

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #24: Chapter 20 – Tests of Faith

The central question that underlies the dilemmas and challenges faced by Chizkiyahu is the age old question of *bitachon*: Should a person rely upon God or exercise his or her own initiative, independence and acumen to actively meet and resolve the situations and struggles of life?

In the story of the terrifying Assyrian attack on Jerusalem (ch. 18-19), Chizkiyahu was saved solely by God's power and grace. Chapter 20 presents two scenarios in which Chizkiyahu acts in contrary directions. In the first, he trusts in God. In the second, he acts independently, furthering his strategic and diplomatic agenda by consorting with a foreign power. These stories will offer us a wonderful opportunity to think about the issue of faith versus self-empowerment.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

In those days Chizkiyahu became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Yeshayahu son of Amotz went to him and said, “This is what God says: ‘Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.’” (20:1)

Sefer Melakhim offers no information as to the reason or cause of Chizkiyahu's sickness,¹ only that he is afflicted with a life-threatening skin ailment (v. 7). Yeshayahu the prophet speaks in God's name, informing Chizkiyahu of his imminent demise and warning him to prepare for death.² And yet, rather than eliciting the king's acquiescence, the divine decree merely spurs Chizkiyahu into desperate prayer, as he pleads before God, stressing his religious commitment:

¹ *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:25 indicates that Chizkiyahu's arrogance or excessive pride was the cause of God's ire. We shall discuss this idea in a wider sense later in this shiur.

² There are three other instances in *Sefer Melakhim* in which kings approach prophets with the question: “Will I recover from this sickness?” In each case, the prophet announces the demise of the royal concerned: Yerov'am's son (*Melakhim* I 14:1-18); Achazya (*Melakhim* II 1:2-4); and Ben-Hadad (*Melakhim* II 8:9-10).

He turned his face to the wall and prayed to God, saying: "Remember, God, how I have walked before You faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in Your eyes." And Chizkiyahu wept bitterly. (2-3)

In no time at all – Yeshayahu hardly had time to leave the palace grounds – God issues a reprieve, granting the king an additional fifteen years. Through this story, Chizkiyahu emerges as a powerful symbol of tenacious prayer, an embodiment of the principle that even after the decree has been issued, after the die has seemingly been cast, one may still appeal to God. In his faith, Chizkiyahu challenges the absolutism of prophecy and overturns the divine sentence.

[Chezekia said] 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. ... "Thereupon straightway, Chezekia turned his face to the kir [wall] and prayed unto the Lord." What is the meaning of 'kir'? — R. Simeon b. Lakish said: [He prayed] from the innermost chambers [kiroth] of his heart ..." (*Berakhot* 10a-b)

Notwithstanding the prophet's explicit annulment of the fatal decree, the king requests a divine sign as verification of his promise. Does the king not trust the prophet? Why does he require further evidence of God's word? Radak explains:

After [Yeshayahu] had pronounced the decree twice – "You will die"; "you shall not live" – [Chizkiyahu] considered Yeshayahu's response, "I will heal you," an attempt to console him after he had witnessed his extensive weeping. And although he saw the manner in which the boils had become healed, he did not believe that he would genuinely regain his strength such that he could "go up to the House of the Lord."

Chizkiyahu was unsure whether the reversal of God's prophecy was truly real. Was the prophet simply trying to alleviate his distress with kind words?³ He needed a direct communication from God. The precise details of the divine sign elude us,⁴ but Chizkiyahu emerges as a paragon of faith. And yet, his firm trust in

³ This is precisely what Elisha did to Ben-Hadad, II Kings 8:10.

⁴ Two major questions may be asked regarding Chizkiyahu's sign. First, what are the "the steps of Achaz," and how does the sun or shade function upon them? Josephus and the Septuagint suggested that we are dealing with a shadow on a flight of steps. Rashi, following the Targum Yonatan suggests that it is a sundial. Yigael Yadin pointed to ancient Egyptian shadow clocks that were built using steps and shadows, thereby uniting the two explanations. *Da'at Mikra* features an illustration of Yadin's shadow clock.

Second, why would Chizkiyahu request a test with such far-reaching cosmic implications? *Midrashim* relate to the "Achaz" connection with a claim that the sun set ten hours early on the day of Achaz's funeral to ensure that he was buried in disgrace and that now, through Chizkiyahu's sign, that time was being restored (Rashi and Ralbag to 20:11). The Ralbag, however, refuses to accept an alteration in the laws of physics: "We have not seen miracles of this sort even with Moses... a miracle in the orbit of the sun itself!" (Note that Ralbag lived 1288-1344, predating Copernicus and Galileo.) Thus, Ralbag proposes that what transpired was a

God does not engender human diffidence. Chizkiyahu balances his reliance on God and his ability to challenge Him.

A question arises that relates to the relationship between this story and the previous one, Sancheriv's siege and Jerusalem's miraculous salvation. The siege is dated by *Sefer Melakhim* to the fourteenth year of Chizkiyahu's reign (18:13). In our story, Chizkiyahu, a king who reigns twenty-nine years (18:2), gets sick and thereafter is granted an additional fifteen years. By simple deduction, we may now date Chizkiyahu's illness to his fourteenth year as well. In that case, we may well follow Rashi and Abarbanel,⁵ who view Chizkiyahu's illness as a mirroring of the nation facing catastrophe, and the deliverance of the two as transpiring concurrently. Indeed, each instance features a desperate king turning to God in prayer and a swift, miraculous reversal that restores life and the normal order of things.

THE VISIT OF BERODAKH BALADAN⁶

The final episode describes the visit of a Babylonian ruler:

At that time, Berodakh Baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent Chizkiyahu letters and a gift, because he had heard of Chizkiyahu's illness. Chizkiyahu received the envoys and showed them all that was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices and the fine olive oil—his armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Chizkiyahu did not show them. (12-13)

Chizkiyahu's display triggers the prophet's ire. He censures Chizkiyahu and issues a terrible prophecy of doom and exile:

The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says God.

This passage raises many questions. Who is this Babylonian ruler? What is his interest in coming to see Chizkiyahu? Is this merely a therapeutic visit to a convalescent monarch or is there more than meets the eye here? Most intriguing is Yeshayahu's rage as Chizkiyahu displays his royal treasures and national

sudden shift in the shade, created by a cloud cover, not a shift in the orbit or rotation of the earth itself.

⁵ Radak, based on the verse "I will save you from the hand of Ashur and this city... I will protect" (20:6), dates the illness to the time of the siege. Ralbag asserts that the story postdates the retreat of Assyria. Rashi and Abarbanel, following *Seder Olam* (ch. 23), explain that the "third day" on which Chizkiyahu was healed coincided with the night of the Assyrian retreat. Miracle was superimposed on miracle. Even if this timeline is unlikely, the biblical tie-in "in those days" certainly furnishes a linkage between the two stories of reprieve and deliverance.

⁶ Here the name is Berodakh. In *Yeshayahu* (39:1) it is written as "Merodakh" – probably a hebraicization of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon.

storehouses? Is a king precluded from exhibiting his wealth? Is this act so dire as to warrant the first instance of a prediction of the *Churban*?⁷

BERODAKH AND CHIZKIYAHU'S EXCESSIVE PRIDE

Ralbag suggests that the Babylonian delegation came in response to the miraculous sign enacted at Chizkiyahu's request, the reversal of the sun. Yeshayahu became enraged because Chizkiyahu misappropriated the visit to glorify his own power instead of God:

This was evil in God's eyes, for he raised himself [lit. his heart] over God. [The Babylonians] came to enquire about the miracle; it was inappropriate for Chizkiyahu to leverage this to his self-glorification. Instead, he should have attributed the greatness and honor to God and have them appreciate God's power.

Ralbag's portrayal of Chizkiyahu as occupied with and guilty of self-aggrandizement is based on the account in *Divrei Ha-yamim*.⁸

In those days, Chizkiyahu became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to God, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Chizkiyahu's **heart was proud** and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore God's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:24-5)

Interestingly, while *Divrei Ha-yamim* fails to mention the visit by Berodakh's men, these verses establish a causal link between the king's sickness, his excessive pride and God's condemnation of Jerusalem.

A MILITARY FOCUS

Berodakh Baladan is a historical figure,⁹ and historical records show that he twice attempted to galvanize an anti-Assyrian coalition to terminate Assyria's regional dominance. It seems highly possible that this international diplomatic mission was a consultation in building precisely such a war coalition.¹⁰

⁷ An additional instance can be found in *Yirmiyahu* 26:18, quoting *Mikha* 3:12.

⁸ Others identify his arrogance in his responses to Yeshayahu in ch. 20 – see *Bamidbar Rabba* 20:6.

⁹ Berodakh was a Babylonian rebel who united the Chaldean tribes to resist and overthrow Assyrian dominance. His revolt succeeded, and from 722-711 BCE he ruled Babylonia and sought to galvanize a broad resistance to crush Assyria entirely. However, Sargon fought back against Berodakh's allies and prevented the rise of an anti-Assyrian coalition. After Sargon's death in 705 BCE, Berodakh once again felt that his time had come, but Sancheriv conquered Babylonia in 703 BCE and Berodakh lost his power. Scholars debate whether this delegation to Chizkiyahu should be dated to the period of 711 BCE or to the later attempt in 705-703 BCE, but the visit by Berodakh's men seems highly plausible.

¹⁰ See Y. Elitzur, *Israel and the Bible* (Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 1999) pgs 201-209 [Hebrew].

Chizkiyahu's display of his treasury and stores was probably a demonstration of his ability to mount a military campaign, or conversely, to withstand an Assyrian onslaught.

In this vein, the *midrash* suggests that Berodakh's visit was not so much a result of Chizkiyahu's miraculous recovery, but in response to Israel's amazing defeat of Sancheriv:

When Chizkiyahu saw the Babylonian delegates, he became exceedingly conceited [lit. high of heart]. He showed them the royal treasury and the Holy of Holies, and opened the Ark [of the Covenant] and pointed to the tablets [of stone] and said: "It is with these that we wage war and achieve victory!" (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, 51)

According to this *midrash*, when the prophet criticizes Chizkiyahu's "pride," his complaint is that Chizkiyahu was downplaying God's role in the defeat of Assyria and highlighting his own role, accentuating his strength. Here, the offensive factor is not simple arrogance; it goes deeper than that. In Chizkiyahu's desire to impress the foreign dignitaries, he sequesters God's victory and miracles, misappropriating God's power as his own. He is essentially usurping God.

AGAINST ALLIANCES

These readings are based upon *Divrei Ha-yamim's* accusation of excessive pride, but in fact, *Sefer Melakhim* never lists this as Chizkiyahu's character flaw. If we read *Melakhim* alone, what could we propose to explain Yeshayahu's fierce opposition to Chizkiyahu's alliance with Babylon?

The most obvious answer is to reflect upon the fact that Yeshayahu is a prophet who repeatedly warns against alliances with foreign governments. Yeshayahu advises King Achaz against a pact with Assyria; he seeks to thwart Chizkiyahu's alliance with Egypt. But what is the reason for the prophet's disinclination to form these pacts? What is wrong with alliances?

First, the ally can easily let you down:

"Woe to the obstinate children," declares God, "to those who carry out plans that are not Mine, forming an alliance, but not by My spirit... who go down to Egypt without consulting Me; who look for help to Pharaoh's protection, to Egypt's shade for refuge. **But Pharaoh's protection will be to your shame**; Egypt's shade will bring you disgrace." (*Yeshayahu* 30:1-3)

Second, Israel is simply a small player up against huge imperial forces much larger than it. Israel would do much better to "be firm and be calm," to ride out the storm. If Israel bets on the wrong alliance, it can be easily overwhelmed and destroyed:

Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloach... Therefore, God is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates—the king of Assyria with all his pomp. It will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks, and swirl through Judah like a flash flood reaching up to the neck. (*Yeshayahu* 8:6-8)

This may be the easiest explanation of Yeshayahu's gloomy prediction: “all that your predecessors have stored up until this day will be carried off to Babylon.” He means that the people whom you befriend today are likely to turn against you tomorrow.

But lastly, in a world in which there is no separation between religion and state, in which every country has a religious vision and culture, a covenant with a foreign power generally involves a religious compromise. Chizkiyahu's father Achaz is good proof for this in that his strategic alliance with Assyria opened the floodgates to a wholesale adoption of Assyrian religious norms.

Yeshayahu opposes reliance on a foreign power for all these reasons. In turbulent times, he far prefers the adoption of a more modest profile, withdrawing from brokering international treaties and meddling.

Sefer Melakhim paints a picture of a faithful, religious Chizkiyahu. However, maybe precisely due to his propensity to depend upon God, his diplomatic courtship of a foreign power is misplaced and flawed.

QUESTIONS OF TRUST: THE BOOK OF REMEDIES.

If Yeshayahu's reluctance to form alliances with other nations is indeed warranted, what is the king to do? Should Chizkiyahu never negotiate alliances with other regional powers? He is, after all, the king; wouldn't his people expect him to prepare a strategy that would avert yet another invasion by a superpower like Assyria? Should Chizkiyahu run his foreign policy solely by turning to God in prayer?

We can reinforce this question with a famous rabbinic reflection upon Chizkiyahu's successes and mistakes:

King Chizkiyahu did six things; regarding three [the Rabbis] protested and regarding three they did not: He dragged his father's remains on a rope-drawn bier, and they did not protest; He ground down the brazen serpent, and they did not protest; He hid the Book of Remedies, and they did not protest. [These are the] three things against which they did protest: He cut off the doors of the sanctuary and sent them to the king of Assyria, and they protested; He blocked off the waters of the upper Gichon, and they

protested; He intercalated the month of Nisan in Nisan, and they protested. (*Pesachim* 55b-56a)

The Rabbis approve of Chizkiyahu's war on idolatry: his defilement of his father's funeral and his destruction of Moshe's serpent. But how does the "Book of Remedies" enter into this list? This book sounds like a compendium of cures. Why would anyone destroy a medical almanac? Rashi (*Pesachim* 56a) explains that the Book of Remedies gave a means of immediate healing to any ailing person and "it was hidden away due to the fact that people's hearts were not subdued regarding the sick and they were healed immediately." Maimonides was flabbergasted at this interpretation:

How nonsensical is this argument and how deluded! It ascribes a degree of foolishness to Chizkiyahu (and to the Sages who supported his efforts) the like of which one should only attribute to the basest of the masses. According to their confused and idiotic reasoning, if a person is hungry and turns to bread and consumes it, thus becoming healed from that great "sickness" of hunger, shall we say that he has lost his faith in God? Only fools would say that! For just as I thank God when I eat for that which He provided me to relieve my hunger and to sustain and preserve me, so, too, will I thank Him for providing me with a remedy which heals sickness. (Rambam, Commentary to the *Mishna*, *Pesachim* ch. 4)

Rambam is suggesting that medicine is no more an affront to God than food. God has given man the power to utilize medicine to cure disease no less than to relieve hunger by eating.

And yet, the conclusion of the *mishna* quoted above states that the Rabbis disapproved of Chizkiyahu's rerouting of the Shiloach, "because he should have relied upon God" (Rashi). But how can we accept this? Should Chizkiyahu not have fortified his city to the best of his ability? Again, we return to our central question: When is it legitimate to exercise human initiative and when is it more appropriate to rely upon God?

One suggestion might be to limit one's reliance upon God to circumstances in which one has no influence – in Chizkiyahu's case, the Assyrian attack and his sickness. But then, why did Yeshayahu censure Chizkiyahu's overtures to Berodakh?

The *Gemara* recounts another fascinating exchange between Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu, which highlights this tension:

"In those days, Chizkiyahu became mortally sick. Yeshayahu the prophet, son of Amotz, came to him..." [Chizkiyahu] said to him: "Why have I been punished so harshly?" [Yeshayahu] replied: "Because you did not try to have children." He said: "The reason was because I saw by the Divine

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.” (*Berakhot* 10a)

Chizkiyahu's sickness is attributed here to his unwillingness to have a family.¹¹ Chizkiyahu refrains from having children out of fear that his children will follow a sinful path. The prophet's response – “You should have done what you were commanded, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do that which pleases Him” – implies that man is fundamentally empowered to make his own decisions.

IN CONCLUSION

We leave Chizkiyahu with a series of fascinating reflections. This monarch took an idolatrous kingdom and turned it around, rededicating the Temple and cleansing the country of idolatry. Furthermore, he makes every attempt to unify the kingdom, persuading the northern tribes to join him in Jerusalem. Archaeologists document a huge expansion of Jerusalem during Chizkiyahu's reign, possibly a migration of exiles from the north.

But Chizkiyahu faces a most formidable enemy – Ashur. Here, as his strategies fail and the Assyrian war machine closes in on Jerusalem, he has no one to trust but God. The city's miraculous salvation and Chizkiyahu's unexpected recovery from his illness both underscore God's role in history and the remarkable effect of reliance on the Almighty. But should man always rely upon God? Chizkiyahu is excoriated for exploring an alliance with Babylon, thereby gaining some traction against Assyria. We raised three possible explanations for Chizkiyahu's crime: (1) His haughty demeanor – he rides the wave of God's victory and attributes divine power to himself; (2) all alliances are problematic – they are unreliable, unpredictable and frequently necessitate future compromises that may have dire idolatrous ramifications; and (3) his reliance upon a foreign power demonstrates a lack of faith in God.

We discussed the question whether Chizkiyahu should be relying on God exclusively or, alternatively, pursuing his own national agenda. Here, we saw that in several instances, Chizkiyahu seems to be the man who must initiate rather than merely follow God. In this manner, the question remains open.

In the final analysis, Chizkiyahu is a man of great faith who, despite his faults, leaves a legacy as one of the greatest of the Judean kings.

¹¹ There is some contextual support for this claim, as Chizkiyahu's son and heir is Menasheh, who ascends the throne at age 12 (see 21:2). Chizkiyahu seems to have fathered Menasheh after this episode, and no children of his are recorded prior to his illness.