YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Talmudic Aggadot**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #22: The Story of Chizkiya and His Illness – Part I**

**a. Introduction – the midrashic story**

In previous *shiurim,* we discussed *aggadot* that belong to the category of “stories of the Sages:” their main characters were active during the period of *Chazal*. In this *shiur,* we will look at an *aggada* that centers on biblical characters. This type of *aggada* is sometimes known as a “*midrashic* story,” since it is based on *midrashic* teachings relating to the text. This type of story is commonly found in *midrashei* *aggada* on the Torah, and is also found elsewhere in the Talmuds. The point of departure of a *midrashic* story is the biblical narrative, which it elaborates upon and sometimes retells in a different way. Ultimately, it arrives at the same ending as the biblical story, but via a different path.

We shall address the *midrashic* story in the Talmud Bavli in the same way that we addressed “stories of the Sages:“ an analysis of the story on its own, followed by a broader view of its context within the *sugya* and an attempt to understand how a reading of the story within its context contributes to the story and/or the *sugya*. The story we will examine here records the illness and prayer of King Chizkiyahu.[[1]](#footnote-1)

b. The biblical story

The story of Chizkiyahu’s illness and his recovery is recounted in the Talmud Bavli in *Massekhet Berakhot* 10a-b, based on the biblical account which appears both in *Melakhim* II (20:1-11) and in *Yeshayahu* (Chapter 38). Let us first review the account, as it appears in *Sefer Melakhim*:

“In those days, Chizkiyahu fell deathly ill. And the prophet Yeshayahu, son of Amotz, came to him, and said to him: ‘Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’ Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the Lord, saying, ‘I beseech You, O Lord; remember now how I have walked before You in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in Your sight.’ And Chizkiyahu wept bitterly. And it came to pass, before Yeshayahu had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying: ‘Turn back, and tell Chizkiyahu, the prince of My people: Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the House of the Lord. And I will add to your days fifteen years, and I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Ashur, and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant, David.’ And Yeshayahu said, ‘Take a cake of figs.’ And they took and laid it upon the festering place, and he recovered. And Chizkiyahu said to Yeshayahu, ‘What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up into the House of the Lord on the third day?’ And Yeshayahu said, ‘This shall be your sign from the Lord that the Lord will do the thing that He has spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten degrees, or shall it go backward ten degrees?’ And Chizkiyahu answered, ‘It is easier for the shadow to go down ten degrees; no, but let the shadow return backward ten degrees.’ And Yeshayahu the prophet cried to the Lord, and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Achaz.”

The first three verses here tell of the king’s illness, his message from the prophet Yeshayahu that he will not recover, and his prayer. The text then goes on to record the prophecy revealed to Yeshayahu, according to which Chizkiyahu’s prayer has been accepted. The story then details the manner in which Yeshayahu heals Chizkiyahu, Chizkiyahu’s request for a sign, and the sign’s fulfillment. The reason for our division of the verses in this manner is that the story recorded in the Bavli focuses on the plot and midrashim pertaining to the first three verses only, as we shall see.

c. The story in the Talmud Bavli, Massekhet Berakhot 10a-b

1.

R. Himnuna said: What is the meaning of the verse (*Kohelet* 8), “Who is like the wise man, and who knows the interpretation of a thing [*pesher davar*]?” [It means,] Who is like the Holy One, blessed be He, Who knew how to effect reconciliation [*peshara*] between two righteous men – Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu. Chizkiyahu said, “Let Yeshayahu come to me, for so we find in the case of Eliyahu, that he went to Achav, as it is written (Melakhim I 18), ‘And Eliyahu went to show himself to Achav.’” Yeshayahu said, “Let Chizkiyahu come to me, for so we find in the case of Yehoram, son of Achav, that he went to Elisha.” What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He brought suffering upon Chizkiyahu, and then said to Yeshayahu, “Go and visit the sick” – as it is written (*Melakhim* II 20, *Yeshayahu* 38), ‘In those days Chizkiyahu fell deathly ill. And the prophet Yeshayahu, son of Amotz, came to him, and said to him: Thus says the Lord (of Hosts), Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’ What is the meaning of [the seemingly repetitive formula], ‘You shall die and not live’? ‘You shall die’ – in this world, ‘and not live’ – in the World to Come.

2.

[Chizkiyahu] said to him, ‘Why such [harsh punishment]?’ He said to him, ‘Because you did not engage in procreation.’ He said to him, ‘The reason was because I saw, through a Divine vision, that the children issuing from me would not be worthy.’ He replied, ‘Why do you involve yourself with the secrets of the Almighty? That which you are commanded, you are obligated to do; let the Holy One, blessed be He, then do as He sees fit.’ He said, ‘Then give me now your daughter; perhaps by my merit and your merit worthy children will emerge from me.’ He replied, ‘The decree has already been issued.’ [Chizkiyahu] said, ‘Son of Amotz – finish your prophecy and go. The tradition that I have from my ancestor’s house is that even if a sharp sword is placed against a man’s neck, he should not desist from [praying for] mercy.”

3.

This saying is also recorded in the names of R. Yochanan and R. Elazar: ‘Even if a sharp sword is placed against a man’s neck, he should not desist from [praying for] mercy’ – as it is written (Iyov 13), “Though He slays me, I will trust in Him.” R. Chanan said: Even if it is revealed to a person in a dream that tomorrow he will die – he should not desist from [praying for] mercy, as it is written (Kohelet 5), ‘For in the multitude of dreams are vanities and also many words; as for you – fear God.’

4.

Thereupon, (*Yeshayahu* 38) “Chizkiyahu turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord.” Why the reference to the ‘wall’ (*kir*)? R. Shimon ben Lakish said, ‘[He prayed] from the innermost chambers [*kirot*] of his heart, as it is written (*Yirmiyahu* 4), ‘My bowels, my bowels! I am shaken in the chambers [*kirot*] of my heart…’. R. Levi said: This alludes to his prayer for a different wall. He said to [God], ‘Master of the universe, the Shunamite woman made just one small chamber [*kir*] – and You restored her son to life; how much more so [should I be restored my life, since] my ancestor overlaid the entire Temple with silver and gold!’

5.

(*Yeshayahu* 3) ‘Remember, I pray You, how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done that which is good in Your eyes.’ To what does he refer by the words, ‘I have done that which is good in Your eyes? R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: ‘He juxtaposed redemption with prayer.’ R. Levi said, ‘He hid the Book of Cures.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

d. General overview of the story’s structure

As we can see, this *midrashic* story – like many others – alternates fragments of the plot with teachings that illuminate the biblical verses upon which the plot is based. While this might seem to hamper the smooth flow of the reading, it is clear that the homiletical elements are also part of the story, clarifying and elaborating on different aspects of it and thereby contributing to its development. The second section of the story (part 2), an uninterrupted dialogue between the king and the prophet, would appear to be the heart of the rabbinical narrative.

As noted, a conspicuous feature of the story in the Gemara is that it pertains to only the first three verses of the biblical account. The biblical account and the rabbinical story share three elements, all of which appear in the verses that are cited:

1. Chizkiyahu’s illness and God’s command to Yeshayahu to inform him of his imminent death
2. Chizkiyahu’s turning to the wall to pray
3. The content of his prayer

There is an important difference between the *midrashic* elaboration on the first verse and its treatment of the latter two. With regard to each of the latter two verses, *Chazal* offer a homiletical explanation of a certain point in the verse by citing different teachings by Amoraim. In section 4, various opinions are cited concerning the meaning of Chizkiyahu’s turning to the wall, and these shed light on the content of his prayer. In section 5, there are different interpretations of his assertion, “I have done that which is good in Your eyes,” each suggesting what this “good” might be. With regard to the first part of the story, pertaining to the first verse of the biblical account, *Chazal* elaborate in a different way: before the verse itself is cited we are given a “background” of sorts which does not appear in the Tanakh (section 1), and after the verse is cited there is a dialogue between the king and the prophet, which likewise is not part of the biblical account. The conclusion of the dialogue brings us (both physically and thematically) back to the biblical account, at the point where Chizkiyahu turns his face (part 4). The narrator elaborates on the story and leads it in a different direction. The deviation from the text, however, is not absolute; the end of the dialogue connects the reader smoothly and seamlessly back to the continuation of the biblical story.

d. Comparison with the biblical account

The attention in the midrash to just the first three verses of the biblical account is not a matter of brevity; rather, it is a reorientation of the focus of the story. The biblical story consists of Chizkiyahu’s illness, his prayer, the Divine response to the prayer, and his request for a sign. In other words, it reviews everything that happens to Chizkiyahu in the wake of his illness. The reason for his illness is not mentioned, and it is possible that it is not related to any sin or wrongdoing. In any event, the prophet tells him only that he should prepare to die. But Chizkiyahu wants to live, and he prays, enumerating his merits, following which the prophet informs him that his prayer has been answered and he has been given another fifteen years to live. This news does not satisfy him; he requests a sign, and is indeed shown the shadow of the sundial moving backwards. The question lying at the heart of the biblical story and occupying Chizkiyahu himself is whether there can be recovery after a prophetic message that death is imminent. Therefore, the story must continue to the point where he is given the sign – in other words, where it is certain that he will recover.

Chizkiyahu is the main character in the story. There is no real conflict between him and any other character, and the inner human development in the story takes place mainly within his own consciousness: his difficulty in accepting the news of his impending death, his prayer, his questioning, and his relief upon receiving the sign. Yeshayahu is not an adversary, but rather mainly a transmitter of information (from God) which affects Chizkiyahu’s inner state.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Center of the *midrashic* story

The story recounted in *Massekhet Berakhot* seems, at first glance, very similar, with some elaboration on certain points. Indeed, an initial reading suggests that the story in the Gemara is brought mainly to fill in gaps in the biblical account. For example, the biblical text gives rise to the question of why Chizkiyahu, who was a righteous king who instituted a widespread religious revival, deserves illness and premature death. In the midrash, this question is voiced by Chizkiyahu himself, and Yeshayahu provides the response: he will die because of his sin – failure to procreate. Later on in the dialogue, Chizkiyahu answers the question that may occur to the reader following this midrashic interpretation: how is it possible that a king who exerted himself to such a degree to do good in God’s sight, withheld himself from the commandment to procreate? Chizkiyahu explains that his intentions were good; he simply could not reconcile himself with the idea that an unworthy king would issue from him. By preventing the eventual birth of this king, he was also saving the entire nation from the bitter fate that it would suffer under the rule of Menashe. Further on, the midrash elaborates on the meaning of the “wall” (*kir*) and the substance of Chizkiyahu’s prayer, reinforcing the power of his prayer and its worthiness of acceptance.

However, none of this is the real purpose of *Chazal’s* story. Its point is not merely to complement the biblical story, but to offer a completely different main theme and focus. The textual basis is limited to the first three verses: there is no mention of Yeshayahu’s message of recovery, nor of the sign. Thus, the question of Chizkiyahu’s recovery is no longer the issue. The focus of the midrash may be discerned through the individual positions of the characters in the story and the relations between them, as well as an examination of the literary devices characterizing the midrashic story – including structure and the use of ambiguity, as we shall see below.

e. Analysis of the parts of the midrash

Introduction

The relations between the characters are portrayed differently here than from the biblical account. In the midrash, Yeshayahu is not merely a messenger bringing the Divine message. There is a dialogue between him and Chizkiyahu which places them, at each stage of the discussion, on opposing sides. The prophet is thus “upgraded” here to a more central role in the dramatic and psychological development of the story.

This is apparent already at the very outset, in the introduction, which chronologically precedes Chizkiyahu’s illness. At first, the question posed in the Gemara seems to make no sense: what need is there for any compromise between the king and the prophet? The *midrashic* elaboration on the verse from *Kohelet* describes a situation in which these two figures are meant to meet – but the reader has no idea what the purpose of this meeting might be. All that we are told is that neither the king nor the prophet is willing to make the first move in initiating the encounter.

The only hint to the content of the meeting is to be found in the biblical rebukes that each brings to back up his position. Chizkiyahu bases his argument on the precedent of King Achav, before whom Eliyahu came to present himself. Yeshayahu looks to the following generation, when Yehoram, Achav’s son, went to Elisha. Since we assume that these precedents are not chosen randomly, they seem to convey a hint that, as in the instances cited, the king has sinned and the prophet has harsh words for him. In the example given to support Chizkiyahu, recalling the encounter between Eliyahu and Achav, the prophet not only rebukes the king but foretells his death – alluding, perhaps, to the message that Yeshayahu will bring to Chizkiyahu.[[4]](#footnote-4) In any event, the introduction creates a certain level of tension between Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu, the source of which is still unclear to the reader. The midrash then goes on to explain that God causes them to meet by bringing suffering upon Chizkiyahu (which apparently could have been avoided had they met earlier). As the party who has sinned, it is he who falls ill, so ill that he cannot go to Yeshayahu, and so Yeshayahu comes to him.

The chiastic structure of the story and its significance

Part 2 has as its starting point the beginning of the biblical account: Yeshayahu’s message to Chizkiyahu that he will die, and the midrashic explanation that he will be cut off not only from this world, but also from the World to Come. This is followed by the dialogue between them. The chiastic structure of the dialogue exposes its inner meaning:

(A1) [Chizkiyahu] said to him, ‘Why such [harsh punishment]?’

(B1) He said to him, ‘Because you did not engage in procreation.’

(C1) He said to him, ‘The reason was because I saw, through Divine inspiration, that the children issuing from me would not be worthy.’

(D) *He replied, ‘Why do you involve yourself with the secrets of the Almighty? That which you are commanded, you are obligated to do; let the Holy One, blessed be He, then do as He sees fit*.’

(C2) He said, ‘Then give me now your daughter; perhaps by my merit and your merit worthy children will issue from me.’

(B2) [Yeshayahu] replied, ‘The decree has already been issued.’

(A2)[Chizkiyahu] said, ‘Son of Amotz – finish your prophecy and go. The tradition that I have from my ancestor’s house is that even if a sharp sword is placed against a man’s neck, he should not desist from [praying for] mercy.”

The dialogue begins in the wake of Yeshayahu’s message that Chizkiyahu will die. The king asks why he is being punished (A1), and Yeshayahu reveals that the king’s sin is the reason for his illness (B1). Chizkiyahu tries to explain his behavior as arising from his own prophecy that his descendants would be wicked (C1). At this point, Yeshayahu rebukes the king directly for having the presumptuousness to meddle with Divine plans that are hidden from human understanding. Man must do what he is commanded to do, regardless of how things will develop – even if future developments are revealed to him in a vision. This rebuke is at the center of the chiastic structure, representing the central message of the story: in the face of a Divine command, one must ignore visions and prophecies concerning the future, and do that which can and must be done.

This represents the turning point of the story. Chizkiyahu understands Yeshayahu’s message, and takes it a step further. He proposes that Yeshayahu give him his daughter in marriage, hoping that a righteous son will emerge from their joint merits. In other words, if it is man’s activity that is important, and not the Divine vision, then perhaps through proper human action and righteousness it is possible to overcome the vision and change the future results. This section (C2) corresponds to Chizkiyahu’s justification of his previous behavior, but is in fact its opposite: instead of evading God’s command because of the negative results that he envisions, Chizkiyahu now proposes doing that which he is obligated to do, in the most optimal fashion (in this case – adding Yishayhau and his merits to the lineage of his future progeny), with the idea that this may positively affect the results. However, this was not Yeshayahu’s intention. His rebuke to Chizkiyahu had not taken into account the possibility of changing the results envisioned in the prophecy; he had simply meant to emphasize man’s obligation to do what he is commanded to do, regardless of the seemingly negative consequences. This appears to be part of the limitation of a prophet – he is unable to imagine the non-fulfillment of the prophecy.

Indeed, Yeshayahu responds in this spirit: “The decree has already been issued” (B2). This statement is opaque and the reference to the “decree” is ambiguous: it might mean the decree of wicked progeny, or the decree that Chizkiyahu will die; seemingly, it refers to both. This idea is further emphasized through the structure. The context for Yeshayahu’s statement, “The decree has already been issued,” is a response to the previous words uttered by Chizkiyahu: the attempt to influence the nature of the child that will be born to him. But if we look at the corresponding limb in the chiastic structure (B1), it seems that Yeshayahu is actually talking about the decree of death resulting from Chizkiyahu’s failure to procreate.

The chiastic structure also highlights the difference between what each of the characters experiences. Yeshayahu’s words in (B2) correspond to his earlier words in (B1): in (B1) he reveals his prophetic knowledge of Chizkiyahu’s sin, and in (B2) he maintains his prophetic insistence that the decree has been issued. The contrast between the limbs that contain Yeshayahu’s words (B1, B2) with Chizkiyahu’s parts in the dialogue (C1, C2), which highlight the turnaround that he experiences, show that Yeshayahu remains static, faithful to his vision and, to some extent, trapped within it.

Indeed, it seems that Chizkiyahu understands both meanings of Yeshayahu’s words in (B2). Going beyond Yeshayahu’s refusal to cooperate with Chizkiyahu’s proposed attempt to influence the character of his future progeny, Chizkiyahu understands that Yeshayahu’s attitude mirrors the decree of death issued against him. Here Chizkiyahu speaks out in protest because, ironically enough, things have turned upside down. The prophet’s absolute adherence to his prophecy causes him, paradoxically, to violate the same principle that he himself has set down in the main part of the dialogue – a principle that Chizkiyahu has now accepted and internalized: a person should not involve himself with visions and their results, but rather should do that which he is supposed to do. Here Chizkiyahu would be justified in reflecting Yeshayahu’s message back to him: “‘Why do you involve yourself with the secrets of the Almighty?”

The differing world-views of Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu

The plot of the story in the Gemara ends at this point. The lines that follow elaborate and deepen our understanding of Chizkiyahu’s prayer. There are different explanations as to where its power lies – in introspection into “the recesses of his heart,” or looking outward, to precedents where subjects who were seemingly less deserving were nevertheless granted mercy by God. There are also various proposals – perhaps reflecting different world-views – as to which of Chizkiyahu’s merits rendered him worthy of Divine compassion. However, the story does not progress beyond the prayer to its result. Perhaps the reason for this is that the narrator assumes that the reader is familiar with the biblical text and knows how the story ends: Chizkiyahu’s prayer indeed changes the decree of his illness, but the son he bears will still be wicked. One result has changed for the better; the other has not. However, it may be that the results themselves are less important to the narrator here. Unlike the biblical narrative, the tension here does not concern the question of whether or not Chizkiyahu will recover. Instead, the tension is built on a conflict of world-views: on one hand, there is the static view of the prophet, demanding that man perform his duty with no thought of results, but also with no real belief in the ability of his spiritual efforts to affect reality and change prophetic decrees. On the other hand, there is the changing world-view of Chizkiyahu, who undergoes a process of *teshuva* and learning. From an attempt to flee from reality and to prevent it from being realized, he arrives at the understanding that his fate is not predetermined. He is obligated to act even beyond his basic halakhic obligation. He is prompted not only by the demand that he “do as he must,” but also out of faith in his ability to change the decree. This is faith in God’s attribute of mercy, which can be activated through prayer to replace the attribute of justice. The importance of the story lies not in the result, but rather in the difference of opinion between the prophet and the king, and the lesson of Chizkiyahu’s faith in the possibility of effecting change.

In the next *shiur*, we will compare the story in the Bavli with its parallels in other rabbinic literature, and we will explore the place of the story in its wider context in the *massekhet*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. A detailed and important analysis of the story in its various sources is to be found in O. Meir, “Sippur Mahalato shel Chizkiyahu”, *HaSifrut* 30-31 (1981), pp. 109-130. Some of the points we raise here were inspired by the article, although in certain instances we focus on different aspects or differ with Meir’s interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Further on in the *sugya* there are a few more excerpts relating to the biblical story, but they are only indirectly connected to the plot as discussed here – for instance, the *beraita* about six things that Chizkiyahu did. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There is no real dialogue between Chizkiyahu and God, but God answers Chizkiyahu’s requests – both his supplication for healing and his request for a sign. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)