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 #12: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (1)**

Tiglat-Pileser III, the great Assyrian conqueror, and Achaz, the king of Yehuda who surrendered to him, died in the same year (727 B.C.E.). Shalmanesser V was not like his father, and rebellions broke out in northern Syria and Phoenicia. Shalmanesser conquered the Aramean kingdoms in northern Syria, but Tyre (at that time, an island about one kilometer from the mainland) held out against the Assyrian superpower, which inspired defiance elsewhere. The winds of insurrection influenced Shomron as well, and Hoshea ben Ela rebelled against Assyria, aided by So, king of Egypt – leading Shomron to destruction. Shalmanesser laid siege to Shomron for three years,[[1]](#footnote-1) died suddenly in the midst of the siege, and was succeeded by Sargon II (seemingly his younger brother), who conquered Shomron and exiled its inhabitants.

The final years of Israelite Shomron are reflected in the prophecies of Hoshea (Chapters 7-12) and Yeshayahu (Chapter 28), describing the aimlessness of an intoxicated, sleepy leadership, with everything going up in flames – with Hoshea displaying love for the children of “Efraim” who have remained in the land.

The death of Achaz in Yehuda (together with the death of Tiglat-Pileser) opened the door to internal religious and spiritual reawakening, in the spirit of Yeshayahu. This was one of the most important revolutions in the history of Jerusalem and the house of David, and in the history of the Jewish People.

It seems that Chizkiyahu was a close disciple of Yeshayahu, who fraternized with the royal house. At the same time, the prophet Mikha was emerging in the lowland of Yehuda, receiving prophecies from Yeshayahu but molding them in a less universal and more national style. A large portion of the prophecies of Yeshayahu and Mikha reflect the reign of Chizkiyahu.

For instance, Mikha is known as continuing on from Yeshayahu in a vision of the “end of days”[[2]](#footnote-2) in which he uses Yeshayahu’s language,[[3]](#footnote-3) with some slight changes, and also makes a significant addition:

And they shall sit, each man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples shall go, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the Name of the Lord our God forever and ever. (*Mikha* 4:4-5)

This addition introduces a tone that is slightly different from the universal scope of Yeshayahu. Mikha emphasizes the separateness of the faith of Israel and the reign of King Shlomo as an ideal,[[4]](#footnote-4) while Yeshayahu offers sharp criticism of the silver and gold,[[5]](#footnote-5) the horses and chariots, and the foreign gods that Shlomo’s wives brought with them.

**Chizkiyahu’s revolution – restoring the ancient glory**

**Achaz’s burial**

The death of King Achaz is documented in different sources in different ways:

In *Sefer Melakhim*, his death and burial are recorded with the same formula used for the kings of Yehuda who preceded him:

And Achaz slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the City of David, and his son, Chizkiyahu, reigned in his stead. (*Melakhim* II 16:20)

*Divrei ha-Yamim* records a different tradition:

And Achaz slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city, in Jerusalem, for they did not bring him into the sepulchers of the kings of Israel. And Chizkiyahu, his son, reigned in his stead. (*Divrei ha-Yamim* II 28:27)

A third tradition, recorded by the Sages of the Mishna, is worded even more sharply than the one in *Divrei ha-Yamim*. It describes Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, as having “dragged the bones of his father on a bed of ropes.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Purification of the Temple**

Chizkiyahu began to reign when he was twenty-five years old, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem, and his mother’s name was Aviya, daughter of Zekharyahu…

He, in the first year of his reign, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them.

And he brought in the *kohanim* and the *leviim*, and gathered them together into the broad place on the east,

And said to them: Hear me, O *leviim*: now sanctify yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord, the God of your fathers, and remove the filth out of the holy place.

For our fathers have acted treacherously, and have done that which was evil in the sight of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs.

Also they have shut the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense nor offered burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel.

Therefore the wrath of the Lord was upon Yehuda and Jerusalem, and He has delivered them to be a horror, an astonishment, and a hissing, as you see with your eyes.

For behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity, because of this.

Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that His fierce anger may turn away from us. (*Divrei ha-Yamim* II 29:1-10)

*Sefer Melakhim* does not paint such a drastic image of closing the Temple in the time of Achaz after its defilement with (pagan?!) impurity. However, it does mention dramatic changes made at Achaz’s instigation.

Let us first consider the end of the description there, the damaging of the landmark symbols instituted by King Shlomo in the Temple courtyard,[[7]](#footnote-7) and then the construction of a new altar[[8]](#footnote-8) fashioned after the triumphal altar of Tiglat-Pileser in Damesek, which celebrated the conquest and the slaying of Retzin, leader of the rebellion:

And king Achaz cut off the borders of the bases, and removed the laver from off them; and took down the sea from off the brazen oxen that were under it, and put it upon a pavement of stone.

And the covered place for Shabbat that they had built in the House, and the king's entry outside, he turned to the house of the Lord, because of the king of Assyria.

And king Achaz went to Damesek to meet Tiglat-Pileser king of Assyria, and saw the altar that was at Damesek; and king Achaz sent to Uriya the Kohen the fashion of the altar, and the pattern of it, according to all its workmanship.

And Uriya the Kohen built an altar; according to all that king Achaz had sent from Damesek, so did Uriya the Kohen make it for the coming of king Achaz from Damesek.

And when the king came from Damesek, the king saw the altar; and the king drew near to the altar, and offered upon it.

And he offered his burnt-offering and his meal-offering, and poured his drink-offering, and dashed the blood of his peace-offerings against the altar.

And the bronze altar, which was before the Lord, he brought from the forefront of the house, from between his altar and the house of the Lord, and put it on the north side of his altar.

And king Achaz commanded Uriya the kohen, saying: “Upon the great altar offer the morning burnt-offering, and the evening meal-offering, and the king's burnt-offering, and his meal-offering, with the burnt-offering of all the people of the land, and their meal-offering, and their drink-offerings; and dash against it all the blood of the burnt-offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice; but the bronze altar shall be for me to look to.” (*Melakhim* II 16:10-18)

Since the major changes that Achaz introduces in the Temple are all in the courtyard, while no mention is made of the Sanctuary itself, it is not difficult to complete the picture based on the description from *Divrei ha-Yamim*: the Sanctuary is closed, and everything King Shlomo had done to represent God’s Presence in the courtyard is broken. The altar “which was before the Lord” is placed “on the north side of his (new) altar”; it is no longer used for worship unless the king so desires. The new altar expresses the subservience of the sacrificial worship in Jerusalem to the complete sovereignty of the king of Assyria. This was something that the kings of Assyria had never demanded of vassal kings.

The one atrocity not mentioned here is the placing of an idol – one of the Assyrian gods – inside the Sanctuary. Perhaps Achaz was careful not to cross this ultimate red line, out of concern that it would provoke a dangerous level of dissent. However, the changes that he made were enough to effect a complete transformation of the Temple service, expressing the end of the period when the God of Israel rested His Presence in the Temple as an independent Sovereign; the king’s actions made an announcement, as it were, that “the Lord has forsaken the land.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It is interesting that although the cutting off of the bases comes many generations before God shows Yechezkel a vision of the keruvim departing from the Temple, the two images have similar meaning.

Another interesting discovery, this time with an Assyrian source, is the lists of Tiglat-Pileser[[10]](#footnote-10) in which Achaz is referred to as Yehoachaz, king of Yehuda. Indeed, the name “Yehoachaz” (like “Achazya”)[[11]](#footnote-11) sounds appropriate for kings of Israel and Yehuda (far more appropriate than “Achaz”). Therefore, we may assume that the Tanakh deliberately omits the suffix of the Divine Name from the name of the king who cut off God’s Name from His Sanctuary. (Another possibility is that Achaz himself cut his own name short.)

Against this background, we can well understand Chizkiyahu’s initiative immediately upon ascending the throne[[12]](#footnote-12) – namely, purification of the Temple – opening the Sanctuary and renewing the service of the Lord God of Israel in purity. The crushing of the bronze serpent into powder may be considered part of this purification, since at this point the serpent would certainly also have been viewed as a pagan abomination.

**The crushing of the bronze serpent**

For generations, a bronze plate in the shape of a serpent had hung in the Temple courtyard. According to tradition, it had been preserved by the *kohanim* from the time of Moshe and was the same “bronze serpent… atop a pole” that the Torah says was prescribed by God[[13]](#footnote-13) for those bitten by the plague of serpents in the wilderness, healing them when they looked up to it:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Make for yourself a fiery serpent, and place it upon a pole, and it shall be that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, he shall live. So Moshe made a bronze serpent, and set it upon the pole, and it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten someone, when he looked at the serpent of bronze, he lived. (*Bamidbar* 21:8-9)

Now, hundreds of years after David and Shlomo,[[14]](#footnote-14) the young Chizkiyahu chose to take this artifact and crush it into powder – a powerful symbol of a revolution that sought to abolish any aspect or component of religious ritual that was not a pure, clean element of the service of the God of Israel. Even phenomena that had been part of the social landscape for hundreds of years could no longer be tolerated after Achaz’s pagan turn. Thus, everyone got a clear message that the new king had no intention of continuing the idolatrous Assyrian cult that had been embraced in Jerusalem.

**Removal of the high places**

After these initial moves, which made the new king’s direction clear to everyone, Chizkiyahu decided to move on to the next and more difficult stage of his religious revolution. For hundreds of years, the people had “offered sacrifices and incense on *bamot* (high places),” in contravention of the Torah’s explicit command that Divine worship be carried out only at one central place “where the Lord will cause His Name to dwell” – meaning, to gather at a central point: either the Mishkan or the Temple.[[15]](#footnote-15) Nevertheless, the people continued to practice a form of local worship at public *bamot* throughout the country. There is clear evidence of Chizkiyahu’s revolution in the archaeological findings at Tel Arad, Tel Sheva, and Tel Lakhish.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Like the bronze serpent, which had existed (apparently within the Temple) throughout the period of the monarchy, with no one taking action to remove it, so *bamot* were used throughout this period in all the cities of Yehuda, and none of the kings of Yehuda had acted against them. The prohibition had existed but had not been enforced. The population had always preferred a “miniature sanctuary” in the place where they lived, just as they want a synagogue[[17]](#footnote-17) in every community (for thousands of years), and the kings of Yehuda preferred to turn a blind eye.

In Chizkiyahu’s revolution, nothing was ignored; no phenomenon was too big or too small to tackle. Faith in “One God” demands one single Temple. Along with the ritual, religious aspect of the removal of the *bamot* and the struggle over the purification of Divine service, Chizkiyahu’s actions also advanced a national objective of fortifying the status of the house of David, and of Jerusalem, especially in view of the collapse of the kingdom of Israel in Shomron.

It appears that Chizkiyahu continued his father’s foreign policy, ruling over Yehuda as an Assyrian vassal state, without taking part in the rebellions of the surrounding nations. At the same time, he started to appeal to the hearts of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to bring them back to God. Achaz, we recall, had abandoned God of his own initiative – not under pressure from the Assyrians, who did not force their pagan cut on the lands that they conquered. Chizkiyahu was therefore able to carry out his religious reforms without fear of Assyrian intervention, so long as he continued paying the tax demanded of him as a vassal king.

**The pronouncement of Philistia “in the year of the death of King Achaz”**

In the year that King Achaz died was this pronouncement:

Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you, because the rod that smote you is broken [the conqueror is dead]; for out of the serpent’s root shall come forth a basilisk, and his fruit [successor] shall be a flying serpent.

And the firstborn of the poor shall feed, and the needy shall lie down in safety [in the territory of Philistia], and I will kill your root with famine, and your remnant shall be slain.

Howl, O gate; cry, O city; melt away, O Philistia, all of you; for there comes a smoke from the north [the conqueror returns], and there is no straggler in its ranks.

What then shall one answer the messengers of the nation [who seek help and salvation]: That the Lord has founded Tzion, and in her shall the afflicted of His people take refuge. (*Yeshayahu* 14:28-32)

The date given here is the year of the death of Achaz, and the prophet is speaking out against the rejoicing heard from Philistia. He tells them: do not be in such a hurry to celebrate. If you thought “the rod that smote you is broken,” know that “out of the serpent’s root shall come forth a basilisk.”

Of all of Yeshayahu’s prophecies that include an explicit chronological framework, this prophecy is considered the most complicated to identify in time. During the reign of Uziyahu, Yehuda ruled over Philistia,[[18]](#footnote-18) but by the time of Achaz, Philistia had freed itself of this domination.[[19]](#footnote-19) After Achaz’s death, in the time of Chizkiyahu, the army of Yehuda once again smote Philistia “as far as Aza and its borders, from the tower of the watchmen to the fortified city.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This was a decisive factor in Sancheriv’s campaign against the rebellious Yehuda.

Hence, the celebration of the Philistines cannot be linked to the fact of Achaz’s death, as though it were he who was the rod that smote them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

It seems, then, that “the year of the death of King Achaz” actually points to the death of Tiglat-Pileser, which was in the same year.[[22]](#footnote-22) According to this view, the Philistine rejoicing arose because they hoped to be free of the Assyrian yoke with the death of the great conqueror. Similar waves of hope and rebellion erupted among other nations, including the kingdom of Israel, in the time of Hoshea ben Ela.

The prophet’s message puts an end to the joy in Philistia, and in Shomron: “For out of the serpent’s [Tiglat-Pileser’s] root shall come forth a basilisk [Shalmanesser], “and his fruit [successor] shall be a flying serpent” – referring to Sargon, who intensified the cruelty of his father’s conquests.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Translated by Kaeren Fish







1. *Melakhim* II 17:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mikha* 4:1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Yeshayahu – ke-Tzipporim Afot*, pp. 244-246; 293-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Melakhim* I 5:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Yeshayahu* 2:6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This tradition appears in the Tosefta, and from there was incorporated in all printings of the Mishna *Masekhet Pesachim*, at the end of Chapter 4 (see Bavli *Berakhot* 10b; *Pesachim* 56a). See Y. N. Epstein, *Mavo le-Nusach ha-Mishna*, Jerusalem 5708, pp. 950-951. Rashi on *Pesachim* explains Chizkiyahu’s action as follows: “[He did so] for the sake of atonement, and did not bury him with [the usual] honor, on a more respectable litter, for the sake of sanctifying God’s Name – that [Achaz] might be held in disdain for his wickedness, and that all the wicked might be discomforted.” Some scholars suggest that the dragging of his father’s bones was in preparation for the day of the gathering of the bones, as practiced during the Second Temple Period. According to this view, we might explain that Achaz was buried in the sepulcher of his forefathers, but his bones were then taken to be buried among the graves of ordinary citizens. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Melakhim* II 16:17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. 10-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Yechezkel* 8:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See A. Demsky, *Madrikh bi-Mekorot Chitzoniim le-Toldot Yisrael bi-Yemei ha-Mikra*, 5742, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See “Achazyahu ben Achav” (*Melakhim* I 22:52); “Ahazyahu ben Yehoram, king of Yehuda” (*Melakhim* II 8:25); “Yehoachaz ben Yehu upon Israel” (*Melakhim* II 13:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We will treat the description in *Divrei ha-Yamim* as including two separate events, separated in time: the first is the purification of the Temple immediately upon Chizkiyahu’s assumption of the throne; the second is the Pesach that was celebrated together with the tribes of the north during Chizkiyahu’s second coronation, after the destruction of Shomron. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As I understand it, looking up at the bronze serpent atop the pole forced the victims to freeze in place and stop moving, and this is what saved them. It is well known that agitation of the body after being bitten by a snake accelerates the spread of the poison in the bloodstream. Since a great many of Bnei Yisrael were bitten, in different parts of the camp, the only way to stop the tumult (quite understandable, in view of the pain and fear) of those bitten was to have them all stop in their tracks and look up at the “bronze serpent.” However, in the time of Achaz – perhaps even beforehand – the bronze serpent (*nachash ha-nechoshet*) became an idol that was worshiped in its own right and was called “Nechushtan” (*Melakhim* II 18:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Chazal* ask how it is possible that throughout the period of the monarchy, none of the righteous kings of Yehuda acted to remove the serpent. The answer the Gemara arrives at is that “It must be that his ancestors left something undone whereby he (Chizkiyahu) might distinguish himself” (Bavli *Chullin* 6b). Radak offers a more rationalist explanation: “This serpent had been there since the time of Moshe, as a memorial to the miracle, like the container of manna. And [kings] Asa and Yehoshafat did not destroy it as they destroyed all other forms of idolatry, because during their reigns they did not find that people were worshipping and offering incense to this serpent, so they left it, as a memorial to the miracle.” In Radak’s view, then, it was only in Achaz’s time that this bronze serpent became an object of idolatrous worship. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Contrary to the conventional view in biblical scholarship, Chapter 12 of *Sefer Devarim* actually offers a range of possibilities for “the place which the Lord shall choose… from all your tribes,” or “in one of your tribes,” “to place His Name there” or “to cause His Name to dwell there,” or simply, “which the Lord your God shall choose.” This fluidity matches the period of the settlement of the land and then the period of the judges, up until the institution of the monarchy, when the religious center was still moving around and not fixed to a particular geographical spot. Jerusalem is not mentioned anywhere in *Sefer Devarim*; it is one of the possibilities of “the place” that will be chosen “from all of your tribes,” and indeed so Rashi understands it (commenting on *Devarim* 12:9, 13), following *Chazal*’s teaching (*Zevachim* 119). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A small horned altar was found at the gate of Lakhish, with the horns having been broken off at the time of Chizkiyahu (see photograph below). A splendid horned altar discovered at the Tel Sheva fortress (north of Be’er Sheva), fashioned out of cut stone (in contravention of Torah law; see *Shemot* 20:21), had been taken apart and hidden in a storehouse during the time of Chizkiyahu; see *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Chadasha le-Chafirot* (A. Stern ed.), Jerusalem 1992, vol I., p. 140 (see photograph below). For more about a similar altar (built according to the measurements stated in the Torah, *Shemot* 27:1) hidden at Tel Arad, see Z. Herzog, “*Tel ha-Metzudot be-Arad*,*”* in *Arad*, Tel Aviv 1997, pp. 182-209. See Prof. Yehuda Elitzur’s comments on this finding in *Proceedings of the 12th World Congress of Jewish Studies,* 5757 vol. I, Jerusalem 5759 (see also the photograph below). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. If the offering of sacrifices at *bamot* is outlawed, then what remains might be a synagogue. To my mind, the synagogue was indeed born out of a compromise between the law of the Torah, which prohibits sacrifice “in every place that you see” (*Devarim* 12:13), and the natural need to serve God in every place where God’s servants live. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Divrei ha-Yamim* II 26:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. 28:18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Melakhim* II 18:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Both Rashi and Radak maintain that there is no connection between the death of Achaz and the rejoicing of the Philistines, which had begun after the death of Uziyahu and now, with the death of Achaz, merely intensified, in view of the humiliation of Yehuda. One hypothesis suggests that there were additional battles fought between Philistia and Yehuda, in which King Achaz increased his burden on them, but these are not mentioned in the text (*Da’at Mikra*). However, this is difficult to accept, in light of the complete Assyrian control over both Philistia and Yehuda in the time of Achaz. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Commentary of *Olam ha-Tanakh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For a different commentary, which attributes the appellations “serpent” and “basilisk” to Uziyahu and Chizkiyahu, see Y. Ofer, “*Mi-Shoresh Nachash Yatza Tzefa*,” *Megadim* 1 (Nissan 5746), pp. 56-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)