YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**May HaKadosh Barukh Hu have mercy
upon His People and upon His Land.**

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**Lecture 322: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXXII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (CVIII)**

 The first part of *Yeshaya* 22 dealt with the wild behavior of the inhabitants of Jerusalem upon completion of the fortifications of the city and the harsh response of the prophet. The second part deals with Shevna, who was "over the house," who during his lifetime hewed for himself a tomb. The prophet informs him that he will leave his high office, and the position will pass on to Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu. It is rare to find a prophecy that is directed at the fate of one person, and not the public at large. In this *shiur* we will deal with Shevna and the significance of the prophet Yeshayahu's attitude toward him and his replacement.

### WHat is the role of "over the house"?

The verse itself states: "And the key of the house of David I will lay upon his shoulder; and he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (*Yeshayahu* 22:22). The key to the house of David seems to be a metaphor for the management of the entire kingdom of the Davidic house.

According to this understanding, the person who was "over the house" appears to have been the officer who headed all the other officers and was responsible for the house of David. This seems to have the most senior office in the kingdom after the king himself. In addition, the word "*sokhen*" ("steward") that is used in connection with Shevna, is an honorary title assigned to someone close to the king. This understanding is supported by the description of the delegation of officers that was sent to Ravshakeh when he arrived at the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Ravshakeh tries to convince the inhabitants of Jerusalem to surrender. At the head of the delegation stands Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu who is over the house. This undoubtedly attests to the highest and most important role that he played in the kingdom below the king.

We find another example in the days of King Achav in Ovadya who is over the house (I Kings 18:3 and on). There too the precise nature of this elevated position is not completely clear. In my opinion, we are dealing with the most important position in the kingdom after the king himself. A second possibility that has been suggested[[1]](#footnote-1) is that the officer who was over the house would carry the key to the house on his shoulder, perhaps a piece of jewelry in the form of a key that the officer would bear on his shoulder as a sign of his high rank.

*Chazal* propose a third possibility. They understand the word "house" as referring to the house of God, and therefore the man who is over the house is the High Priest. Thus we find in *Vayikra Rabba* 5, 5:

"If the anointed priest shall sin" (*Vayikra* 4:3) – this is Shevna, as it is written: "Go, get you unto this steward, unto Shevna" (*Yeshayahu* 22:15). Rabbi Elazar said: He was the High Priest. Rabbi Yehuda said: He was a supervising officer (*amarkal*). According to Rabbi Elazar who said that he was the High Priest: "And I will clothe him with your robe" (*Yeshayahu* 22:21). According to Rabbi Yehuda the son of Rabbi who said he was a supervising officer: "And I will commit your government into his hand" (ibid)… According to Rabbi Elazar who said he was the High Priest, he derived benefit from the sacrifices. According to Rabbi Yehuda the son of Rabbi who said he was a supervising officer, he derived benefit from consecrated property. "You shame of the lord's house" (*Yeshayahu* 22:18) – according to Rabbi Elazar who said he was the High Priest, because he disgraced the sacrifices. According to Rabbi Yehuda the son of Rabbi who said he was a supervising officer, because he disgraced the house of his two masters, namely, the house of Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu. (*Vayikra Rabba* 5, 5)

### What was Shevna's sin?

As stated, we have proposed here three interpretations, but we are most persuaded by the first possibility. We say this in light of the exceedingly harsh criticism of Shevna on the part of the prophet, in the wake of which he was ousted from his elevated position.

1. Hewing the tomb

 The verses themselves refer to the hewing of a grave. According to the simple understanding, we are dealing with a situation in which a person, while he is still alive, carefully plans the site of his burial. It is interesting that the verse repeats the word "here" three times: "What have you **here,** and whom have you **here,** that you have hewed you out **here** a tomb, you that hews you out a tomb on high, and graves a habitation for yourself in the rock?" (*Yeshayahu* 22:16). That is to say, the prophet, as it were, asks Shevna: By what right do you hew yourself a tomb in this place? Who have you here? Do you wish to be buried alongside a relative who is buried here?

It is highly likely that Shevna chose for himself an important and magnificent place, perhaps a burial place where officers and other distinguished people were buried in close proximity to the city.

In terms of location, the closest and most well-known place to look for a grave is in the area of the village of Shiloach, adjacent to the eastern slope of the Kidron valley, which is essentially the eastern border of the City of David. The site is dignified and majestic, it faces the City of David, and in its vicinity, over fifty magnificent burial caves from the First Temple period have been found. In this complex, about sixty meters south of the monolith known as "the tomb of Pharaoh's daughter" in the northern part of the village, a tomb was hewn in the rock. It is a square structure, its façade faces north-west, and it is eight meters long. Above the entrance to the tomb there are three rows of letters in ancient Hebrew script.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The French archaeologist Clermont Gannot, in 1870, removed the two inscriptions found there and sent them to the British Museum in London.

Prof. Avigad deciphered the Hebrew inscription as follows:

This … yahu who is over the house. There is no gold or silver here, but only [his bones] and the bones of […]. Cursed be the man who opens this.

This very moving find teaches us several things connected to burial in the First Temple period. Although the inscription is broken in the place where the name of the deceased should appear, it is clear that his name ends with the suffix "yahu," a common suffix that was attached to many names in the First Temple period. The inscription explicitly mentions the office of the deceased – "over the house." The very discovery of this inscription in this place undoubtedly confirms the assumption that officers and other distinguished people in the kingdom were buried here, due east of the City of David.

Prof. Yigal Yadin proposed that the name of the person who is buried here is Shevnayhu, the shortened form of which is Shevna.[[3]](#footnote-3) This suggestion is supported by the following facts:

1. The writing is similar in form to the writing appearing in the Shiloach inscription, and thus it is appropriate for the period of King Chizkiyahu and Shevna who was over the house, mentioned in *Yeshayahu* 22.

2. The place where the tomb is hewn may aptly be described as: "you that hews you out a tomb on high," for it is not an underground vault hewn in the rock, as we find with other tombs, but rather a structure visible to the eye.

3. It has been suggested that Shevna was of foreign birth, which explains the prophets words: "What have you here?" Thus we also understand why there is no mention of the name of his father. So too the term "*sokhen*" in the masculine is found in Scripture only here, but it is found in Phoenician. This inscription as well does not mention the name of the father of the deceased. In addition, the wording of the curse, "cursed be the man," is reminiscent of the wording of Phoenician inscriptions.

There is, of course, room to ask about the end of the name. In *Yeshayahu* 22 the name is Shevna, whereas in the inscription it ends with –yahu. Several Hebrew seals from the First Temple period are engraved with the name Shevnayahu or Shevnayu, indicating that this was a fairly common name in Yehuda and Israel. From here we learn that Shevna was a shortened form of the name Shevnayhu (which appears, for example, in I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:24, as the name of one of the priests in the time of David). This abbreviated form is similar to Avda from Ovadyahu and Shima from Shemayahu, and others like it.

There is nothing forcing us to identify this grave with the grave of Shevna, but the possibility is reasonable. Is it possible that Chilkiyahu, the father of Elyakim who replaced Shevna, also served in the position of "over the house" even though there is no mention of this in Scripture? It is also possible that the person buried in this tomb was someone who was "over the house," but not mentioned explicitly in the verses.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Is it possible that the prophet is hinting at the fact that Shevna exploited his elevated standing, as well as the timing – a period of intense construction of new city walls and water works – to hew a tomb for himself during a time of national emergency? As one of the most important officers in the kingdom, Shevna who was over the house occupied himself with his own affairs, the hewing of a tomb in a most dignified area – perhaps similar to the section on Mount Herzl reserved for the "Great Leaders of the Nation."

It is very possible that in Shevna's mind the hewing of a tomb in that most distinguished area opposite the City of David expressed the idea that he was fixed in his lofty position. Therefore the prophet came and informed him that his honor would disappear with his removal from office.

2. The sad reality in Jerusalem

On the face of it, there is room to combine the two parts of chapter 22 into a single unit, and argue that Shevna who was over the house was in great measure responsible for what was happening in Jerusalem, for the rejoicing and debauchery, for the eating and drinking, "for tomorrow we shall die," and for the exaggerated confidence in the strength of their weaponry and fortifications. It is interesting that the first part of the chapter ends with the words "says the Lord, the God of hosts," and the prophecy about Shevna opens with the words, "Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts" (*Yeshayahu* 22:14-15).

Assuming that King Chizkiyahu was very busy with all the alliances at the international level and with planning how to contend with the Assyrian army, it seems that the internal arena was left entirely in the hands of his most senior officer, Shevna who is over the house.

The original mission of Achaz's replacement, Chizkiyahu, was to prepare the kingdom and uphold it with justice and with righteousness (*Yeshayahu* 9:6), but the king was immersed in an attempt to organize an alliance of regional forces against the global power of the time, Ashur. Therefore, it is very logical to see Shevna as responsible for the dismal moral situation in the city, as described at the beginning of the book of *Yeshayahu*, when this period of emergency and national preparation for the Assyrian invasion and siege of Jerusalem is exploited for private purposes and not for justice and righteousness, as is reflected in the words of the prophet:

How is the faithful city become a harlot! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards; they judge not the fatherless, neither does the cause of the widow come unto them. (*Yeshayahu* 1:21-23)

The prophet describes how Jerusalem, a city that is supposed to represent righteousness in the world, has become a place that is clearly and openly the very opposite. A prophecy that parallels Yeshayahu's prophecy in this context is that of the prophet Mikha:

Hear this, I pray you, you heads of the house of Yaakov, and rulers of the house of Israel, that abhor justice, and pervert all equity; that build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money; yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say: Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us? Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest. (*Mikha* 3:9-12)

Here, too, the primary issue under discussion is the corruption of all parts of the regime, its rulers, its heads, its priests and its prophets.

This leads to a new and harsh prophecy, the destruction of Jerusalem and the house of God. Even if there is a certain difference in the time of the prophecies, these two prophets prophesied during the same period, each one in his own style. It is clear that the addition in Mikha's words about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the house of God is dramatic, but it is reasonable to assume that they relate to the identical reality – the corruption of all the elements of the regime in Jerusalem.

Regarding the prophecy of Mikha, the words of Scripture are poor in one place and rich elsewhere, and the Bible explains itself: We have an exact date for this prophecy in Yirmeyahu 26; the prophecy there was delivered at the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim, when there were those who wished to kill Yirmeyahu. At that time -

Then said the princes and all the people unto the priests and to the prophets: This man is not worthy of death; for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God. Then rose up certain of the elders of the land, and spoke to all the assembly of the people, saying: Mikha the Morashtite prophesied in the days of Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda; and he spoke to all the people of Yehuda, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest. Did Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda and all Yehuda put him at all to death? did he not fear the Lord, and entreat the favor of the Lord, and the Lord repented Him of the evil which He had pronounced against them? Thus might we procure great evil against our own souls. (*Yirmeyahu* 26:16-19)

In other words, there is clear prophetic evidence that Mikha's prophecy was delivered in the time of Chizkiyahu.

As we have stated, the connection between the two parts of chapter 22 apparently indicates that the main cause of the spiritual and social reality in Jerusalem was Shevna.

3. According to *Chazal,* Shevna was opposed to the rebellion and supported surrender to Ashur.

Several sources in *Chazal* describe Shevna as undermining Chizkiyahu's leadership and adopting a pro-Ashur policy in continuation of the policy followed by Achaz. According to *Chazal,* the prophet Yeshayahu came out against this approach. Thus states the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*:

Shevna expounded [the law] before thirteen myriads, whereas Chizkiyahu expounded it only before eleven. When Sancheriv came and besieged Jerusalem, Shevna wrote a note, which he shot on an arrow [into the enemy's camp, declaring]: Shevna and his followers are willing to conclude peace; Chizkiyahu and his followers are not. Thus it is written: "For lo, the wicked bend the bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string" (*Tehilim* 11:2). So Chizkiyahu was afraid, and said: Perhaps, Heaven forfend, the mind of the Holy One, blessed be He, is with the majority; and since they wish to surrender, we must do likewise! Thereupon the prophet came and reassured him: "Say you not a confederacy, concerning all of whom this people do say, A confederacy" (*Yeshayahu* 8:12); that is to say, it is a confederacy of the wicked, and as such cannot be counted [for the purpose of a decision]. (*Sanhedrin* 26a) (*Sanhedrin* 26a)

Facing Shevna's support for Shevna, on the one hand, and Chizkiyahu's joining an alliance against Ashur, on the other, the prophet Yeshayahu stands opposed to both of these possibilities. In actuality, after the Assyrian invasion and Ravshakeh's slanderous words against God and against King Chizkiyahu, the latter goes to the house of God and prays. The prophet Yeshayahu delivers God's answer: "For I will defend this city to save it, for My own sake, and for my servant David's sake" (*Yeshayahu* 37:35). In other words, despite his principled stand against international alliances and against King Chizkiyahu's policy, the prophet supports the king and convinces him not to surrender to Ashur because God will in fact save Jerusalem.

Thus, in the first part of chapter 22 Yeshayahu sharply criticizes all of the military preparations for the rebellion, whereas in the second part he sharply criticizes the readiness to surrender to Ashur.

We see later that in the end Chizkiyahu replaces Shevna with Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu (*Yeshayahu* 36:22), and in fact in the delegation that goes out to Ravshakeh we find Elyakim ben Chilkiyahu "over the house" and Shevna "the scribe," so that in actuality Shevna no longer filled the lofty position. There are different views as to whether the reference here is to the Shevna who had been over the house but was removed from that position and was now filling a lower position in the kingdom, or to a different Shevna altogether (*Tosafot*, *Shabbat* 12b, s.v. *Shevna*, and *Tosafot, Yoma* 38b, s.v. *delo*, bring conflicting views on this issue). In the end, however, Yeshayahu's prophecy regarding Shevna was fulfilled and Shevna was replaced and the position of "over the house" was filled by someone else.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to discuss the reign of Chizkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Thus in Amos *Chakham's* *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yeshayahu.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A detailed account of the tomb and the deciphering of the inscription can be found in Nachman Avigad, *Matzevot Kedumot be-Nachal Kidron*, pp. 9, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the conclusion of Yechezkel Kutscher, *Ketovot Yerushalayim mi-Yemei Bayit Ruishon*, in *Sefer Yerushalayim* I, 1977, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. So suggests Shmuel Achitov in his article, "*Ketovot Ivriyot mi-Yerushalayim shel Yemei Bayit Rishon*," in *Yerushalayim bi-Yemei Bayit Rishon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)