YESHIVAT HAR EZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Ein Yaakov - The World of Talmudic Aggada**

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**Lecture 36: Daf 10a-b**

**The King’s Prayer**

The Gemara so far has presented King David as the paradigm of the life of prayer. In what follows, we find an account of one of David’s most illustrious descendants, King Chizkiyahu, in which he, too, appears as a model of commitment to prayer as a way of life. Unlike the previous discussions, however, where prayer is presented as a supreme value without any competition, in this story, the legitimacy of the prayerful life is challenged by none other than the prophet Yishayahu. This is not a story about good guys versus bad guys. Rather, this passage is about a conflict between two *tzadikim* (righteous people) who each represent legitimate, yet conflicting truths:

R. Hamnuna said:

What is the meaning of the verse,

‘Who is as the wise man?

And who knoweth the interpretation [*pesher*] of a thing?’ (*Kohelet* 8:1).

Who is like the Holy One, blessed be He,

who knew how to effect a reconciliation [*peshara*]

between two righteous men,

Chizkiyahu and Yishayahu?

Chizkiyahu said:

Let Yishayahu come to me,

for so we find that Eliyahu went to Achav,

as it says,

‘And Eliyahu went to show himself unto Achav’ (I *Melakhim* 18:2).

Yishayahu said:

Let Chizkiyahu come to me,

for so we find that Yehoram son of Achav went to Elisha (see II *Melakhim* 3:12).

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do?

He brought sufferings upon Chizkiyahu

and then said to Yishayahu,

Go visit the sick.

For so it says,

‘In those days was Chizkiyahu sick unto death.

 And Yishayahu the prophet, son of Amotz,

came to him and said unto him,

Thus saith the Lord,

Set thy house in order,

for thou shalt die and not live’ (*Yishayahu* 38:1).

According to this account, Chizkiyahu and Yishayahu found themselves at an impasse. Each one felt that he was the most significant leader in Israel, and each one felt the other must acknowledge his primacy. As we shall see, these two people are not simply individuals. Each one represents a different path of serving God. These two paths cannot always be reconciled. Only God can bring them together. In doing so, God seems to favor the king, as ultimately Yishayahu is the one who must come to visit Chizkiyahu. However, Yishayahu must do so only because God strikes Chizkiyahu with a mortal illness. As we shall see, this illness is a punishment for Chizkiyahu’s misdeeds. As such, when Yishayahu enters the king’s chambers, the scales remain balanced in this faceoff between king and prophet.

Why did the Sages think that there was a conflict between these two great leaders? The story of Chizkiyahu’s illness is told in *Yishyahu* chapter 38 (= II *Melakhim* 20). In the preceding two chapters, we find the account of Sancherev King of Assyria’s invasion of the land of Israel. The Assyrians besiege Jerusalem and almost conquer it. They are foiled by a last minute miracle. As Maharsha notes, in the entire account of these events, Chizkiyahu and Yishayahu communicate only by messenger. The rabbis apparently deduced from this detail that the two men refused to meet with each other. They postulated that this refusal was because of an argument about who should come to whose house.

Similarly, in the next scene, we learn that Chizkiyahu has avoided having children until now, apparently by not taking a wife. How do the rabbis know that Chizkiyahu was childless at this time? When God ultimately heals Chizkiyahu, He tells the king through Yishayahu that He is granting him fifteen years of life (II *Melakhim* 20:6). The Maharshanotes that in the beginning of the next chapter, when Chizkiyahu’s son Menashe takes the throne, we are told that he was only twelve years old at the time. Hence, Chizkiyahu’s presumably eldest son must have been born after his father’s illness.

In the next scene, the deeper nature of the dispute between monarchy and prophecy is revealed:

What is the meaning of

'thou shalt die and not live?’

Thou shalt die in this world

and not live in the world to come.

He said to him:

Why so bad?

He replied:

Because you did not try to have children.

He said:

The reason was because I saw by the holy spirit

that the children issuing from me would not be virtuous.

He said to him:

What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful?

You should have done what you were commanded,

and let the Holy One, blessed be He,

do that which pleases Him.

He said to him:

Then give me now your daughter;

perhaps through your merit and mine combined

virtuous children will issue from me.

He replied:

The doom has already been decreed.

The prophet has come to the king, not to comfort him, but to rebuke him. Yishayahu immediately announces Chizkiyahu’s fate and then declares that the king is being punished for not having brought children into the world. This scene is reminiscent of many other incidents described in the Bible in which the prophet reprimands the king for his sins and reveals the Divine punishment that will befall the king and his house. In scenes such as these, the prophet stands above the king. He is the bearer of the Divine will, to which even the king is subject.

Chizkiyahu now does something that no rebuked king in the Bible does. He attempts to regain the moral high ground. He argues that not having children was the lesser of two evils. He knew that were he to have a son, that son would be evil. Hence, he thought that not fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply was better than bringing evil into the world. Yishayahu responds that this was none of his business. His only responsibility was to follow God’s commandments.

We can now understand the underlying debate between these two men. Yishayahu, representing the prophetic worldview, believes that God is the primary actor in the world. He decides who shall live and who shall die. He determines the fate of nations. These determinations are based on His own moral calculus, and it is futile for humans to attempt to alter the course that He has set or to make their own moral calculations. Mortals’ only responsibilities are to follow God’s commandments and accept His decrees**.**

Kings, in contrast, take a far more activist view. They believe that we can and must endeavor to change the Divine plan when it does not lead to a satisfactory end. God expects this of us.

At this point in the story, the conflict remains unresolved. Chizkiyahu insists on challenging the Divine decree by marrying Yishayahu’s daughter and attempting to bring children into the world. Yishayahu insists that this is not possible, as the king’s fate has already been sealed in heaven. Finally, however, Chizkiyahu breaks the deadlock:

Said the other:

Son of Amotz,

finish your prophecy and go.

This tradition I have

from the house of my ancestor

Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck

he should not desist from prayer.

Chizkiyahu aggressively dismisses Yishayahu, denying that the prophet has any moral authority left. The king confidently draws on the tradition of his ancestor David that it is never too late to pray for salvation. Even when it seems that one’s fate is sealed, one should always call to God to change His course. This is the lesson that we learn from David’s great book, *Tehillim.*

This ends the main plotline of the story. The reader is expected to know that God does answer Chizkiyahu, sparing him his life. This vindicates Chizkiyahu’s ancestral tradition regarding the efficacy of prayer even in the most dire of circumstances. Yishayahu’s fatalism, on the other hand, is roundly rejected. The Gemara now continues with a series of “post-scripts” to this story.

**The Stuff Dreams are Made of**

While discussing the efficacy of prayer, even in the most dire of circumstances, the Gemara takes a break in its narrative to cite another statement along these lines:

R. Chanan said:

Even if the master of dreams says to a man

that on the morrow he will die,

he should not desist from prayer,

for so it says,

‘For in the multitude of dreams are vanities

and also many words,

but fear thou God’ (*Kohelet* 5:6).

In its original context, this statement seems to focus on the unreliability of dreams, as indicated by the verse cited from *Kohelet.* However, cited in this context, the statement takes on further meaning. The statement emphasizes that God is in direct control of all that happens. He is not bound to fulfill any predictions or rulings that have already been issued in his name. An individual always has the possibility of escaping his fate by appealing directly to God through prayer.

**Wall to Wall**

The Gemara now returns to analyze Chizkiyahu’s dream as it is described in the biblical narrative,

‘Thereupon straightway,

Chizkiyahu turned his face to the wall [*kir*]

and prayed unto the Lord’ (*Yishayahu* 38:2).

What is the meaning of *kir*?

R. Shimon b. Lakish said:

[He prayed] from the innermost chambers [*kirot]* of his heart,

as it says,

‘My bowels, my bowels,

I writhe in pain!

The chambers [*Kirot*] of my heart etc.’ (*Yirmiyahu* 4:19)

The Gemara focuses on Chizkiyahu turning his face to the wall, *kir.* The Gemara assumes that because the text emphasizes this detail, it comes to tell us something essential about Chizkiyahu’s prayer. Reish Lakish understands this reference to *kir* as referring, not to the wall of the room where the king lay, but to the walls of the chambers of his heart. This interpretation picks up on the motif of praying with every fiber of one’s being. Just as David blessed God from his soul, using the phrase *borkhi nafshi,* his descendant prayed to God from the depths of his heart.

R. Levi suggests another interpretation:

R. Levi said:

[He prayed] with reference to [another] *kir*.

He said before Him:

Sovereign of the Universe!

The Shunamite woman made only one little chamber [*kir*]

and Thou didst restore her son to life.

How much more so then me whose ancestor

overlaid the Temple with silver and gold!

R. Levi recalls another person saved from the brink of death whose story contains the word *kir.* In II *Melakhim* 4, we read the story of the Shunamite woman, who builds a small upper chamber in her house, where she invites the prophet Elisha to dwell. This room is called an *aliyat kir* in the text. Elisha promises the woman a child who is soon born. One day, however, the boy collapses in the field and dies. The woman sends for Elisha, who prays to God and resurrects the child.

R. Levi suggests that in turning to the *kir,* Chizkiyahu was implicitly comparing his case to that of the son of the Shunamite. The boy’s great merit, for which he was saved from death, was that his mother built a small room for a man of God. How much more so does Chizkiyahu deserve to be healed, as his “father” King Shlomo built a magnificent Temple for God Himself. Once again, in this passage, the deeds of a king are juxtaposed with those of a prophet. This time again, the king comes out as superior to the prophet.

**What has He Done for God?**

Finally, the Gemara considers the reason that Chizkiyahu merited this miraculous salvation from God:

‘Remember now, O Lord,

I beseech Thee,

how I have walked before Thee

in truth and with a whole heart,

and have done that which is good in Thy sight’ (*Yishayahu* 38:3).

What means,

'I have done that which is good in Thy sight?'

Rav Yehuda says in the name of Rav:

He joined *geula* and *tefila*.

R. Levi said:

He hid away the Book of Cures.

In his prayer, Chizkiyahu argues that he has always “done good,” and that these deeds should merit Divine intervention in his hour of need. The Gemara asks exactly what deeds Chizkiyahu is referring to. R. Yehuda answers that he always joined *geula* and *tefila*. As we saw earlier on this *daf,* this refers to saying the *geula* blessing after the *Shema* immediately before saying the *Shemone Esrei.* Clearly, attributing this practice to Chizkiyahu, who lived centuries before the rabbis enacted the prayer service, is anachronistic. This attribution must serve to teach us a deeper lesson. Back on *daf* 4b, I suggested several explanations for this practice and why the Sages found it so important.

One possibility is that the blessing of redemption, *geula*, focuses on God taking the Jews out of Egypt, the most prominent example of such Divine intervention in human affairs. Similarly, the prayer of the *Shemone Esrei* addresses a God who is involved in human affairs and can meet the individual and collective needs of the Jews and all humankind. Effective prayers require that a person believe God can and does involve Himself in the world and therefore a person’s prayers can affect real change in the world. This approach is most similar to the “activist” approach attributed to Chizkiyahu in the previous story. R. Yehuda implies that Chizkiyahu merited salvation precisely because he understood the redemptive power of prayer and trusted in God to intervene even when it seemed that all was lost.

The second answer, suggested by R. Levi, is that Chizkiyahu merited salvation because he “hid away the Book of Cures.” What was this book and why did it deserve to be taken out of circulation? Rashi states simply that he hid this book, “so that [people] would request mercy [from God].” This book apparently had methods for curing many, if not all, illnesses. As a result, people relied on these cures and did not pray to God. This explanation is consistent with the previous story, which emphasizes Chizkiyahu’s relying on prayer and Divine intervention in facing his own illness.

Rambam, in his commentary on *Mishna Pesachim* 4:10, famously attacks this interpretation:

I have heard and it has been explained to me that Shlomo wrote the Book of Cures and that if a person fell ill with any affliction he would turn to [this book] and do as it says and he would be healed. When Chizkiyahu saw that people were not trusting in God, but in the Book of Cures [to heal] their illnesses, he went and hid it away… According to the faulty and stupid ideas [of those who say this], if a person is hungry and turns to some bread and eats it, so that he is healed from this great affliction without a doubt, would such a person be considered lacking faith in God? Even fools could tell these people that, just as I praise God when I eat… so too should I praise Him for creating a treatment for my illness when I make use of it. Were this stupid interpretation not so widespread, there would be no need to refute it.

Rambam, the great physician, sees no conflict between prayer and human efforts to heal the sick. All healing comes from God, whether it comes about as a result of prayer or as a result of human ingenuity and research. Rambam’s position underlies much of Modern Orthodoxy’s positive attitude toward science and research. Nevertheless, Rashi’s opinion cannot be dismissed as easily as Rambam suggests. Seeing the hand of God in the blessings of technology is often difficult. People tend to say that these deeds were done “with my strength and the power of my hand.” Hence sometimes people must turn directly to God so that they will be aware of the ultimate source of their healing. Chizkiyahu did not ban all medicine, only a work that threatened to totally hide God’s face by providing a comprehensive cure to all illness.

The book of Jubilees, written in the Second Temple period by Jewish sectarians akin to the Sadducees, also refers to a book of cures. The tenth chapter of the book of Jubilees says that the angels revealed to Noah cures for all illnesses. Noah wrote these cures down in a book, which was then passed down to Abraham, and later to the priests. This reference puts Chizkiyahu’s actions in a very different perspective. He was not depriving humankind of Shlomo’s scientific discoveries. Rather, he was opposed to people receiving such information through direct angelic revelation. This opposition may reflect a general opposition to those groups who claimed secret revelations which gave them special powers and abilities.

**You Win Some, You Lose Some**

Our Rabbis taught:

King Chizkiyahu did six things;

of three of them they [the Rabbis] approved

and of three they did not approve.

Of three they approved:

he hid away the Book of Cures;

and they approved of it;

he broke into pieces the brazen serpent,

and they approved of it;

and he dragged the bones of his father [to the grave] on a bed of ropes,

and they approved of it.

Of three they did not approve:

He stopped up the waters of Gichon,

and they did not approve of it;

he cut off [the gold] from the doors of the Temple

and sent it to the King of Assyria,

and they did not approve of it;

and he intercalated the month of Nisan during Nisan,

and they did not approve of it.

But did not Chizkiyahu accept the teaching:

This month shall be unto you the beginning of months:

[this means] that this is Nisan and no other month shall be Nisan?

He went wrong over the teaching enunciated by Shmuel.

For Shmuel said:

The year must not be declared a prolonged year

on the thirtieth of Adar,

since this day may possibly belong to Nisan;

and he thought:

We do not pay heed to this possibility.

We now learn that Chizkiyahu’s decision to hide the Book of Cures was one of three things that he did that the rabbis of his time approved of, while the rabbis disapproved of three other things that he did. I do not want to deal with each individual action, its meaning and its significance. Rather, I would like to consider this passage as a whole.

In the previous story, Chizkiyahu conflicts with a prophet. Now, he confronts another key element of Jewish leadership, the rabbis. Chizkiyahu was a bold leader who was willing to take unconventional measures in order to secure the physical and spiritual welfare of his people. Such an aggressive leadership style may well be expected from the king, who, as we saw, is associated with an activist approach to life. However, this aggressive spirit needs to be counterbalanced by a more conservative force, the Sages. At times, they approved of Chizkiyahu’s deeds, but at times they felt that he had gone too far. A proper balance needs to be achieved between caution and aggressive action.

**Credit where Credit is Due**

Ultimately, however, the Gemara ends its discussion of Chizkiyahu with a rather harsh critique of him:

R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Yosi b. Zimra:

If a man makes his petition

depend on his own merit,

heaven makes it depend on the merit of others;

and if he makes it depend on the merit of others,

heaven makes it depend on his own merit.

Moshe made his petition depend on the merit of others,

as it says,

‘Remember Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael Thy servants!’(*Shemot* 32:13).

and Scripture made it depend on his own merit,

as it says,

‘Therefore He said that He would destroy them,

had not Moshe His chosen stood before Him in the breach

to turn back His wrath,

lest He should destroy them’ (*Tehillim* 106:23).

Chizkiyahu made his petition

depend on his own merit,

as it is written:

‘Remember now, O Lord, I beseech Thee,

how I have walked before Thee’ (*Yishayahu* 38:3),

and God made it depend on the merit of others,

as it says,

‘For I will defend this city to save it,

for Mine own sake

and for My servant David's sake’ (ibid 37:35).

And this agrees with R. Yehoshua b. Levi.

For R. Yehoshua b. Levi said:

What is the meaning of the verse,

‘Behold for my peace I had great bitterness?’ (Ibid. 38:17).

Even when the Holy One, blessed be He,

sent him [the message of] peace

it was bitter for him..

Previously, the Gemara found references to his great deeds in Chizkiyahu’s prayer. Now the Gemara uses these very same words to point out his shortcomings. In referring to his past deeds, Chizkiyahu calls undue attention to himself. Rather, like Moshe, he should have invoked the deeds of his forefathers, so as not to look arrogant. Chizkiyahu is punished for this deed in that God makes no reference to Chizkiyahu in declaring the coming salvation. Chizkiyahu’s emphasis on his own deeds is a further expression of his own self-confidence and his conviction that he could change his circumstances through his own actions. At times, this approach is superior to the quietism and caution advocated by the prophets and rabbis. Sometimes, however, this attitude is simply hubris.