YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #11: The Period of Yarovam, Uziyahu, Pekach, and Achaz (4a)**

**Prophecies of “On that day”**

Yeshayahu’s prophecy in Chapter 7 includes five sections describing the anticipated conquest, the complete Assyrian domination, the destruction, and the desolation. These were already described briefly in Chapters 5-6, but the description here is more immediate and realistic, and makes explicit mention of Assyria.

The prophet describes the Assyrian takeover by means of four images:

1. **Flies from Egypt and bees from Assyria**

And it shall come to pass **on that day** that the Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the furthest part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they shall come, and shall rest all of them in the rugged valleys, and in the holes of the rocks, and upon all thorns, and upon all brambles. (*Yeshayahu* 7:18-19)

The first image is one of swarms of bees and flies, which will come to land in every place, in every corner, and on every tree and thornbush.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In his prophecy, Yeshayahu undermines both options being considered in Yehuda and in Israel: a coalition with Egypt (continuing the direction of Retzin and Pekach) against Assyria, or submission and acceptance of Assyrian patronage. Both options, to the prophet’s view, will lead to the same result: Assyrian domination of Israel and Yehuda.

1. **A hired razor**

**On that day**, the Lord shall shave with a razor for hire in the parts beyond the river – (i.e.,) with the king of Assyria – the head and the hair of the feet; and it shall also wipe out the beard. (Ibid. 20)

The second image is one of shaving. In the ancient world, the Egyptians were clean-shaven, while the Semitic nations prided themselves on their beards. The stories of David’s wars include an episode of shaming by means of shaving: the messengers David sent to the king of the children of Amon were suspected of being spies; the king shaved off half of their beards and also maimed their private parts. The men were “very ashamed” and David instructed them to stay in Yericho “until your beards are grown, and then return.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The kings of Assyria, especially, sported meticulously trimmed beards, as represented on their statues and monuments. With this background, we can understand the idea of shaving as a grave humiliation: God is bringing the king of Assyria from the other side of the River[[3]](#footnote-3) like a hired barber, to shave with a razor all the hair in Israel and Yehuda; even the beard, the symbol of dignity, would be “wiped away.”

1. **Abundance of curd and honey**

And it shall be **on that day** that a man shall rear a young cow, and two sheep. And it shall come to pass that for the abundance of milk that they shall give, he shall eat curd, for curd and honey shall every one eat that is left in the midst of the land. (Ibid. 21-22)

The idea of a remnant has already appeared twice in *Yeshayahu*: in the vision of the *sukka* with the clouds of glory over “him that is left in Tzion and he that remains in Jerusalem,”[[4]](#footnote-4) and at the conclusion of the vision of desolation with the departure of the Divine presence, “if there be yet a tenth in it… so the holy seed shall be the stock thereof.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, the reference to “every one that is left in the midst of the land” is a third appearance.

Attention should be paid to the heavy irony in the blessing: from amidst the abandoned vineyards, and the fields that will be overgrown with briars and thorns, there shall be new growth. This naturalistic blessing, not dependent in any way on human exertion and effort, is the blessing of Eretz Yisrael, known to us as “flowing with milk and honey.” The few who will remain in the land will drink the milk of beasts that will roam freely, and will eat sweet fruits, and the honey of bees in the forest, all of which will grow back on its own. The admirable agriculture of Eretz Yisrael that developed after deforestation, will disappear, and the natural forest will grow back and take over. This is an idyllic picture that comes after catastrophe: the remnant of a nation will be sustained by the free abundance of the earth, and not from mankind’s subjugation of it.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. **Desolation of the settled land**

And it shall be **on that day**, that every place where there were a thousand vines worth a thousand pieces of silver – shall be [a place of] briars and thorns. With arrows and with bow shall one come there, because all the land shall be briars and thorns. And all the hills that were dug with the hoe – you shall not come there, for fear of briars and thorns, but it shall be for the sending forth of oxen and for the treading of sheep. (Ibid. 23-25)

These verses only seem to contradict the previous ones, which promised natural abundance to the remnant left behind. The children of Israel and Yehuda had turned the mountains into a developed agricultural region, full of vines. This region would now be completely overrun with natural growth, with hunters venturing in to hunt wild animals. Wherever farmers remain in the mountains, tending their remaining plots with hoes so they will not become overgrown with thorns, abandoned oxen and sheep will roam freely and trample the vines.

**The Assyrian conquest of Israel and the beginning of exile**

Since the Exodus from Egypt and the beginning of the conquest and settlement of the ancestral land, there had been many struggles and divisions between the tribes of Israel, but there had not been exile. There had been a united kingdom that later split into two kingdoms, but there had been no great Destruction. For at least around six hundred years, the tribes of Israel had lived in their land.

With the Assyrian conquest, everything changed.

Since then, for some 2,750 years, *Am Yisrael* has been dispersed in the exiles of Assyria, the Caucuses, and Babylonia; Yemen, Persia, and India; Egypt and Ethiopia; Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco; Spain, France, and Germany; Syria and Turkey; Greece and Rome; Poland and Lithuania; Russia, America, and more. It is only in the last few generations that we have witnessed the miracle of the ingathering of the exiles, with the annihilation of the European Diaspora – and still only approximately half of the Jewish People is rebuilding the Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael.

The exile began in the Galilee and in Gil’ad:

In the days of Pekach, king of Israel, came Tiglat-Pileser, king of Assyria, and he took Iyon, and Avel Beit Maakha, and Yanoach, and Kedesh, and Chatzor, and Gil’ad, and the Galilee, and all the land of Naftali, and he carried them captive to Assyria. (*Melakhim* II 15:29)

The information we have from Scripture, as well as from Assyrian inscriptions, allows us to trace the path of the Assyrian campaign in 732 B.C.E.[[7]](#footnote-7) Their sophisticated army set off southward from Lebanon, along the Beqaa Valley, via Iyon, Avel Beit Maakha and Kedesh, and then appears to have split: one party headed via the Beit Netofa valley toward the coast,[[8]](#footnote-8) while the other continued southward through the Jordan Valley to Chatzor and the Kinneret, and then went up from there to the eastern side of the Jordan to conquer Gil’ad. The conquest of Gil’ad was considered one of the highlights of the campaign, since this was Pekach’s stronghold in the alliance with Retzin and Damesek against the Assyrian advance. The campaign in the direction of the eastern side of the Jordan is recorded in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

The sons of Reuven, the first-born of Israel: Chanokh and Palu, Chetzron and Karmi… Be’era his son, who was carried away captive by Tilgat-Pileser, king of Assyria – he was prince of the Reuvenites. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 5:3-6)

Tiglat-Pileser, the first Assyrian king to invade the kingdom of Israel, immediately implemented a policy of deportation of the vanquished population.[[9]](#footnote-9) The conquest of the Galil and Gil’ad marked the beginning of the exile of the ten tribes comprising the kingdom of Israel. According to Assyrian inscriptions, more than 13,000 inhabitants were deported from this area. There must certainly have been many more who fled in advance, for fear of the advancing enemy and the collapse of administrative systems. The inscriptions give no hint of population exchanges, which were practiced elsewhere – including, a few years later, in Sargon’s campaign in Shomron. Perhaps Tiglat-Pileser was not interested in engaging in settlement of the Galil, attaching no special importance to the area. In his eyes, the important routes led from Damesek toward the coast (Tyre), and from there southward to the land of the Pelishtim and to Egypt.[[10]](#footnote-10) Archaeological findings indeed indicate that the Lower Galilee was laid waste and was not resettled or rehabilitated for a very long time afterwards.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thus, Hoshea’s first prophecy,[[12]](#footnote-12) foretelling how “the bow of Israel” would be broken in “the valley of Yizre’el,” was fulfilled.

The kingdom of Israel had now shrunk to occupy only Shomron, the hills of Menashe and Efraim. This truncated kingdom was surrounded by three areas that had become Assyrian satrapies, which were listed in the Assyrian records by their capitals: Megiddo (which included the valleys of the north and the Galilee); Dor (which included the Sharon, all the way to Philistia); and Gil’ad (the other side of the Jordan). The region of the hills of Efraim continued as an independent framework only thanks to the Israeli capitulation to Assyria, with the assassination of Pekach ben Remalyahu at the hand of Hoshea ben Ela, with the blessing of the Assyrian conquerors and under their patronage:

And Hoshea, son of Ela, made a conspiracy against Pekach, son of Remalyahu, and smote him, and slew him, and reigned in his stead, in the twentieth year of Yotam, son of Uziya. (*Melakhim* II 15:30)

**The kingdoms of Israel and Yehuda under Assyrian domination**

Tiglat-Pileser did not trouble his troops to actually physically occupy the Shomron hills; he was content to rule from afar. With his help – and seemingly at his instigation – Hoshea ben Ela seized control in Shomron, assassinated Pekach, and turned the kingdom of Shomron into an Assyrian protectorate. Assyrian inscriptions indicate that Tiglat-Pileser set the rules in Shomron:

I conquered the entire land of the House of Omri […] I brought their spoils to the land of Assyria. They took down Pekach, their king, and I made Hoshea king over them […] I extracted 10 talents (*kikar*) of gold, 100 talents of silver, and brought them to the land of Assyria.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Hoshea, son of Ela, gave a tribute to Tiglat-Pileser in his 15th year (731 B.C.E.), while the Assyrian army was busy waging war against Babylonia. Later, we find him giving tribute to Shalmanesser (V):

Against him came up Shalmanesser, king of Assyria; and Hoshea became his servant, and brought him presents. (*Melakhim* II 17:3)

At a certain stage, Hoshea tried (perhaps under domestic pressure) to rebel against Shalmanesser by conspiring with So,[[14]](#footnote-14) king of Egypt:

And the king of Assyria found conspiracy in Hoshea, for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and offered no present to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year… (*Melakhim* II 17:4).

**Achaz’s surrender to Ashur: “I am your servant and your son”**

From the beginning of the rebellion by Retzin and Pekach, Yeshayahu had been trying with all his might to halt the political disintegration – on one hand, to prevent the people of Yehuda from joining the rebellious coalition, while on the other hand, keeping King Achaz from surrendering to Assyria. Yeshayahu maintained that the Assyrian chariots should be left to charge in the direction of Aram and Israel, on the way to Philistia and Egypt, since they were not directed towards Yehuda. It would be enough that the Assyrians would know Yehuda had stood firm against Pekach and Retzin.

Ultimately, Achaz was unable to hold out, and capitulated to Assyria.

The delegation that he dispatched to Assyria went further than just surrendering. Achaz did not only present himself as the servant of the king of Assyria, but emphasized his all-encompassing dedication to the Assyrian Empire, setting off for Damesek to participate in the victory rituals honoring Tiglat-Pileser (including the Assyrian gods along with local ones[[15]](#footnote-15)):

So Achaz sent messengers to Tiglat-Pileser, king of Assyria, saying: I am your servant and your son; come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, who rise up against me. And Achaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king’s house, and sent it for a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria acquiesced to him, and the king of Assyria went up against Damesek, and took it, and carried the people of it captive to Kir, and slew Retzin. And king Achaz went to Damesek to meet Tiglat-Pileser, king of Assyria… (*Melakhim* II 16:7-10)

In addressing the king, Achaz refers to himself as “your servant and your son.” In Assyrian inscriptions that attest to subjugation of other nations to the Assyrian Empire and its rule, the expression “your servant” is usually used; sometimes we find “your son,” indicating a degree of closeness and a request for patronage. The expression “your servant and your son” is unique; it indicates that Achaz appealed to Tiglat-Pileser not only as a servant to his master, but also as a son pleading before his father.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Scripture’s description of the great Assyrian king acquiescing to the request of Achaz, king of Yehuda, seems exaggerated: Tiglat-Pileser was already on his way to Aram-Damesek and to Eretz Yisrael, as part of his overall strategy to seize dominion over the entire area; he did not need Achaz’s request for patronage. At most, the Assyrian king could use Achaz’s surrender and his request as proof of how positive and desirable Assyrian rule was in the eyes of the kings of this region. Perhaps the description is meant to reflect Achaz’s perspective, from Jerusalem: he believed that he had “succeeded” in saving Yehuda, and now no one could call the wisdom of his surrender into question.

The kingdom of Israel had begun to fall apart, while at the same time, Yehuda had capitulated to the Assyrian conqueror and had survived (at least, as Achaz saw it), having abandoned faith in the God of Israel, His Torah, and His prophets.

Yeshayahu’s great struggle had not borne fruit.

**The prophet secludes himself among his disciples**

After Achaz’s move, Yeshayahu can do nothing more but seclude himself among his disciples and children – to contemplate the approaching darkness and the failure of both the rebel-believers and the despairing heretics, and to prepare the leadership of the next generation from among his disciples and children:

Bind up the testimony; seal the instruction among my disciples. And I will wait for the Lord, Who hides His face from the house of Yaakov, and I will place my hope in Him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me shall be for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts, Who dwells in Mount Tzion. (*Yeshayahu* 8:16-18)

Yeshayahu understands that now is a time of the “hiding of God’s face,” and he begins to redefine the objectives of his prophecy. Until this point, he has directed all his energy toward persuading the king to halt the deterioration; having failed in that mission, his new message is, “I will wait for the Lord… I will place my hope in Him.” This prophetic spark of light and hope in a place of complete darkness represents a great innovation. Yeshayahu’s prophecy became a formative model for the prophets who followed him.

**The end of Achaz’s reign: Israel and Yehuda under Assyrian rule**

From the moment that Yehuda and Israel became subservient to Assyria, both kingdoms maintained a low profile – at least so long as Tiglat-Pileser ruled. Assyria completed its conquest of the region and then turned to the north, to continue its campaign against Babylonia.

The years that are lost to us and of which there is no biblical record – from the surrender until the death of Achaz (735-727 B.C.E.) – can easily be understood as a period in which the inhabitants of Jerusalem were drawn after the king’s pagan revolution, while those who feared God and remained loyal to Him secluded themselves.

While Jerusalem no longer had any economic influence in the periphery (neither in Eilat and Edom in the south, nor in Philistia in the west, nor in Gil’ad in the east), at least its inhabitants could breathe easy. All the kingdoms that had rebelled against Assyria had collapsed, one after the next: the stronghold of Aram-Damesek had been conquered; the Galil and Gil’ad had fallen into the hands of the Assyrians and their inhabitants were deported; Philistia had been attacked, and Gaza defeated – but Jerusalem had survived, by displaying loyalty to the dominant power. Achaz appeared to many as a wise king who had managed to quiet the nationalist camp and to lead Yehuda on a path that had admittedly ended with submission, but at least not with death. The surrender opened the door to Assyrian cultural influence, along with its entire pagan religious system. It would seem that many inhabitants of Jerusalem forsook their faith and beliefs and aligned themselves with King Achaz.

Those who feared God – including some within the royal palace – apparently kept their heads down and maintained low visibility, like Yeshayahu and his group of disciples.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The bee and wasp were considered royal Egyptian symbols in ancient times. This opens the door to an interesting interpretation of the verses in the Torah: “And I will send the hornet before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite, from before you” (*Shemot* 23:28); “Moreover the Lord your God will send the hornet among them, until they that are left, and they that hide themselves, perish from before you” (*Devarim* 7:20). These verses would seem to be referring to Egyptian war campaigns, especially in the Canaanite areas in the lowlands and the valleys. These campaigns, which were a prominent feature of the Canaanite period in *Eretz Yisrael*, weakened the Canaanites and intensified their reliance on Egypt. In *Yeshayahu*, the situation has reversed: the Egyptians are now “flies” and Assyria is the “bee” – in other words, the ruling power. This hints that Egypt will be incapable of repelling the Assyrians, and all attempts to rely on Egypt will end in disaster for Israel and for Yehuda. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Shmuel* II 10:4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In Mesopotamia, the lands lying to the south of the Euphrates – Syria and *Eretz Yisrael* – were known as “the parts beyond the River.” Hence, the expression actually has dual meaning: the king of Assyria would come from the other side of the River to conquer the lands that were (in his view, and in his language) “the parts beyond the River,” and would “shave” them. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Yeshayahu* 4:3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. 6:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. B. Oppenheimer, “*Yichud Tefisato ha-Historit shel Yeshayahu*,” *Chug Beit Ha-Nasi* I, pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a detailed description, see Y. Aharoni, *Eretz Yisrael bi-Tekufat ha-Mikra*, Jerusalem 5748, pp. 283ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The “way of the sea” – *Yeshayahu* 8:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a detailed description of the exiles of Assyria, from the early days of the empire until its demise, see N. Neeman, “*Shinuyei Ukhlusin be-Eretz Yisrael be-Ikvot ha-Haglayot ha-Ashuriyot*,” *Katedra* 54 (5750), p. 43-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. H. Tadmor, “*Kibbushei ha-Galil bi-Yedei Tilgat-Pilasar ha-Shelishi Melekh Ashur*,” H.Z. Hirschberg (ed.), *Kol Eretz Naftali*, Jerusalem 5728, pp. 62-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tz. Gal, *Ha-Galil ha-Tachton bi-Tekufat ha-Barzel*, Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 5743, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Hoshea* 1:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot Historiot me-Ashur u-Bavel*, pp. 44-46. This represents Assyrian confirmation of the coronation of Hoshea as an Assyrian vassal. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It would appear that So is the biblical name for Sais, the capital of Lower Egypt. Its king was Tefnakht, founder of the 24th dynasty. See Y. Ef’al, *Ha-Historia shel Eretz Yisrael: Yisrael vi-Yehuda bi-Tekufat ha-Mikra*, Jerusalem, 1998, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Melakhim* II 16:7-18; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 28:16-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. M. Kogan and Ch. Tadmor, “*Achaz ve-Tiglat Pileser be-Sefer Melakhim*,” *Eretz Yisrael* 14, pp. 59-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)