YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #316: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXVI) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CII)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lecture-315-history-divine-service-altars-cxxv-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-ci), we dealt with the plain sense of the verses regarding King Chizkiyahu's illness, which in many ways was the disease of the entire kingdom of Yehuda. In this *shiur*, we would like to examine *Chazal's* interpretation of what happened between King Chizkiyahu and the prophet Yeshayahu, as is explained in *Berachot* 10a and in Rav Kook's commentary on this Gemara in his *Ein Aya*. This will allow us to understand the deeper meaning of the encounter between kingship and prophecy.

*Chazal* explain the dispute between the king and prophet as follows:

Rav Hamnuna said: What is the meaning of the verse: "Who is as the wise man? And who knows the interpretation [*pesher*] of a thing?" (*Kohelet* 8:1). Who is like the Holy One, blessed be He, who knew how to effect a reconciliation [*peshara*] between two righteous men, Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu? Chizkiyahu said: Let Yeshayahu come to me, for so we find that Eliyahu went to Achav, as it says: "And Eliyahu went to show himself unto Achav" (I *Melakhim* 18:2). Yeshayahu said: Let Chizkiyahu come to me, for so we find that Yehoram son of Achav went to Elisha. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He brought sufferings upon Chizkiyahu and then said to Yeshayahu: Go visit the sick. For so it says: "In those days was Chizkiyahu sick unto death. And Yeshayahu the prophet, son of Amotz, came to him and said unto him: Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live" (II *Melakhim* 20:1; *Yeshayahu* 38:1). What is the meaning of "you shall die and not live"? You shall die in this world and not live in the World-to-Come. He said to him: Why so bad? He replied: Because you did not try to have children. He said: The reason was because I saw by the holy spirit that the children issuing from me would not be virtuous. He said to him: What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful? You should have done what you were commanded, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do that which pleases Him. He said to him: Then give me now your daughter; perhaps through your merit and mine combined virtuous children will issue from me. He replied: The doom has already been decreed. He said to him: Son of Amotz, finish your prophecy and go. This tradition I have from the house of my ancestor: Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck he should not desist from prayer." (*Berakhot* 10a)

What he have here are two righteous men, each of whom expected the other to show him honor by coming to him. God resolved the impasse by bringing suffering upon Chizkiyahu and asking the prophet Yeshayahu to go and visit the sick. According to *Chazal*, the reason that Chizkiyahu was to die was the he did not occupy himself with procreation. The king explains that he did not do so because he saw by way of the holy spirit that unfit children would be born to him. The prophet answers that the king must do what he is commanded to do and not occupy himself with hidden matters. The king proposes that the prophet should give him his daughter to wife, so that perhaps by virtue of their combined merits worthy children would be born to them. The prophet answers that the decree had already been issued and nothing can be changed. The king then tells the prophet to finish his prophecy and leave, for he has a tradition from his fathers that even if a sharp sword rests upon a person's neck he should not stop praying.

It should be pointed out that Menashe inherited his father's kingdom at the age of twelve, and so he was apparently born three years after Chizkiyahu's illness, the king not having had any children before he took ill. Menashe ruled as king for fifty-two years, and during this long period all traces of Chizkiyahu's reforms were in fact erased.

### THe difference between King Chizkiyahu and the prophet Yeshayahu according to Rav Kook's understanding of the words of the Sages in *Berakhot* 10a

As usual Rav Kook offers a most amazing explanation of the Gemara in *Berakhot*. We will bring the essentials of his explanation in his *Ein Aya*, and then add several points:

136. "Rav Hamnuna said: What is the meaning of the verse: 'Who is as the wise man? And who knows the interpretation [*pesher*] of a thing?' (*Kohelet* 8:1). Who is like the Holy One, blessed be He, who knew how to effect a reconciliation [*peshara*] between two righteous men, Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu? Chizkiyahu said: Let Yeshayahu come to me… And Yeshayahu said: Let Chizkiyahu come to me."

The purpose of the prophetic power that the Holy One, blessed is He, bestowed upon Israel during the time of prophecy was to fulfill the eternal needs of the nation, to instill it with everlasting spiritual life, and to teach it the ways of life through which it could attain eternal existence, that its spirit live forever, and that it enjoy national existence in the future. And the power of the monarchy was to confirm the people in national life in the present. For there are things and practices that give the people additional courage for the time being, but detract from the strength of its existence in the future. And vice versa there are many things that weaken it for the time being, but add power and might for the future… Therefore, Yeshayahu was afraid that if the people choose the power of the monarchy over the power of prophecy, they would fall in spirit and forget their eternal concern. And Chizkiyahu was afraid that if the people would see that the power of the monarchy is weak in relation to the power of prophecy, they would lose their present political power and this would lead to adverse consequences for their moral state as well, for their Torah, their fear of God and their good traits, all of which are supported by the strength of the king. The Holy One, blessed be He, then effected a reconciliation between them, the eye of His providence seeing that, according to the state of Israel at that time, it was necessary that these two powers be exactly equal. That is to say, according to external appearances, the monarchy should seem more highly elevated than prophecy, in order to strengthen national authority and power, but upon closer examination it should be evident that the king surrenders his temporary leadership, effacing it to eternal prophetic goodness. This is how the Holy One, blessed be He, effected a reconciliation between them: "He brought sufferings upon Chizkiyahu and then said to Yeshayahu: Go visit the sick." Superficially, the monarchy was more elevated, for in the end the prophet Yeshayahu went to King Chizkiyahu. But inwardly, who suffered pain and was rejected? The king. This teaches that it is sometimes necessary to subjugate the temporary appearance of national strength when it conflicts with the people's eternal destiny. This is very similar to the need for leadership. For according to the external side of man and his sensual desires, he needs strong and powerful authority, which is the monarchy which has seed and power. But according to the inner side of man, the side of his rational intellect and his aspiration for all good and holiness, he must be led by authority with a pleasant stick, which merely instructs him about the good path, which he will follow out of love, when his good impulses grow strong within him…

"137. And Yeshayahu the prophet, son of Amotz, came to him… Because you did not try to have children. He said: The reason was because I saw by the holy spirit that the children issuing from me would not be virtuous. He said to him: What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful?"

Chizkiyahu, as a king who was worried about the present, was very afraid about the present state of the people. When he saw with the spirit of God that rested upon him that if he bears children they will be corrupt, he was concerned that while sitting on the royal throne they might corrupt the people. But Yeshayahu said to him: "What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful?" For prophecy reflects the eternal state of the people, against which one generation is considered as nothing. Should the monarchy come to an end, and the throne fall away from the ruling family, this could lead to an eternal fall. But the obstacle of one wicked king who came out of the seed chosen by God, that will pass, for in the end the throne will be established in righteousness. Therefore you must not rely on this to interrupt an eternal dynasty, because of a passing vision, even if it came by way of the holy spirit.

Rav Kook first analyzes the discussion between King Chizkiyahu and the prophet Yeshayahu, and totally removes it from a dispute over each party's personal honor. Rather, he raises it to a far more essential discussion about the appropriate relationship between the monarchy and prophecy.

The purpose of prophecy is to fill the eternal needs of the people with a view of achieving permanent national existence in the future, whereas the power of the monarchy is to lead the national life of the people in the present. It is the nature of these two entities that sometimes temporary practices impair future existence, and vice versa that when preoccupation with the present weakens, it leads to added power and strength in the future. It is inappropriate for there to be extreme inclination in only one direction, as this is harmful and difficult. God, on his part, constantly makes sure that a balance be made between eternal and temporary power of existence. The prophet Yeshayahu was afraid that the power of the monarchy would supersede that of prophecy, whereas King Chizkiyahu was concerned about the opposite, and God effected a reconciliation between them so that the two would be of exactly the same strength. Superficially the monarchy was more elevated in order to strengthen national power. But inwardly we see that the king subjugated his temporal leadership to eternal, prophetic goodness. However, following God's compromise, it was the prophet Yeshayahu who manifestly went to King Chizkiyahu.

Rav Kook's position accords with the words of the Rambam in his *Hilkhot Melakhim*, according to which the king has a certain advantage over the prophet regarding outward leadership; nevertheless in his home King Yehoshafat would stand up when he saw a Torah scholar approaching, and say to him: My master, my master, my teacher, my teacher.

In his explanation of Chizkiyahu's position which brought him to abstain from procreation, Rav Kook explains that Chizkiyahu was worried about the nation's present state. On the other hand, from the prophet Yeshayahu's perspective, one generation is not important. Even if an evil king would ascend to the throne, he would eventually pass.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to examine Chizkiyahu's kingdom and consider the Babylonian delegation's visit with the ailing king.

(Translated by David Strauss)