YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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**Shiur #17: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (6)**

***Yeshayahu* 38: Chizkiyahu’s illness (712 B.C.E.)**

In both *Sefer Melakhim* and *Sefer Yeshayahu*, a severe illness that struck Chizkiyahu is described (with some differences) after the account of Sancheriv’s campaign (*Melakhim* II 20; *Yeshayahu* 38). However, the words of both king and prophet indicate that the illness actually appeared prior to the miraculous victory in Jerusalem.[[1]](#footnote-1) For other reasons as well (such as Chizkiyahu’s years of reign), it makes sense to place this unit in the middle of the period of uprisings of the neighboring nations against Assyria, and during the prophet’s struggle against the king’s thoughts of joining their rebellious coalition.

In those days, Chizkiyahu was sick to death. And Yeshayahu ben Amotz, the prophet, came to him, and said to him, “So says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.”

And he turned his face to the wall, and he prayed to the Lord, saying:

“Remember now, O Lord, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done that which is good in Your sight.” And Chizkiyahu wept a great weeping.

And it came to pass, before Yeshayahu had gone out of the inner court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying:

“Return and say to Chizkiyahu, the prince of My people: Thus says the Lord 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, from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of David, My servant.” (*Melakhim* II 20:1-6)

Even the most superficial reading of this unit conveys a sense of tension between the king and the prophet. Yeshayahu comes to the visit the king, who is deathly ill, and sentences him abruptly to death: “Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.” Yeshayahu shows no compassion and no sympathy; the king receives the full force of the attribute of strict justice. *Chazal* take note of the prophet’s harshness and sketch the background to Yeshayahu’s visit:

Rav Hamnuna said: What is the meaning of the verse, “Who is like the wise man, and who knows the interpretation [*pesher*] of the matter” (*Kohelet* 8:1)? The verse means: Who is like the Holy One, blessed be He, Who knows how to effect compromise [*peshara*] between two righteous individuals – i.e., between Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu?

Chizkiyahu said: Let Yeshayahu come to me – for so we find with regard to Eliyahu, who went to [king] Achav, as it is written, “And Eliyahu went to present himself to Achav” (*Melakhim* I 18:2). But Yeshayahu said: Let Chizkiyahu come to me – for so we find with regard to Yehoram, son of Achav, who went to Elisha (*Melakhim* II 3:12).

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He brought suffering upon Chizkiyahu, and then said to Yeshayahu, “Go and visit the sick” – as it is written, “In those days, Chizkiyahu was sick to death. And Yeshayahu ben Amotz, the prophet, came to him, and said to him, ‘So says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live…’” What is the meaning of [the seeming redundancy in the words] “For you shall die, and not live”? “You shall die” – in this world; “and not live” – in the world to come.

[Chizkiyahu] said to [Yeshayahu]: For what [reason am I being punished with] all of this?

He said to him: Because you did not engage in procreation.

[Chizkiyahu protested: It was] because I saw, with Divine inspiration, that the offspring that would emerge from me would not be virtuous.

[Yeshayahu] said to him: Why do you concern yourself with the secrets of the Holy One, blessed be He? That which you have been commanded – you are required to do, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do as He pleases.

[Chizkiyahu] said to [Yeshayahu]: Then give me your daughter [as a wife]; perhaps by the merit of both you and me, virtuous children will emerge from me.

[To which Yeshayahu] said: The decree has already been passed against you.

[Chizkiyahu then] said: Son of Amotz – cease your prophecy and leave! This is the tradition that I received from my grandfather’s house: “Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person’s neck, he should not desist from [praying for] mercy.” (*Berakhot* 10a)

Rav Hamnuna reflects the tension between Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu, though he does not explain its cause. In his understanding, God brought illness upon Chizkiyahu so that Yeshayahu would come to visit him, in fulfillment of the command to visit the sick, but the visit does not go smoothly and the king ends up banishing the prophet from the palace: “Cease your prophecy and leave!” Rav Hamnuna then introduces the prospect of Menashe, son of Chizkiyahu, who would ultimately take up the same evil path that Achaz had followed and thereby erase Chizkiyahu’s progress in improving the moral and religious state of the people.

The text conveys a very clear sense of the animosity between the two personalities. When Yeshayahu conveys his prophecy of the king’s imminent demise, Chizkiyahu does not react in any way to the Divine decree as conveyed by the prophet; rather, he turns his face to the wall and prays. The prophet starts making his way out of the palace, but is immediately called back to inform the king that his prayer has been accepted. We can imagine what Yeshayahu felt at that moment; the king has “bested” him by praying to God!

If we recall Yeshayahu’s ideological and political polemic against the king (in his “naked and barefoot” prophecy), we can fill in the picture by positing that at this time there was a sharp breaking off of relations between the king and the prophet. As long as Chizkiyahu was engaged in his religious revolution, pursuing the purification of Jerusalem and its expansion to take in the refugees of Efraim, Yeshayahu was behind him and embraced him as though he were Mashiach. But when the king started to show interest in the coalition of rebellion against Assyria, the prophet became his most strident opponent. The king continued to pursue his foreign policy, and the prophet continued his protest. Thus a schism formed between these two righteous individuals (as Rav Hamnuna refers to them).

Chizkiyahu's prayer – his direct appeal to God – is accepted. Not only is he told that he will be healed and granted an additional fifteen years of life, but God even promises him that Jerusalem will be protected: "For I will defend this city to save it….”[[2]](#footnote-2) From this moment onward, Chizkiyahu can be sure that God will not allow Jerusalem to be destroyed, "…for My sake and for the sake of David, My servant."[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, according to the account in *Sefer Melakhim*, Chizkiyahu has trouble believing in the dramatic success of his prayer, and asks God for a sign:

And Chizkiyahu said to Yeshayahu: What will be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I will go up to the house of the Lord on the third day?

And Yeshayahu said: This will be the sign for you from the Lord, that the Lord will do that which He has spoken: shall the shadow move forward ten levels, or go back ten levels?

And Chizkiyahu answered, It is a simple thing for the shadow to incline ten levels; no, but let the shadow return backward ten levels.

And Yeshayahu the prophet cried out to the Lord, and He brought the shadow backward, by which it had gone down on the steps of Achaz, by ten levels. (*Melakhim* II 20:8-11)

Yigael Yadin found a sundial matching this description in the Cairo Museum. It is a flat structure with steps leading down from it to the east and to the west, with a small wall at each end, adjacent to the bottom step.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the morning, the eastern wall casts a shadow on the eastern steps. As the sun climbs in the sky, the shadow falls gradually from the top step down to the bottom one, disappearing completely at midday. Over the course of the afternoon, the western wall casts its shadow on the western steps: first it is just on the bottom step, then it rises gradually all the way to the top. The shadow-clock of Achaz (and Chizkiyahu) evidently had ten steps on each side, abutting the southern or northern wall of some building.

It would seem that Yeshayahu spoke to Chizkiyahu at noon, when the shadow had already receded down all ten steps on the eastern side. The shadow-clock was bathed in sunlight; in the natural course of events, the shadow would now start to appear and then lengthen over the steps on the western side. Instead, the text records that God "brought backward the shadow, by which it had gone down on the steps of Achaz, by ten levels."

In the parallel account in *Sefer Yeshayahu*, the sign is offered at the prophet's initiative:

And this shall be the sign for you from the Lord that the Lord will do that which He has spoken: Behold, I will cause the shadow of the steps, which has descended on the steps (shadow-clock) of Achaz, to return backward ten steps. So the sun returned ten steps, by which steps it had gone down. (*Yeshayahu* 38:7-8)

*Sefer Yeshayahu* also records Chizkiyahu's song of thanksgiving:

The writing of Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, when he had been sick, and recovered from his sickness:

I said: In the noontide of my days I shall go to the gates of Sheol; I am deprived of the residue of my years.

I said: I shall not see the Lord, the Lord in the land of the living; I shall no more behold man, with the inhabitants of the world.

My habitation is plucked up and carried away from me like a shepherd's tent; I have rolled up my life like a weaver; He will cut me off from the thrum, from day to night You will make an end of me.

As I make myself like a lion until morning, so it breaks all my bones; from day to night You will make an end of me.

Like a swallow or a crane, so do I chatter; I moan like a dove, my eyes fail with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my surety.

What shall I say? He has spoken to me, and He Himself has performed it. I shall go softly all my years for the bitterness of my soul.

O Lord, by these things people live, and altogether therein is the life of my spirit; therefore recover me and cause me to live.

Behold, for my peace I had great bitterness, but You have in love delivered it from the pit of corruption, for You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

For Sheol cannot praise You, death cannot celebrate You; they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Your truth.

The living – the living – he shall praise You, as I do this day; the father of children shall make known Your truth.

The Lord is ready to save me, therefore we shall sing songs with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the house of the Lord. (*Yeshayahu* 38:9-20)

This song of praise concludes the episode of Chizkiyahu’s illness. He emerges triumphant over everything, even the prophet, singing a great song of life and viscerally aware of his direct connection with God – which can be even stronger and more reliable than the words of Yeshayahu the prophet.

**Chapter 39: The delegation from Babylonia**

After Chizkiyahu’s illness, a delegation arrives from Babylonia:

At that time, Merodach-Baladan, son of Baladan, king of Babylonia, sent a letter and a gift to Chizkiyahu, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

And Chizkiyahu was glad of them, and showed them 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 did not show them. (*Yeshayahu* 39:1-2)

In this account, Chizkiyahu received delegations of rebels against Assyria, and Yeshayahu reacts in the following verses with exceptional vehemence. This delegation from Babylonia is not intended solely as a friendly visit to a recently-recovered patient; in order to appreciate its significance, we need to understand the status of Babylonia in the eyes of the Assyrian Empire.[[5]](#footnote-5)

During the reign of Merodakh-Baladan (the second half of the 8th century B.C.E.), there were Chaldeans who occupied positions of influence in Babylonia. Merodakh was among them, and according to Assyrian sources, he was a prince of the house of Yakin and ruled over a Chaldean tribe not far from the delta of the rivers into the Persian Gulf. Merodakh might be viewed as a forerunner of the Babylonian-Chaldean leader who rose to prominence a century later – Nevukhadretzar. He was initially loyal to Assyria, but later unified the Chaldean tribes and tried to create a counter-balance to Assyrian dominance.

The process had started much earlier, in the time of Tiglat-Pileser (III), but at that time Merodakh was forced to yield to Assyria. After the death of Shalmanesser (V, 722 B.C.E.), Merodakh-Baladan believed that his moment had come. He forged ties with various political elements – with Eilam and with Arab tribes – reaching up to the outermost edges of Syria and *Eretz Yisrael*. He united the Chaldean (and Aramean) tribes and declared himself king over the Chaldean nation, then went on to conquer Babylonia. Sargon, powerless to stop him, recognized his sovereignty. He remained at this peak of power for about ten years. Toward the end of this period, he forged ties with many other kings in the region, hoping to bring about the total collapse of Assyrian rule. Scholars are divided over the question of when Merodakh’s delegation arrived in Jerusalem, but the connection (stated explicitly in the text) between Chizkiyahu’s illness and the many delegations that Merodakh dispatched at the time lends support to the view that the visit described in *Yeshayahu* 39 was part of this initiative (712 B.C.E.).

Sargon saw what was going on and took preemptive action. He waged war against Merodakh’s allies (710 B.C.E.), and Merodakh himself fled to the border of Eilam; according to Sargon’s inscription, he was even taken captive. When Sargon died and was succeeded by his son, Sancheriv (705 B.C.E.), Merodakh decided this was another opportune moment. He could not have foreseen that Sancheriv would turn out to be one of the most capable of the Assyrian rulers – and also one of the cruelest. The intrepid Merodakh strengthened himself and conquered Babylonia. Two years later (703 B.C.E.), Sancheriv attacked Merodakh-Baladan, captured Babylonia from him, and pushed him back to Yakin. Three years after that, Sancheriv returned and drove him from his stronghold there; he fled to some unknown destination in the Persian Gulf and died a few years later.

Now the whole incident – including Yeshayahu’s great anger and his harsh prophecy – makes more sense. Chizkiyahu received the delegation from Babylonia around the time ties were forged with the rebels of Ashdod and the Egyptian coalition; thus, Chizkiyahu joined Yehuda to the circle of nations seeking to rise up against Assyria. Yeshayahu took it upon himself to warn against this development. Each time a delegation arrived in this regard, Yeshayahu would emerge “naked and barefoot,” shouting that this sorry state would be the fate awaiting those who rebelled against Assyria. Chizkiyahu ignored the prophet’s warnings completely and showed the visitors all his treasures – as was customary among rulers of comparable status who sought to strengthen ties among themselves. Chizkiyahu even went so far as to open the treasure houses of Yehuda before his visitors, hiding nothing from them.

When the delegation left, Yeshayahu would angrily approach the king:

And Yeshayahu the prophet came to King Chizkiyahu and said to him: “What did these men say? And from whence did they come to you?” And Chizkiyahu said, “They came to me from a distant country, from Babylonia.”

Then he said, “What did they see in your house?” And Chizkiyahu answered, “All that is in my house they saw; there is nothing amongst my treasure that I did not show them.”

Then Yeshayahu said to Chizkiyahu, “Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days shall come that all that is in your house, and that which your fathers laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylonia; nothing shall be left, says the Lord.

And of your sons that shall issue from you, who you shall beget, they shall take away, and they shall be officers in the palace of the king of Babylonia.”

Then Chizkiyahu said to Yeshayahu, “The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good.” For he said, “Would that there be peace and truth in my days.” (*Yeshayahu* 39:3-8)

It seems that at first Chizkiyahu could not understand what the prophet was getting at. Yeshayahu’s questions, “What did these men say? And from whence did they come to you?” were more than an innocent exploration of information. It seems fair to assume that all of Jerusalem was aware of this official delegation. Furthermore, the ostensible diplomatic framing of the visit (to bring a gift to King Chizkiyahu following his illness) deceived no one: everyone understood that this was political prospecting. Chizkiyahu responds to the prophet with undisguised pride: “From a distant country, from Babylonia.” He attaches great value to the fact that his fame has extended far and wide as an ally in the nascent coalition. He goes on to describe proudly how he showed the Babylonians all of his treasures – and Yeshayahu responds with a terrible blow: “Behold, the days shall come that all that is in your house, and that which your fathers laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylonia; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And of your sons that shall issue from you, who you shall beget, they shall take away, and they shall be officers in the palace of the king of Babylonia.”

Chizkiyahu’s response – “The word of the Lord… is good” – sounds strange, perhaps because we cannot hear its tone. Malbim (commenting on *Yeshayahu* 39:8) interprets it as follows:

In any event [the prophet’s words suggest that] it shall certainly come about that there will be peace and truth in my days; not so the prophecy concerning my offspring [and *Bnei Yisrael*, in the future], concerning whom [what was said] may change, if they mend their ways.

Chizkiyahu divides Yeshayahu’s message to him into two parts. In the first part, he detects a positive message: he has been promised that in his days there will be peace, and says regarding that promise, “The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good.” Concerning the punishment that Yeshayahu foretells for Chizkiyahu’s offspring in the second part of the prophecy, he believes that God’s plan may change if his offspring mend their ways. There is clearly a disconnect in these communications between the king and the prophet. Chizkiyahu pursues his path, confident that he is acting in accordance with God’s will. Like Yeshayahu’s prophecy concerning his death, which was ultimately transformed by virtue of the prayer he offered from the depth of his heart, Chizkiyahu believes that his activity for the benefit of Jerusalem and its inhabitants can find favor in God’s eyes.

Yeshayahu, for his part, maintains the same policy that has guided him all along: he rejects engagement in both branches of earthly politics, saying no to rebellions and no to submission. Yeshayahu demands of Chizkiyahu, as he demanded of Achaz, that he subjugate himself only to God, leaving earthly rulers to play their power games without him. The gifts that Chizkiyahu gave so magnanimously to Babylonia become, in Yeshayahu’s eyes, precursors of the Chaldean-Babylonian kingdom that would rise to power a century later. While the Chaldean-Babylonian Merodakh-Baladan would not leave much of a mark on history, the day would come (125 years later) when a different Chaldean-Babylonian king – Nevukhadretzar – would destroy Jerusalem and the house of God, and Yeshayahu’s prophecy would be fulfilled in all its terrible detail.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Almost all the commentators agree that this unit is not in its chronological place. Some bring it forward, to just prior (Rashi – three days) to Sancheriv’s campaign to Jerusalem; we will follow the view that it took place a few years later. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Yeshayahu* 37:35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Y. Yadin, "*Ma'alot Achaz*," *Eretz Yisrael* 5 (5719). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Y. Elitzur, “*Yishayahu Mul Chizkiyahu u-Merodakh-Baladan*” in his book, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, Ramat Gan 5760, pp. 201-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)