after him only by Yoshiyahu.

Without a doubt, this was a difficult step for all the inhabitants of the kingdom of Yehuda who worshipped God in this manner for centuries. The fact that when Ravshakeh arrived at the wall of Jerusalem, he taunted the people about this, indicates how significant and sensitive a topic this was, as was mentioned in previous *shiurim*.

On the other hand, there were significant issues in the kingdom of Chizkiyahu to which the book of *Melakhim* does not relate, but which the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim* describes in detail (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:30):

- The renewed connection with and re-opening of the house of God after the days of Achaz, during which time there stood in the house of God an altar to the god of Damascus.

- The removal of the idols that had been set up in the house of God to the Kidron Valley.

- The purification of the house of God and its vessels and their rededication for the service of God.

- The rededication of the house including the re-appointment of the priests and Levites to their respective roles.

What is more, *Divrei ha-Yamim* describes at length the offering of the Paschal offering in Jerusalem (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30), in cooperation with some of the residents of the kingdom of Israel.

The renewal of the covenant with God with the Paschal offering together with the kingdom of Israel following the rededication of the Temple, and the eradication of the idol worship of the period of Achaz, were without a doubt, events with national and spiritual significance. The significance of these events and God's full response to then are described only in the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Yehuda, and according to the commandment of the king, saying: You children of Israel, turn back to the Lord, the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Israel, that He may return to the remnant that are escaped of you out of the hand of the kings of Ashur. And be not you like your fathers, and like your brethren, who acted treacherously against the Lord, the God of their fathers, so that He delivered them to be an astonishment, as you see. Now be you not stiff-necked, as your fathers were; but yield yourselves to the Lord, and enter into His sanctuary, which He has sanctified forever, and serve the Lord your God, that His fierce anger may turn away from you. For if you turn back to the Lord, your brethren and your children shall find compassion before them that led them captive, and shall come back into this land; for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away His face from you, if you return to Him.(I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:6-9)

The joint Paschal offering presented a rare opportunity to reunite the two kingdoms with a return to God and the Temple, and a repair of their ancestors' sins. Scripture says about this as follows: "And the Lord listened to Chizkiyahu and healed the people" (*Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:20). God responded to Chizkiyahu, healed the people, and accepted their offerings with favor.

### The Seven additional days

At the end of the section, it is stated:

And the whole congregation took counsel to keep another seven days; and they kept another seven days with gladness. Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda did give to the congregation for offerings a thousand bullocks and seven thousand sheep; and the princes gave to the congregation a thousand bullocks and ten thousand sheep; and priests sanctified themselves in great numbers. And all the congregation of Yehuda, with the priests and the Levites, and all the congregation that came out of Israel, and the strangers that came out of the land of Israel, and that dwelt in Yehuda, rejoiced. So there was great joy in Jerusalem; for since the time of Shelomo the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:23-26)

This addition of another seven days after the celebration of Pesach is interesting. It would appear that these seven days correspond to the seven days that were added to the seven days of dedicating the house of God in the days of Shelomo, as is described in I *Melakhim* 8:65, and in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 7:9-10.

In *Divrei ha-Yamim*, the chapter concludes its description of Chizkiyahu's actions as follows:

And thus did Chizkiyahu throughout all of Yehuda; and he wrought that which was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart, and prospered. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 31:20-21)

### The miraculous rescue of Jerusalem

We see, therefore, that the description in *Divrei ha-Yamim* of the beginning of Chizkiyahu's reign speaks of a great national and spiritual revolution, which included the eradication of idolatry, the rededication of the house of God, the re-unification of the two kingdoms centered on the Paschal offering, and a renewal of Torah study and the observance of the *mitzvot*.

Regarding all of these things, Chizkiyahu tried to emulate David and Shelomo and follow their model.

With regard to writing as well, the verse in *Mishlei* states:

These also are proverbs of Shelomo, which the men of Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda copied out. (*Mishlei* 25:1)

Thus we see that this issue as well was a significant spiritual matter during the time of Chizkiyahu's reign.

It is clear from these events that the beginning of Chizkiyahu's reign marked a dramatic change in comparison to the period of his father Achaz, with regard to everything that was connected to the Holy and the Temple, to idol worship and the *bamot*, to the reunification of the two kingdoms, and to the rededication of the house of God with the bringing of the Paschal offering together with representatives of the kingdom of Israel.

It is reasonable to assume that since he was only twenty-five years old when he ascended to the throne, and against the background of the actions of his father Achaz (service of the Molekh for the first time in Jerusalem, building an altar to the god of Damascus in the house of God in Jerusalem, and the effective closing of the house of God), Chizkiyahu drew great inspiration from the prophet Yeshayahu. This allowed him to drag his father's bones about after he died (an action that received *Chazal's* approval), and to immediately carry out upon his ascent to the throne all the lofty actions in the spiritual and national realm, described above.

Later, after Ashur invaded the kingdom of Yehuda and conquered a significant portion of its lowlands (including Azeka and Lachish), Chizkiyahu heard Ravshakeh's blasphemous words that were hurled against the defenders of Jerusalem walls, tore his clothing, covered himself with sackcloth, and went to the house of God. From there he sent Elyakim the son of Chilkiyahu, who was over the house, Shevna the Scribe, and the elders of the priests to the prophet Yeshayahu to say to him: "For the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth" (II *Melakhim* 19:3).

At this time of distress, the very turning of King Chizkiyahu to Yeshayahu teaches that the king takes the prophet seriously and therefore turns to him for advice.

In addition, after Yeshayahu's answer to Chizkiyahu's emissaries not to fear the king of Ashur, whom God will overthrow after he returns to his country, and that Jerusalem will not fall into the hands of the king of Ashur, Chizkiyahu goes up to the house of God, and prays for God's deliverance of the kingdom of Yehuda from the hands of Ashur "that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you are the Lord God" (II *Melakhim* 19:19).

It turns out, however, that while Chizkiyahu's going up to house of God and his praying to God that He deliver Israel from the hands of Ashur was favorably accepted, in chapter 20 the prophet describes how Chizkiyahu was critically ill, and the prophet Yeshayahu visited him and said:

Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order; for you shall die, and not live. (II *Melakhim* 20:1)

Chizkiyahu once again prayed to God, this time a prayer for himself. But it is clear that in essence there is a parallel between Chizkiyahu's illness and the "disease" of the kingdom. There is a parallel between the prayers, the collective and the personal, and there is a parallel between the deliverance of the kingdom and Chizkiyahu's healing. Indeed, God reveals Himself once again to Yeshayahu:

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 to the house of the Lord. And I will add to 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. (II *Melakhim* 20:4-6)

Scripture itself connects the fate of Chizkiyahu to the fate of the city and its defense. Therefore, there is no doubt that in the time of trouble, King Chizkiyahu's direct appeal to God expresses the extent to which Chizkiyahu is interested in worshiping God. This conduct characterizes Chizkiyahu's attitude as completely opposed to the position of his father Achaz, regarding both the prophet and God.

### Prophecies of destruction and exile

Beyond the impressive aspects of the prophetic assessment of Chizkiyahu's reign, there are several issues regarding which the prophet criticizes the actions of the king.

The first relates to the covenant with Egypt, which the prophet Yeshayahu critiques in chapters 30 and 31 in a very penetrating manner. The reliance on a foreign king in general, the return to Egypt in particular, and the explicit prohibition cast upon the king is a retreat from the commandment, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2).

Beyond the specific act of the covenant with Egypt, with its consequences and flaws, one of the main implications of Chizkiyahu's preoccupation with the alliance with Egypt, Babylon and their neighbors, and with the preparations for the war against Ashur, was his neglect of the central objective of his kingdom, the establishment of justice and righteousness in his country. Two prophets, Yeshayahu and Mikha, describe the sad reality, the injustices of the government, which was apparently a result of the leadership of Shevan. For the first time, a king of Yehuda is informed about the expected destruction of Jerusalem and the house of God (based on *Mikha* 3:12 and *Yirmeyahu* 26:18-19).

Even if these are different periods of time, there is a huge gap between Chizkiyahu, the righteous king who eradicates idolatry, who rededicates the house of God and celebrates Pesach together with representatives of the kingdom of Israel, who turns to the prophet and prays to God, both about matters pertaining to the entire kingdom and about his personal health; and Chizkiyahu who enters into an alliance with Egypt, and because of his intensive preoccupation with his preparations for war against the kingdom of Ashur, in great measure neglects the internal spiritual and social issues of justice and righteousness, the result of which is the first prophecy concerning the destruction of the city. In addition, when Chizkiyahu shows the emissaries of Merodakh Baladan the son of Baladan king of Babylon:

… his treasure-house, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious oil, and all the house of his armor, and all that was found in his treasures; there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Chizkiyahu showed them not. (*Yeshayahu* 29:2) –

the prophet's response is exceedingly sharp:

Behold, the days come, that all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And of your sons that shall issue from you, whom you shall beget, shall they take away; and they shall be officers in the palace of the king of Babylon. (*Yeshayahu* 39:6-7)

For the first time Yeshayahu prophesied about exile to Babylon. It is interesting that the very harsh description of the injustice in Jerusalem appears only in the books of *Yeshayahu* and *Mikha*, and the prophecy about the destruction of the Temple appears only in *Mikha*.

### Some FInal Points

The book of *Melakhim* presents side by side Chizkiyahu's dedication to God, his observance of the commandments, and his great confidence in God: "And after him there was none like all the kings of Yehuda, and which were before him" (II *Melakhim* 18: 5), and together with that his actions relating to the emissaries of the king of Babylon, and the prophecy about the exile to Babylon.

The book of *Divrei ha-Yamim* is the only one that describes alongside Chizkiyahu's exceedingly impressive beginning (the eradication of idolatry, the rededication of the house of God, the celebration of Pesach together with representatives of the kingdom of Israel), the reasons that brought Chizkiyahu to where they brought him:

But Chizkiyahu 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)

In his days, however, there was the great threat of the invasion of Ashur, the conquest of the lowlands of Yehuda, and the burning of the entire kingdom:

Your country is desolate; your cities are burned with fire; your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by floods. And the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, we should have been like unto Gemora. (*Yeshayahu* 1:7-9)

In the end, thanks to Chizkiyahu's repentance and prayers, the destruction of the city and the house of God was postponed until the days of Tzidkiyahu. There was a miraculous salvation, but as the prophet explained it: "And I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant David" (II Kings 20: 6), but not for Chizkiyahu.

Scripture's account emphasizes how great the mission falling upon the king of Israel was and how much humility it demanded of him:

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)

Chizkiyahu was one of the greatest kings of Yehuda during the centuries of the monarchy of the house of David.

We have seen that his attitude toward the prophet and the word of God was very important, even if on some of the issues he acted independently without asking or consulting with him. He related to the military campaign against Ashur, as if it all depended upon him: "You made also a basin between the two walls for the water of the old pool, but you looked not to Him that had done this, neither had you respect to Him that fashioned it long ago" (*Yeshayahu* 22:11).

In the end, neither the alliance with Egypt nor the military fortifications (the construction of the walls and the quarrying of the tunnel that led the water of the Gichon spring to a pool at the southern end of the city) helped, because it was a miraculous salvation that saved Jerusalem and the kingdom of Yehuda.

Beyond the issue of listening to the prophet, there is another lesson here, namely, the relationship between foreign policy and the international campaign, on the one hand, and the spiritual and social reform of the kingdom, and the goal of managing it with justice and righteousness, on the other. The resolute position of the prophet Yeshayahu is that the international domain belongs to God, and that the king of Israel is not in charge of it. The king, in consultation with the prophet, is responsible for leading the kingdom with justice and righteousness, and preserving the kingdom's connection to Torah and the observance of *mitzvot*.

A comparison of the kingdom of Chizkiyahu to the reign of his father Achaz highlights his righteousness, his deep relationship to the word of God and prophecy, his repentance and prayers, and his comprehensive eradication of both idolatry and the *bamot*, something none of the kings of Yehuda before him accomplished and after him was attempted only by Yoshiyahu.

There is no doubt that before Chizkiyahu stood the image of David and Shelomo, and that in some ways he succeeded in being like them and following in their footsteps.

In his day there was great economic well-being:

And Chizkiyahu had exceeding much riches and honor; and he provided him treasuries for silver, and for gold, and for precious stones, and for spices, and for shields, and for all manner of goodly vessels; storehouses also for the increase of corn, and wine, and oil; and stalls for all manner of beasts, and flocks in folds. Moreover he provided him cities, and possessions of flocks and herds in abundance; for God had given him very much substance. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:27-29)

From the perspective of international relations, there is no doubt that the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem and the whole of the kingdom made a great impression throughout the world:

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. 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…

Nevertheless, in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that He might know all that was in his heart. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:22-31)

We conclude here our examination of one of the greatest kings of Yehuda. In the next *shiur* we will begin to discuss the reign of Chizkiyahu's son, Menashe.

(Translated by David Strauss)