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 #22: Yeshayahu, Hoshea, and Mikha in the Time of Chizkiyahu (11a)**

**The war for Jerusalem (*Melakhim* II 18 / *Yeshayahu* 36 – 37)**

And the king of Assyria sent the ‘turtanu’ and the ‘rav saris’ and Ravshakeh from Lachish to King Chizkiyahu, with a great army, to Jerusalem; and they went up and came to Jerusalem, and they went up and came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway of the fullers’ field.

And when they called to the king, there came out to them Elyakim the son of Chilkiya, who was over the household, and Shevna, the scribe, and Yoach, son of Asaf, the recorder. (*Melakhim* II 18:17-18)

The confrontation takes place “by the conduit of the upper pool,” on the northern side of the Temple Mount,[[1]](#footnote-1) and involves very senior ministers, but Chizkiyahu maintains the honor of the kingdom of Yehuda and does not respond to the call; rather, he sends emissaries matching the level of the delegation (as is customary in international relations). As an aside, we learn from this that the despised Shevna (if indeed we are talking about the same person; see *shiur* #20) is no longer “over the household” but has become merely “the scribe.” He is still part of the administration, but Elyakim ben Chilkiya has been appointed over the household in his stead.

Ravshakeh starts to speak, on behalf of the Assyrian delegation. It is fairly clear that the ‘turtanu’ and ‘rav saris’ are more senior and important figures than Ravshakeh, and the only reason he serves as their spokesman is his ability to speak “Yehudit” (the language of the people of Yehuda – Hebrew). Ravshakeh seems to be the Assyrian army’s expert on Jewish affairs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Analysis of Ravshakeh’s words shows that he employs psychological tactics to break the spirit of the fighters, and takes care to mention the points of greatest sensitivity for the nation under siege. His words are measured and powerful, and are aimed at undermining the confidence of the people of Jerusalem on all fronts: military, political, and religious:

* **Scorn for the “broken reed”**

And Ravshakeh said to them: Say now to Chizkiyahu: So says the great king, the king of Assyria: What confidence is this, wherein you trust?

Do you say that a mere word of the lips is counsel and strength for the war? Now, in whom do you trust, that you have rebelled against me?

Now, behold, you trust in the staff of this broken reed – in Egypt, which, if a man leans upon it, it will go into his hand and pierce it; so is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to all who trust in him. (*Melakhim* II 18:19-21)

All the inhabitants of Yehuda are aware that the revolt in Jerusalem rests on the strong military alliance between local nations and Egypt of the “Black Pharaohs,” an alliance Yeshayahu had protested. Now Ravshakeh is repeating the prophet’s disdain, almost word for word. He focuses on an internal mood – albeit an oppositional one – and uses it to undermine the spirit of the fighters entrusted with defending the city.

* **Scorn for Chizkiyahu’s religious reform**

But if you say to me, “We trust in the Lord our God” – is that not He whose high places and whose altars Chizkiyahu took away, saying to Yehuda and to Jerusalem, “You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem”? (Ibid. 22 / *Yeshayahu* 36:7)

Ravshakeh’s intelligence tactics worked devastatingly well. He has picked up on the dispirited mood of the masses in Yehuda following the removal of the *bamot* at Chizkiyahu’s initiative. The people had offered sacrifices at these *bamot* for many years; they were full of good intentions and simply sought to serve God in their own cities. Seizing a moment of weariness and slight weakness, Ravshakeh brings to the fore and exploits the suppressed anger and indignation over Chizkiyahu’s revolution, heaping scorn on the king’s religious overconfidence – which, according to Ravshakeh, has brought God’s anger upon him.

* **Scorn for the feeble power of the army of Yehuda**

Now therefore, I pray you, make a wager with my master, the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders upon them.

How, then, can you turn away the face of one captain, of the least of my master’s servants? Yet you put your trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?! (*Melakhim* II 18:23-24 / *Yeshayahu* 36:8-9)

What do we actually know about the size of the army of Yehuda? Sancheriv’s great inscription describes the destruction of Yehuda and the army that he defeated, and it shows that Sancheriv respected the power of Chizkiyahu’s army and its fortifications. Hence, it is difficult to understand how Ravshakeh could have uttered such untruths to the soldiers of Yehuda concerning their supposedly weak army. The gap between the actual strength of the army and Ravshakeh’s barefaced deprecation would seem to arise against the backdrop of the fall of the cities of the lowlands, and from the image of the Assyrian army in the eyes of the soldiers in Jerusalem, who had heard mainly about Assyrian victories. This enables Ravshakeh to intimidate them.

* **Assyria acts in accordance with God’s will**

Have I now come up without the Lord against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it. (*Melakhim* II 18:25 / *Yeshayahu* 36:10)

Many years previously, in the time of the campaign of Tiglat-Pileser, Yeshayahu had referred to Assyria as the “rod” (*shevet*) of God’s wrath. Now, Ravshakeh repeats the same idea as he tries to break the spirit of the people. Once again, the Assyrian intelligence displays its familiarity with the teachings of the prophets and its ability to exploit the parts that prove useful.

The delegation representing Yehuda understands very well the danger of this psychological warfare, and seeks to change the rules of the game:

Then said Elyakim son of Chilkiyahu, and Shevna, and Yoach, to Ravshakeh: “Speak, I pray you, to your servants in the Aramean language, for we understand it, and do not speak with us in the language of Yehuda, in the ears of the people that are on the wall.”

But Ravshakeh said to them: “Has my master sent me to your master, and to you, to speak these words? Has he not sent me to the men that sit on the wall, to eat their own dung and to drink their own water with you?” (*Melakhim* II 18:26-27 / *Yeshayahu* 36:12)

At this point, Ravshakeh addresses himself directly to those defending the walls.

* **The king of Assyria suggests leaving Jerusalem**

Then Ravshakeh stood and called out with a loud voice in the language of Yehuda, and spoke, saying: Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria.

Thus says the king: Let Chizkiyahu not beguile you, for he will not be able to deliver you.

Neither let Chizkiyahu cause you to trust in the Lord, saying, “The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.”

Do not listen to Chizkiyahu, for thus says the king of Assyria: Make peace with me and come out to me, and let each man eat of his vine and each of his fig tree, and each drink the water of his own cistern,

Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, and land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and of honey, that you may live and not die; and do not listen to Chizkiyahu when he persuades you, saying, “The Lord will deliver us.” (*Melakhim* II 18:28-32 / *Yeshayahu* 36:13-17)

Here Ravshakeh contradicts himself. Earlier, he spoke respectfully of the Lord God of Israel, who appointed Assyria to exile His people from their land. But as he continues his speech, he places God on the same level as all the gods of the other conquered peoples, claiming that as their gods did not save them, neither will the God of Israel save the kingdom of Yehuda. It may well be that at this point, Ravshakeh loses the impact and influence that his initial words might have had.

But the people held their peace and did not answer a word, for the king’s command was, saying, “Do not answer him.” (*Melakhim* II 18:36 / *Yeshayahu* 36:21)

The delegation, however, returns to Chizkiyahu despondent and despairing:

Then Elyakim son of Chilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shevna the scribe, and Yoach son of Asaf, the recorder, came to Chizkiyahu with their clothes rent, and told him the words of Ravshakeh. (*Melakhim* II 18:37 / *Yeshayahu* 36:22)

**Yeshayahu reverts to prophecies of deliverance: from rebuke to resilience and salvation**

Chizkiyahu’s response to the Assyrian propaganda recalls his prayer during his illness. He rends his clothes, dons sackcloth, and bursts forth into prayer. He sends a special delegation to the elderly Yeshayahu, begging him to join the struggle for God’s glory and for the welfare of Jerusalem. The delegation conveys the king’s message to the prophet:

And they said to him: So says Chizkiyahu, This is a day of trouble and of rebuke and of contempt; for the children have come to the birth but there is no strength to bring forth.

Perhaps the Lord your God will hear all the words of Ravshakeh, whom the king of Assyria, his master, has sent to taunt the living God, and will rebuke the words which the Lord your God has heard; therefore make prayer for the remnant that is left. (*Melakhim* II 19:3-4 / *Yeshayahu* 37:3-4)

These words convey the great tension as well as the longstanding closeness between the king and the prophet. The king does not say, “Perhaps the Lord will hear…” but rather, “Perhaps the Lord your God will hear.” Chizkiyahu is not asking to hear the prophet’s opinion; he is asking that the prophet join him in prayer on this “day of trouble and of rebuke and of contempt.”

But Chizkiyahu also reverts to the world of Yeshayahu the prophet (26:17-18) and the image of the birthing woman who has no strength to give birth (“for the children have come to the birth but there is no strength to bring forth”), implicitly disavowing the prophetic idea formulated by *Mikha*: “Be in pain and labor to bring forth, O daughter of Tzion, like a woman in travail” (4:10). With this, Chizkiyahu implies that the revolt against Assyria was a mistake.

The prophet’s response is brief and clear, in complete contrast to the terror of crisis and the prayers:

And Yeshayahu said to them, “Thus shall you say to your master: So says the Lord, Do not be afraid of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me.

Behold, I will put a spirit in him, and he will hear a rumor, and shall return to his own land, and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.” (*Melakhim* II 19:6-7)

**Chizkiyahu’s prayer and the prophecy of deliverance (*Melakhim* II 19:15-34 / *Yeshayahu* 37:15-35)**

Yeshayahu’s prophecy notwithstanding, Chizkiyahu offers his own prayer and supplication to God:

And Chizkiyahu prayed before the Lord and he said: O Lord God of Israel Who sits upon the *keruvim*; You are the God alone of all the kingdoms of the earth; You made the heavens and the earth.

Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear; open Your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear the words of Sancheriv who has sent him to taunt the living God.

It is true, O Lord, that the kings of Assyria have laid waste to the nations and their lands,

And have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men’s hands – wood and stone; therefore they have destroyed them.

Now therefore, O Lord our God, save us, I pray You, out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are the Lord God, alone. (*Melakhim* II 19:15-19 / *Yeshayahu* 37:15-20)

In this bold speech, Chizkiyahu once again reveals himself as a God-fearing man and king, who, at the height of crisis, turns directly to God.

As at the time of his illness, God responds to Chizkiyahu’s prayer by sending Yeshayahu to prophesy about Sancheriv. Yeshayahu brings the king a sharp prophetic message castigating Sancheriv for his pride and boastfulness in considering himself as though he had risen by his own efforts to “the uttermost parts of Lebanon” – to the highest pinnacles, where even the tallest cedars and fir trees of Lebanon grow shorter because of the cold (“the forest of its cold”):

This is the word that the Lord has spoken concerning him: The virgin daughter of Tzion has despised you and laughed you to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem shakes her head at you.

Who have you taunted and blasphemed? And against whom have you exalted your voice? You have lifted up your eyes on high, against the Holy One of Israel!

By the messengers you have taunted the Lord, and have said: With the multitude of my chariots I have come up to the height of the mountains, to the uttermost parts of Lebanon, and I have cut down its tall cedars and its choicest cypresses, and I have entered into its furthest lodge, the forest of its cold.

I have dug and drunk strange waters, and with the sole of my feet I have dried up all the rivers of Egypt.

Have you not heard? Long ago I made it; in ancient times I fashioned it. Now I have brought it to pass, and it is done, that fortified cities should be laid waste into ruinous heaps.

Therefore their inhabitants were of small power; they were dismayed and confounded, they were as the grass of the field, and as the green herb, as the grass on the housetops, and as corn blasted before it is grown up.

But I know your sitting down, and your going out, and your coming in, and your raging against Me.

Because of your raging against Me, and for that your tumult has come up into My ears – therefore I will put My hook in your nose, and My bridle in your lips, and I will turn you back by the way by which you came. (*Melakhim* II 19:21-28 / *Yeshayahu* 37:22-29)

In counterbalance to the threat of exile, God gives Yeshayahu a sign pointing to the end of the war and the removal of Sancheriv’s army for a long time:

And this shall be the sign for you: you shall eat this year that which grows of itself, and in the second year that which springs of the same; and in the third year – sow and reap and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. (*Melakhim* II 19:29 / *Yeshayahu* 37:30)

Here the lyrical prophecy of Yeshayahu reaches its climax; the prophet and king are in harmony, inspired by the idea of the remnant that grows back from the root:

And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Yehuda shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward.

For out of Jerusalem there shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Tzion they that shall escape; the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform this. (*Melakhim* II 19:30-31 / *Yeshayahu* 37:31-32)

The prophet then adds a concrete promise of God’s protection for Jerusalem:

Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come to this city, nor shoot an arrow there;[[3]](#footnote-3) neither shall he come before it with shield, nor cast a mound against it.

By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and he shall not come to this city, says the Lord.

For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake, and for the sake of David, My servant. (*Melakhim* II 19:32-24 / *Yeshayahu* 37:33-35)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. “Waters of the lower pool” (*Yeshayahu* 22:9) refers to the Shiloach. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 60a; see Rashi on *Melakhim* II 18:22) teach that Ravshakeh was born a Jew but had switched his allegiance. Obviously, with his “insider” knowledge, he was the perfect candidate to serve in this role. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This expression hints to the unique nature of the fortifications of the City of David, on the slopes over the Gichon spring; see my article, “*Ve-lo Yoreh Sham Chetz*,” *Al Atar* 11 (5763), pp. 29-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)