YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

Lecture 317: THe History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXvII) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (cIII)

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbie and David Sable

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After having examined in the previous *shiur* Chizkiyahu's sickness, its timing and its significance, in this *shiur* we will consider the significance of the Babylonian delegation that visited King Chizkiyahu during the period of his illness.

### The Babylonian delegation's visit with the ailing Chizkiyahu

What we said in the previous *shiur* regarding the dating of Chizkiyahu's illness is equally true regarding the visit of the Babylonian delegation with the sick king. The visit is described in both II *Melakhim* 20:12-19 and *Yeshayahu* 39:1-8. In *Melakhim* this is the last topic dealt with in connection to Chizkiyahu, and it appears next to the verses that conclude and summarize Chizkiyahu's reign. According to this, it appears explicit that the visit took place after the great salvation during which Jerusalem was saved from Sancheriv king of Ashur, and after Sancheriv's return to Ashur. Scripture first describes what Chizkiyahu showed the delegation in his treasure-house, including the silver, and the gold, and the spices and the precious oil.

The prophet then relates Yeshayahu's words to Chizkiyahu in the wake of the king's actions. This prophecy is particularly harsh. For the first time the king is informed that everything in his house will be carried off to Babylon, and that his sons will be officers in the palace of the king of Babylon. How are we to understand the prophet's exceedingly strong opposition to Chizkiyahu's actions?

The conventional assumption is that this was not simply a visit with the sick, but rather we are dealing with a political alliance between two regional powers – Israel and Babylon. Josephus Flavius[[1]](#footnote-1) indeed writes that Merodakh offered Chizkiyahu an alliance. Hence this visit was a political engagement involving a clear political-diplomatic act. Chizkiyahu emphasizes that Merodakh arrived from a distant land, as an important political factor from "a far country," and that he came to ally himself with Chizkiyahu. From his perspective, this was an important political achievement. Thus it is stated in *Yeshayahu*:

At that time Merodakh-Baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent a letter and a present to Chizkiyahu; for he heard that he had been sick, and was 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 showed him not. Then came Yeshayahu the prophet unto king Chizkiyahu, and said unto him: What said these men? and from whence came they unto you? And Chizkiyahu said: They are come from a far country unto me, even from Babylon. Then said he: What have they seen in your house? And Chizkiyahu answered: All that is in my house have they seen; there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shown them. Then said Yeshayahu to Chizkiyahu: Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days come, that all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And of your sons that shall issue from you, whom you shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be officers in the palace of the king of Babylon. Then said Chizkiyahu unto Yeshayahu: Good is the word of the Lord which you have spoken. He said moreover: If but there shall be peace and truth in my days. (*Yeshayahu* 39:1-8)[[2]](#footnote-2)

In order to fully understand the meaning of the chapter and the prophet's harsh response, we must present the historical background. Merodakh-Baladan controlled one of the Chaldean tribes in the Persian Gulf area, and he was the pioneer of the great events that took place a hundred years later, in which Nevuchadnetzar and his father overthrew the Assyrian empire, and the unified Chaldean kingdom took its place. Merodakh unified the Chaldean tribes and tried to create a force that could fight against Ashur in the days of Tiglat Pilaser III, but he was forced instead to offer him tribute. Following the death of Shalmanesser V, he forged political ties with Eilam, with Arab tribes and as far as the boundaries of Syria and Eretz Israel. He united the Chaldean tribes, crowned himself as their king and conquered Babylon. King Sargon II of Ashur lacked the strength to stand up to him and was forced to recognize the rule of Merodakh Baladan. At the end of this period he began to establish ties with all the kings in the region in order to utterly destroy the Assyrian regime. Sargon fought against the allies of Merodakh, and at this stage Merodakh apparently was taken captive. Sargon returned him to his place and left him in the principality of the house of Yakhin. When Sargon died, his son Sancheriv took over in his place and reconquered Babylon from the hands of Merodakh Baladan. Merodakh is not mentioned in the next wars, and apparently fled to Eilam or was killed.

Many scholars believe that what is described in our chapter is Merodakh's "final" attempt to enlist Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda to join with the other kings in the area in order to overthrow the kingdom of Ashur.

According to the Assyrian documents, Chizkiyahu's invasion of the land of the Pelishtim and his participation in the rebellion against Ashur were the result of his association with Merodakh. Many scholars believe that Merodakh's delegation arrived in 705 BCE, the time of Sancheriv's rise to power.

The prophet Yeshayahu opposed the alliance that was formed against Ashur, which involved Chizkiyahu's entering into a pact with Egypt.

In order to explain the significance of Chizkiyahu's act, if this occurred before the miraculous fall of the Assyrian army, entering into an alliance with the kingdom of Babylon was undoubtedly an expression of lack of faith, in the extent to which he relies on Babylon in order to fight against Ashur.

There is also room to consider Chizkiyahu's objective when he showed all of his treasures to the delegation that had arrived from Babylon.

It seems from the way he relates to the delegation that he ascribes great importance to the visit. According to the plain sense of the verses, his treasures include gold, silver, and spices. He may also have revealed the many weapons that had accumulated in the emergency warehouses already in the days of Uziyahu. It is very possible that the text in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 22:25 which refers to the king's arrogance relates to this act as well. *Chazal* understand that the visit and what resulted from it took place after the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem and routing of the Assyrian army. Thus we find in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba*:

It is written: "And Chizkiyahu was glad of them, and showed them his treasure house [*nekhoto*]." What is "his treasure house"? R. Imi said: He showed him the bite [*nekhita*]that he had bitten off from Sancheriv and the plunder that he had plundered from Sancheriv. (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 3, 4)

Similarly in *Bereishit Rabba,* where the conclusion is exceedingly harsh: "The Holy One, blessed is He, knocked on the vessels of four people, and found them to be vessels fit for urine. And they are: Adam, Kayin, Bil'am and Chizkiyahu" (*Bereishit Rabba* 19, 11).

In order to fully understand this, let us recall what happened when Sancheriv arrived in the fourteenth year of Chiskiyahu's reign, as is explained in II *Melakhim* 18:13-16. Sancheriv went up against all the fortified cities of Yehuda and conquered them:

Now in the fourteenth year of King Chizkiyahu did Sancheriv king of Ashur come up against all the fortified cities of Yehuda, and took them. And Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda sent to the king of Ashur to Lachish, saying: I have offended; return from me; that which you put on me will I bear. And the king of Ashur appointed unto Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. And Chizkiyahu gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house. At that time did Chizkiyahu cut off the gold from the doors of the Temple of the Lord, and from the door-posts which Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Ashur. (II *Melakhim* 18:13-16)

On the face of it, with the rise of Sancheriv, the seizure of the cities of Yehuda and the imposition of a heavy tax burden on them, Chizkiyahu gave Sancheriv all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house, and even the gold from the doors of the Temple of the Lord, and from the door-posts which Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda had overlaid himself. From here it would seem that nothing of value was left in his hands. From where then did he have silver and gold, spices and precious oil? The Midrash explains that he had these things from the plunder that he had taken from Sennacheriv. The text in *Melakhim* offers a rather succinct description of the miraculous salvation by way of which Jerusalem was saved: "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of Ashur a hundred fourscore and five thousand; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses" (II *Melakhim* 19:35). It seems that Chizkiyahu took plunder from those hundred and eighty five thousand corpses, and returned it to his treasure-house, and that this is what he later showed to the Babylonian delegation. In this sense, to show the plunder from the miraculous deliverance from the army of Ashur, and in great measure to present it as part of the king's own treasures, means not fully attributing the deliverance to God. This certainly accords with the position taken by *Chazal* in their statement that "Chizkiyahu did not recite a song," as will be explained below.

It is also possible that this is consistent with the account of Chizkiyahu's sickness in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

In those days Chizkiyahu was sick even unto death; and he prayed unto the Lord; and He spoke unto him, and gave him a sign. But Chizkiyahu rendered not according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up; therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Yehuda and Jerusalem. Notwithstanding Chizkiyahu humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Chizkiyahu. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:24-26)

These verses lead us to the arrogance about which the Torah expressed its concerns in the section dealing with the appointment of a king.

After prohibiting the multiplication of the king's wives, silver, gold and horses, and after commanding that the king write a book of the law that will remain with him all his life, the Torah concludes the section dealing with a king: "That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left; to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel" (*Devarim* 17:20).

Chizkiyahu acts with arrogance before the delegation sent by the king of Babylon, Merodakh Baladan, and in great measure attributes his wealth, greatness and glory to his own powers. This is what *Chazal* said in *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim*:

Chizkiyahu should have recited a song over the fall of Sancheriv, as it is written: "But Chizkiyahu rendered not according to the benefit done unto him" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 32:25). Why? "For his heart was lifted up." His heart was lifted up above reciting a song… Chizkiyahu said: The Torah with which I occupy myself will atone for the song. R. Levi said: Chizkiyahu said: Why do we have to proclaim the miracles and wondrous acts of God; they are already known from one end of the world to the other. (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 4, 3)

The connection between Chizkiyahu's arrogance and his failure to recite a song is that Chizkiyahu attributed the miraculous deliverance from the Assyrian camp not to God, but to himself, and this was a demonstration of his utter ingratitude to God.

As we have seen, the principled position of the prophet opposes Chizkiyahu's active involvement in international matters. Just as he had said to Achaz: "Keep calm, and be quiet; fear not, neither let your heart be faint, because of these two tails of smoking firebrands" (*Yeshayahu* 7:4), that is to say, do not enter into an alliance with Ashur against Retzin and Pekach; so too he said to Chizkiyahu: "In sitting still and rest shall you be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength; and you would not" (*Yeshayahu* 30:15). Here he strongly opposes the pact against Ashur; the principle is to remain calm and quiet. The prophet voices the same position regarding the delegation sent by Merodakh Baladan.

Just as Achaz was in error, even though he correctly understood that Ashur was the rising power, so too Chizkiyah was right that Babylon was the rising power, but he was mistaken in his actions. Chizkiyahu's arrogance which brought him to stick his head in between the super powers in order to profit in some way was wrong.

This is the spiritual meaning of the words of the prophet: "But they look not unto the Holy One of Israel" (*Yeshayahu* 31:1). Trust must be placed exclusively in the Holy One of Israel. Yeshayahu is not preaching passivity or fatalism. This is an enlightened perspective: Who raised Ashur up? "O Ashur, the rod of My anger" (*Yeshayahu* 10:5). And who will raise Babylon up? The God of Israel.

God raises up empires and brings them low. Yehuda is in fact a small country, which may indeed aspire to greatness and the restoration of its elevated status in days of old. How should this be done? Not by way of arrogance or by adopting the mannerisms of a superpower when it is not a superpower; but rather by systematically and continuously walking in the light of God. Do God's will, go towards Him, until He will restore your former greatness.

Yeshayahu is not preaching passivity; but at this time activity must be on a different level. Not direct intervention in the struggles of the great powers, but an indirect change of reality by way of Divine providence.

In next week's *shiur* we will continue our examination of Chizkiyahu's kingdom.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. *Jewish Antiquities* 12, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This issue was dealt with by Prof. Yehuda Elitzur in his article, "*Yeshayahu Mul Chizkiyahu U-Merodakh Baladan*," in his book *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, pp. 201-203; and by Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun and Benny Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu ke-Tziporim Afot*, pp. 217-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)