YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #310: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XCVI)**

After having dealt with the reign of Achaz and the worship of Molech, let us now move on to the kingdom of Chizkiyahu. In order to get an overall picture of the days of Chizkiyahu we must examine II *Melakhim* 18-20, II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29-32, and many prophecies in the books of *Yeshayanu* and *Mikha.*

Even though there is no well-ordered chronology of the chapters dealing with Chizkiyahu, it is possible to distinguish between different periods. Let us examine the events that occurred during the first period of his reign.

**The First Period of Chizkiyahu’s Reign**

From the very beginning, Chizkiyahu's reign (especially according to the account in *Divrei ha-Yamim*) shows an absolute turnabout in comparison with the reign of Achaz.

A revolution of such scale (as we shall see immediately) and at such an early stage ("in the first year of his reign in the first month"; II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:3) point to Chizkiyahu's planning, determination and persistence, and it is reasonable to assume that the prophet Yeshayahu was involved.

**A Rededication of the House of God (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 29)**

In the previous *shiurim*, we saw that Achaz introduced idolatry into the Temple and closed the house of God. Chizkiyahu reopened the house of God already at the beginning of his reign, a measure which involved several actions: removing the filth from the sanctuary, cleansing the house and the sanctuary, removing the impurity to the Kidron Valley, and purifying the vessels and re-sanctifying them. Scripture testifies to the speed with which everything was done: "for the thing was done suddenly" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:36).

At the same time, the king eradicated the idolatry that took root in the cities of Yehuda and Israel, and then renewed the service in the Temple: the service of the priests and the Levites, the priestly watches, the *ma'amadot*, and bringing the *teruma* and tithes to the house of God (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:31).

We have already mentioned that the eradication of idolatry from the Temple usually took place in the Kidron Valley, east of the Temple.

**A Passover to the Lord (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 30)**

In the context of the renewed covenant with God, the Passover holiday was chosen as the appropriate time for reuniting the two kingdoms, Israel and Yehuda, around the service of God in the Temple in Jerusalem. The king sent emissaries and letters to all of Israel from Dan to Be'er Sheva, asking the people to return to worship God together in Jerusalem and to offer the Passover offering.

Scripture notes that the time of bringing the Passover offering was postponed:

For the king had taken counsel, and his princes, and all the congregation in Jerusalem, to keep the Passover in the second month. For they could not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified themselves in sufficient number, neither had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:2-3)

Then they killed the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the second month; and the priests and the Levites were ashamed, and sanctified themselves, and brought burnt-offerings into the house of the Lord. And they stood in their place after their order, according to the law of Moshe the man of God; the priests dashed the blood, which they received of the hand of the Levites. For there were many in the congregation that had not sanctified themselves; therefore the Levites had the charge of killing the Passover lambs for every one that was not clean, to sanctify them unto the Lord. For a multitude of the people, even many of Efrayim and Menashe, Yissachar and Zevulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the Passover otherwise than it is written. For Chizkiyahu had prayed for them, saying: The good Lord pardon. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:15-18)

It is clear from this passage that the Passover offering was put off because of ritual impurity, but the Sages disagree (*Sanhedrin* 12a-b) regarding the nature of the delay. According to the simple understanding, the second month is the month of Iyyar, that is to say, the king put off the regular Passover offering, and brought only the second Passover offering. This is the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehuda in the name of Rabbi Shimon (ibid.). According to other Sages, however, this was the second month of Adar, and Chizkiyahu prayed for pardon because the validity of intercalation for reason of ritual impurity is questionable, or because he intercalated a month of Nissan in Nissan (ibid.; *Pesachim* 4:9), and the rule is that only a month of Adar can be intercalated.

In any case, Chizkiyahu's aim in making the Passover was to reunite the entire nation, and especially the kingdom of Israel, around the Temple in Jerusalem. It is also possible that in this way, the king wished to realign the calendars of the two kingdoms, after Yeravam had deliberately created a gap between them (II *Melakhim* 12:33), and in this way the entire people would celebrate the festival of Passover together, on one shared date.

*Chazal* relate in a Baraita (*Pesachim* 56a) to this act of Chizkiyahu, saying that Chizkiyahu intercalate a month of Nissan in Nissan, but the Sages did not agree with this step. It is accepted that according to the Halakha, it is only the month of Adar that can be intercalated, in order to fulfill the words of the Torah in *Devarim*: "Observe the month of Aviv, and keep the Passover unto the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 16:1). According to them, the festival of Passover must be celebrated in Aviv, the spring, a matter which depends on the solar calendar.

*Chazal* understand that Chizkiyahu sanctified Rosh Chodesh Nissan and then regretted what he had done, and therefore turned the month into a Second Adar. According to *Chazal,* this is called intercalating Nissan in Nissan.

The Baraita mentions three things that King Chizkiyahu did, and the Sages agreed with his actions:

1. He dragged his father's bones on a rope bier.

2. He crushed the bronze serpent into powder.

3. He hid the book of remedies.

These three acts of Chizkiyahu express the dramatic change that Chizkiyahu wished to institute in his kingdom, in comparison with the days of Achaz. Let us now address each one of these actions.

**The Dragging of Achaz’s Bones on a Rope Bier**

Chizkiyahu disgraced his father by taking him out for burial on a rope bier, rather than on a bier fit for the king (a bier of gold and silver). So too he dragged the bier in a disgraceful manner rather than carry it out on the shoulders of the people who mourned his death. Chizkiyahu did this in order to bring his father atonement through this humiliation, and in order to reprimand the wicked who followed in Achaz's path, and thereby sanctify the name of God.

Achaz's death is described in II Kings: "And Achaz slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David" (II *Melakhim* 16:20). This formulation is similar to the accepted formulation in the book of *Melakhim* regarding most of the kings of the house of David.

The formulation in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* is: "And Achaz slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city, even in Jerusalem; for they brought him not into the sepulchers of the kings of Israel" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:27.) That is to say, the burial, according to *Divrei ha-Yamim,* did not take place in the plot of the kings of the house of David, but rather in a grave without any distinction, in a portion of people whose identities are unknown and whose graves were apparently not visited. It is reasonable to assume that when he did this Chizkiyahu first consulted with the prophet Yeshayahu. The goal was to show all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Yehuda that the days of Achaz were over – that period of idol worship in the Temple itself, of worship of Molech through the burning of children in the valley of Ben Hinom, and of the king's detachment from the Torah and from the prophet, during which time the Temple was actually closed. In practice, in the context of the burial of Achaz a statement was made that the honor of God stands above the honor of one's father, this father having committed trespass against God (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:19-22) and having angered the God of his fathers (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:25).

**The Crushing of the Bronze Serpent**

It is stated in *Melakhim*:

He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Ashera; and he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moshe had made; for to those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called Nechushtan. He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Yehuda, nor among them that were before him. For he cleaved to the Lord, he departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the Lord commanded Moshe. (II *Melakhim* 18:4-6)

The prophet describes here a dramatic change in Chizkiyahu's leadership as compared to that of Achaz. The removal of the *bamot*, the breaking of the pillars, the cutting down of the Ashera, and the crushing of the bronze serpent on the one hand, and the trust placed in God (the likes of which we do not find in any of the kings after him), the cleaving to Him, and the observance of His commandments, on the other.

We will start with the crushing of the bronze serpent.

Towards the end of the forty years of Israel's sojourning in the wilderness, the people speak out against God and Moshe. God punishes them and sends poisonous serpents against them and many die. After they begin to repent, God tells Moshe to fashion a fiery serpent and set it upon a high pole, so that anybody who was bitten by a serpent could look at it and be healed.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moshe then made the fiery serpent of brass:

And the Lord said unto Moshe: Make you a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he sees it, shall live. And Moshe made a serpent of brass, and set it upon the pole; and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived. (*Bemidbar* 21:8-9)

In other words, this serpent is like a healer from God for those who looked at it after having been bitten by a serpent. It is reasonable to assume that from the days of Moshe to the days of Chizkiyahu there was in the *Mishkan* or Temple a sheet of copper in the shape of a snake. This sheet was kept by the priests in Jerusalem. About this the Radak says: "This serpent was set aside from the days of Moshe as a remembrance of the miracle, like the jar of manna (Radak, II *Melakhim* 18:4). In his commentary to *Melakhim* the Radak explains the matter of the bronze serpent at great length, saying as follows:

"And he broke in pieces the brazen serpent" – There are those of *Chazal* who say that he pulverized it and scattered it to the wind, as it was forbidden to derive benefit from it. Others say that it was not forbidden to derive benefit from it… And by right crushing it was not necessary, only that when Chizkiyahu saw that Israel erred after it, he got up and crushed it.

For to those days the children of Israel did offer to it – from the time that the kings of Yehuda did evil and Israel strayed after idol worship, until the days of King Chizkiyahu, the children of Israel offered to it. Since they found that it was written: "when he sees it, shall live," they thought that it would be good to serve as a go-between, and to worship it. And this serpent was set aside from the days of Moshe as a remembrance of the miracle, like the jar of manna. And Asa and Yehoshafat who did not destroy it when they destroyed the rest of the idolatry, did that because they did not find during their reigns that the people were worshipping this serpent and offering to it, and they left it as a remembrance of the miracle. And Chizkiyahu decided to destroy it when he destroyed the other idolatry, because in the days of his father people would worship it, as an idol. Even though the good people remembered the miracle through it, he said that it would be better to destroy it and the miracle be forgotten, than to leave it and have the children of Israel stray after it today or tomorrow. And our Rabbis said: Is it possible that Asa came and did not remove it, that Yehoshafat came and did not eradicate it; but surely all of the idolatry in the land of Yehuda Asa and Yehoshafat eradicated! Rather, his predecessors left a place for him to distinguish himself.

"And he called it Nechushtan" – in a belittling manner. That is to say, it is nothing but brass, what power does it have to do evil or to do good. When he broke it, he called it that. He said to Israel: How could a person think that this helps, it being merely brass. The added *nun* is to belittle it…. And Targum Yonatan translated: "And they called it Nechushtan," that is to say, Israel, when they worshipped it would call it Nechushtan. (Radak, II *Melakhim* 18:4).

First, the Radak discusses the disagreement in *Chazal* as to whether or not it was permitted to derive benefit from the serpent (*Avoda Zara* 43b-44a). He explains that as soon as Chizkiyahu saw that Israel was straying after it, he arose and crushed it. Later, he explains that Asa and Yehoshafat who eradicated all of the idolatry in the kingdom did not eradicate the serpent, because people were not worshipping it in their time, and they left it as a remembrance of the miracle. But in the days of Achaz they did worship it and therefore Chizkiyahu decided that it was better to destroy it and let the miracle be forgotten. The designation "Nechushatan" was meant to express scorn and to clarify that it is only brass, and therefore void of any power to do good or to do evil.

If so, Chizkiyahu crushed the bronze snake. Even though the snake was found in the Temple for hundreds of years, the significance of this act is that the king removes any ritual that is not directly related to the worship of God. It should be mentioned that Achaz's introduction of the Assyrian cult into the house of God undoubtedly impacted upon the connection of the entire nation to God, and the power of idolatry left its mark on everything. The goal of this measure was to return the Jewish people to believe and trust directly in God without any go-betweens.

In this *shiur*, we began our study of some of the first things that Chizkiyahu did as king, those that involved a great change and a new path, in comparison to the reign of his father Achaz. In the coming *shiurim* we will continue to consider the reign of Chizkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Based on the Mishna: "Rather, when Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their father in heaven, they were healed, but otherwise, they pined away" (*Rosh ha-Shana* 3:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)