YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Lecture 324: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXXIV) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CX)**

After having examined the reality in Jerusalem on the eve of the Assyrian invasion of the kingdom of Yehuda and the prophet's attitude toward Shevna who was over the house (apparently the individual who was responsible for the wretched situation in Jerusalem), we wish now to relate to Sancheriv's campaign.

The sources available to us to examine Sancheriv's campaign include Assyrian sources and documents, archeological findings at several key sites in Yehuda (Jerusalem, Lakhish, Azeka), and the accounts in the books of *Yeshayahu*, *Mikha*, *Melakhim* and *Divrei ha-Yamim.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

The campaign began in the cities of Phoenicia and from there it continued south along the length of the coast – Akko, Yaffo, Beit Dagon, Benei Brak, and Agur – cities that were under the protection of Tzedka, king of Ashkelon, who actively participated in the revolt against Ashur - and from there to Ashdod and Yavneh. The first battle against Egypt was fought in the area of Tibna. After his victory over the Egyptians, Sancheriv continued in the direction of the Pelishti cities under the rule of Yehuda, conquered Ekron and Gat, and from there he continued to Azeka in the coastal plain of Yehuda.

Azeka is located in the Ella valley which connects the coastal plain to the mountains, and makes it possible to ascend to the cities of Bet Lechem and Jerusalem in the central mountains.

The destruction of the cities in the plain of Yehuda is described in the prophecy of Mikha:

The word of the Lord that came to Mikha the Morashtite in the days of Yotam, Achaz, and Chizkiyahu, kings of Yehuda, which he saw concerning Shomeron and Jerusalem. Hear, you peoples, all of you; hearken, O earth, and all that therein is; and let the Lord God be witness against you, the Lord from His holy Temple. For, behold, the Lord comes forth out of His place, and will come down, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains shall be molten under Him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, as waters that are poured down a steep place. For the transgression of Yaakov is all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Yaakov? is it not Shomeron? And what are the high places of Yehuda? are they not Jerusalem? Therefore I will make Shomeron a heap in the field, a place for the planting of vineyards; and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will uncover the foundations thereof. And all her graven images shall be beaten to pieces, and all her hires shall be burned with fire, and all her idols will I lay desolate; for of the hire of a harlot has she gathered them, and unto the hire of a harlot shall they return. For this will I wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked; I will make a wailing like the jackals, and a mourning like the ostriches. For her wound is incurable; for it is come even unto Yehuda; it reaches unto the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem. Tell it not in Gat, weep not at all; at Bet-le-afra roll yourself in the dust. Pass you away, O inhabitant of Safir, in nakedness and shame; the inhabitant of Tza'anan is not come forth; the wailing of Bet-ezel shall take from you the standing-place thereof. For the inhabitant of Marot waits anxiously for good; because evil is come down from the Lord unto the gate of Jerusalem. Bind the chariots to the swift steeds, O inhabitant of Lakhish; she was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion; for the transgressions of Israel are found in you. Therefore shall you give a parting gift to Moreshet-gat; the houses of Akhziv shall be a deceitful thing unto the kings of Israel. I will yet bring unto you, O inhabitant of Maresha, him that shall possess you; the glory of Israel shall come even unto Adulam. Make you bald, and poll you for the children of your delight; enlarge your baldness as the vulture; for they are gone into captivity from you. (*Mikha* 1)

The prophet refers to the transgressions of Shomeron and Jerusalem. The account of the calamity that befell Yehuda mentions twelve places outside of Jerusalem, each one receiving the punishment that it deserves.

What we have here is a description of a campaign, according to which Sancheriv came from the sea and from the coastal road, and entered Yehuda from the southwest, by way of Azeka and Lakhish. The next stage in the campaign was to ascend from the plain to Jerusalem. It is reasonable to assume that this part of the campaign in the direction of the Pelishti cities was undertaken in order to confront the real enemy – Egypt, whose army had begun to advance its forces toward Gaza.

From Azeka, Sancheriv continued toward Lakhish, the second most important city in the kingdom of Yehuda. After laying siege to the city, Lakhish was captured and then became Sancheriv's headquarters as he continued on his way to the mountains of Yehuda and Chevron.

The extensive archaeological excavations that were carried out over the years in Tel Lachish have revealed the Assyrian siege in a most impressive way. They exposed both the offensive batteries of Ashur and the inner fortifications of the people of the kingdom of Yehuda in Lakhish.

These remains are remarkably consistent with what is described in the Assyrian reliefs discovered in Nineveh, Sancheriv's capital, and so there is a remarkable correspondence between all the sources – the account in Scripture, the Assyrian written sources, the Assyrian reliefs and the archaeological findings.

The reliefs show tortured prisoners being paraded in the victory processions of the Assyrian army. These processions bring to mind the words of the prophet Yeshayahu: "So shall the king of Ashur lead away the captives of Egypt, and the exiles of Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt" (*Yeshayahu* 20:4).

The Assyrian inscriptions summarize Sancheriv's campaign as follows:

As for Chizkiyahu, the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke, 46 of his strong cities, as well as the small cities in their neighborhood, which were without number – by levelling with battering rams and by bringing up siege-engines – I besieged and took (those cities). 200,150 people, great and small, male and female, horses, mules, asses, camels, cattle and sheep, without number, I brought away from them and counted as spoil. Himself, like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city.

Sancheriv testifies that he had laid siege to forty-six fortified cities and captured them with the help of battering rams and siege-engines. Although the names of the cities conquered by Sancheriv are not listed here, it would appear that we are dealing primarily with the cities located in the plain of Yehuda, including Lakhish and Azeka, and this might include also the cities mentioned in the prophecy of Mikha.

Similarly, in parallel Assyrian inscriptions Sancheriv always boasts of the conquest of the capital city, whereas here there is no mention of the conquest of Jerusalem. It says that he shut Chizkiyahu the Jew in Jerusalem "like a caged bird." From Sancheriv's perspective his failure to capture Jerusalem was without a doubt not to his glory, but nevertheless he mentions the siege laid around it. The fact that on the walls of Nevuchadnetzar's palace in Nineveh the siege of Lakhish is depicted in a huge relief that describes his victory as the most important achievement of the war may stem from his desire to play down his failure to conquer Jerusalem.

The description at the beginning of the book of *Yeshayahu* is very reminiscent of Sancheriv's campaign and its results:

Your country is desolate; your cities are burned with fire; your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by floods. And the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sedom, we should have been like unto Gomora. (*Yeshayahu* 1:7-9)

This reality is clearly reflected in the excavations at Tel Lakhish and Tel Azeka. At both sites we find the remains of a devastating fire that can be dated to the end of the 8th century, B.C.E, the days of Sancheriv. The archaeological finds indicate that the kingdom of Yehuda never recovered from Sancheriv's campaign before the destruction of the First Temple and Yehuda's exile to Babylon in 586 B.C.E.

In addition, the prophet describes the moral corruption of Jerusalem, which he compares to Sodom and Gomora, as he describes also later in the chapter:

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, your wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; every one 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)

This prophecy parallels the prophecy of Mikha (3:9-12) regarding the corruption of the entire regime. It is reasonable to assume that the harsh spiritual and social reality resulted from Shevna's rule, as was argued in the previous *shiur*, while Chizkiyahu was occupied with the alliance with Egypt and the other partners against the global superpower, Ashur.

Let us consider the formulation used by Yeshayahu to describe the rescue of Jerusalem: "As birds hovering, so will the Lord of hosts protect Jerusalem; He will deliver it as He protects it, He will rescue it as He passes over" (*Yeshayahu* 31:5). The prophet announces that God will protect Jerusalem; just as birds hover, so Jerusalem will be released from the siege. The verse alludes to a passing over, a future salvation like the salvation of Pesach, when God smote the Egyptians and took Israel out of Egypt. In similar fashion, God will smite the Assyrian camp and Jerusalem will be liberated from the siege.

### The doors of the Temple

 The prophet in II *Melakhim* describes Sancheriv's entry into the kingdom of Yehuda and his capture of the cities of Yehuda including Lakhish:

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 Lakhish, 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)

Chizkiyahu, among the organizers of the international alliance against Ashur, was compelled when Sancheriv entered the kingdom of Yehuda to surrender to him and pay for it. The verses mention three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. The Assyrian documents mention, in addition to thirty talents of gold, eight hundred talents of silver, precious stones, eye-paint, inlaid furniture, and even some of his daughters and concubines – an exceedingly heavy levy.

Scripture testifies that Chizkiyahu used even the silver in the house of God to pay the tax. In addition, he cut off the gold from the doors and door-posts of the Temple, which he himself had plated at the beginning of his reign. Chizkiyahu's father, Achaz, in addition to the fact that he built an altar to the god of Damascus and offered sacrifices on it, executed certain measures in the house of God that significantly impaired its functioning:

And king Achaz cut off the borders of the bases, and removed the laver from off them; and took down the sea from off the brazen oxen that were under it, and put it upon a pavement of stone. And the covered place for the sabbath that they had built in the house, and the king's entry without, turned he unto the house of the Lord, because of the king of Ashur. (II *Melakhim* 16:17-18)

And in *Divrei ha-Yamim* it is stated:

And Achaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the Lord; and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:24)

In addition to the total closure of the house of God, Achaz cut off the borders of the bases, removed the laver, took down the sea, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of the Lord.

Apparently, this cutting included the cutting off of the gold from the doors and the door-posts of the Temple, even though this is not specifically mentioned. Chizkiyahu at the beginning of his reign reopened the house of the Lord, and plated the doors of the Temple. In the wake of Sancheriv's invasion of the kingdom of Yehuda, Chizkiyahu once again cut the gold off from the doors and the door-posts which he himself had plated as part of the overall repair of the actions of his father Achaz.

In the account of the cutting off of the gold from the doors and the door-posts, Scripture refers to the king as "Chizkiyahu," whereas when he plates them at the beginning of his reign, he is called "Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda." The verse prophetically alludes[[2]](#footnote-2) to the standing of the king in the wake of his actions. At the beginning of his reign, when he restored the house of God, he acted as king with all his powers and authority. As soon as he cuts off the gold from the doors in order to pay the heavy tax to the king of Ashur, the prophet removes from him his royal title.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to examine Chizkiyahu's reign.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Many have dealt with this issue, including: B. Mazar, "*Masa Sancheriv* *le-Eretz Yehuda*," in Y. Livor (ed.), *Historiya Tzeva'it shel Eretz Israel*, Tel Aviv 1964, pp. 286-295; N. Ne'eman, "*Masa'ot Malkhei Ashur le-Yehuda le-Or Te'uda Ashurit Chadasha*," *Shenaton le-Mikra u-le-Cheker ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum* II (1977), pp. 165-166; and also Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun and Beni Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu ke-Tziporim Afot*, Tel Aviv 2013, pp. 252 and on. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I first heard this idea from my revered teacher, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)