

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #22: Chapter 18 – The Rise of King Chizkiyahu

King Chizkiyahu heralds an exciting period in the kingdom of Yehuda. Chizkiyahu is devoted to God and responsive to His prophet. During his reign, Chizkiyahu leads Israel in a religious renaissance and seeks to heal the rift between the kingdom of Yisrael in the north and the kingdom of Yehuda in the south. There are moments in which Chizkiyahu seems to display the same grandeur as Shlomo.¹ And yet the challenges that he faces are far from easy. He assumes the leadership after the death of his father, the idolatrous king Achaz. Achaz had instigated a pro-Assyrian foreign policy, and in his era Yehuda had functioned as an Assyrian vassal enjoying the benefits of affiliation with the regional superpower. But an alliance with Ashur meant acceptance of its gods. How could Chizkiyahu restore the nation's loyalty to God, purify the kingdom of its idolatry and still keep his kingdom safe from the Assyrian threat? If he needed any reminder of the dangers that loomed ahead, his northern neighbor, the kingdom of Yisrael, was vanquished and exiled in the sixth year of his reign, palpable evidence of the menacing power of Ashur. How does a small kingdom navigate in such a perilous environment? Let us follow Chizkiyahu's narrative and see how he confronts the formidable tests of his reign.

REPUDIATING IDOLATRY

Sefer Melakhim offers a very favorable impression of Chizkiyahu in the opening verses of Chapter 18:

3. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done.
4. He removed the high places [*bamot*] and broke the pillars and cut down the *Ashera*. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moshe had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it and called it "Nechushtan."
5. He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Yehuda after him, nor among those who were before him.
6. For he held fast to the Lord. He did not depart from following Him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moshe.

¹ *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 30:26

7. And the Lord was with him; wherever he went out, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Ashur and would not serve him.

8. He struck down the Philistines as far as Azza and its territory, from watchtower to fortified city.

We are impressed by several points of emphasis. First, Chizkiyahu engages in an unwavering campaign to eradicate idolatry from the kingdom. We see him swiftly dismantling the *bamot* and the *Ashera*. Evidently, the country had become so overwhelmingly idolatrous that even Moshe's copper serpent, an instrument of God's miraculous healing in the wilderness,² had been adopted as an object of worship. Yet Chizkiyahu is single minded; he is not averse to removing and dismantling that historic artifact in his ardent offensive against national idolatry.

Second, the verses employ an impressive sequence of superlatives to denote Chizkiyahu's unwavering devotion to God. He is compared to David, he "does not depart" from the laws of Moshe, he "trusted" in God and "held fast" to Him. These are unusual accolades.

Lastly, we note Chizkiyahu's military victories. In an era that sees Ashur dominating the region, the conquests of this king are no small feat.

A BED OF ROPES

Let us begin our analysis with Chizkiyahu's war against idolatry. His father Achaz had turned the Temple of Jerusalem into a pagan shrine, welcoming an influx of Assyrian religion into Yehuda (Ch. 16). With his father's death, Chizkiyahu uproots and totally overturns his father's religious practices. *Chazal* offer a fascinating image for Chizkiyahu's rejection of his father; they recount that he "dragged his father's coffin on a bed of ropes" (*Pesachim* 56a). In a recently published volume, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun and Rav Beni Lau dramatize the scene of Achaz's state funeral and the shock that this act would have generated:

We can only try to imagine the scene of that funeral, choreographed by the heir to the throne, Chizkiyahu, under the supervision of the prophet Yeshayahu. The officials of Yehuda and its national leadership stand, lined up for the royal procession. The protocol dictates that the heir apparent lead the royal coffin of the dead sovereign to the official burial tomb of the monarchs of the House of David.

At that same time, a heated discussion was being held in Yeshayahu's study; Yeshayahu refused to approve the funeral proceedings. For almost twenty years, Chizkiyahu had grown under Yeshayahu's tutelage. His grandfather had put him under Yeshayahu's guidance, his father barely noticed, and he had become one of the prophet's finest students... Now Yeshayahu and the royal heir sat hatching the spectacle of the king's departure, his final journey. He must show the

² *Bamidbar* ch.21

people of Jerusalem that the days of paganism have ended, his father's evil era had come to a close.

...At the key moment, the courtiers lay the coffin of the deceased sovereign in the palace courtyard, a coffin fit for a king. Official royal convention dictated a silken burial shroud and a hearse encrusted with precious stones. Around the head of the king were spices and sweet-smelling branches. All the elder statesmen and the members of the government stood waiting for the heir to emerge and approach the bier. Suddenly, an official announcement sounded: "By order of Chizkiyahu, son of Achaz: Remove the body from the carriage, and place it on a bed of ropes!" A shocked murmur was heard from the crowd: "A bed of ropes? Like a wretched pauper?"

Suddenly the figure of Chizkiyahu emerged, erect, standing tall at the gateway of the palace. Nobody dared defy the royal pronouncement. Slowly, the body was removed from the royal hearse onto the bed of ropes and the funeral procession began on its way to the royal burial grounds, the resting place of the House of David. (*Isaiah*, 170-172)

Divrei Ha-yamim takes the indignity visited upon Achaz even further. It claims that Chizkiyahu denied his father's burial inside the royal tomb:

Achaz slept with his forefathers, and they buried him in the city, in Jerusalem, but they did not bring him to the graves of the kings of Yisrael, and Chizkiyahu his son reigned in his stead. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 28:27)

There is little doubt that this shocking inaugural act conveyed a powerful message regarding the new king's religious orientation.

REOPENING THE TEMPLE

Divrei Ha-yamim presents new information on Chizkiyahu's religious revolution:

In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the Temple of the Lord and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites, assembled them in the square on the east side and said: "Listen to me, Levites! Consecrate yourselves now and consecrate the Temple of the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Remove all defilement from the sanctuary. Our parents were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the Lord our God.... Therefore, the anger of the Lord has fallen on Judah and Jerusalem... Now I intend to make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel... (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 29:3-10)

This they do. It takes eight days to remove all the idolatry from the Temple, following which they rededicate the Temple in an eight day ceremony of consecration.³

³ This was possibly based on the eight day *miluim* ceremony described in *Vayikra* 8-9.

NATIONAL UNITY

Next, Chizkiyahu invites the northern tribes to join him in celebrating Pesach in Jerusalem.⁴ Because the purification of the Temple had taken so long, the official date for Pesach had already passed. As a result, the holiday was scheduled a month later:

Chizkiyahu sent word to all Yisrael and Yehuda and also wrote letters to Efraim and Menashe, inviting them to come to the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem and celebrate the Pesach to the Lord, the God of Israel. The king and his officials and the whole assembly in Jerusalem decided to celebrate the Pesach in the second month. They had not been able to celebrate it at the regular time because not enough priests had consecrated themselves and the people had not assembled in Jerusalem.⁵ (*Divrei Ha-yamim* 30:1-3)

Here the key, repeated throughout the chapter is Chizkiyahu's appeal to the tribes of the north, "from Be'er Sheva to Dan" (30:5) – Efraim and Menashe, Asher and Zevulun (30:10-11). It seems that Chizkiyahu made a considerable effort to unify the nation for this inaugural celebration. To achieve this goal, a variety of measures were undertaken to ensure participation of the northern tribes. One issue was that many of the northerners were ritually impure:

Although most of the many people who came from Efraim, Menashe, Yissakhar and Zevulun had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Pesach, contrary to what was written. But Chizkiyahu prayed for them, saying, "May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone who sets their heart on seeking God—the Lord, the God of their ancestors—even if they are not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary." And the Lord heard Chizkiyahu and healed the people. (18-20)

The people are impure and yet they celebrate Pesach!⁶ Ordinarily, this would be an insurmountable obstacle. And yet, Chizkiyahu prays for them and God

⁴ *Divrei Ha-yamim* gives us the impression that Ch. 30-31 take place in Chizkiyahu's first year. Some contest this, assuming that it would take time for Chizkiyahu to gain the political capital needed to invite the northern tribes, especially before the fall of Shomron. Additionally, Chizkiyahu speaks of the captivity of the northern tribes (30:9). (Rav Beni Lau and Rav Yoel Bin-Nun suggest this approach, p. 96.) But the text can be read as taking place in the first year of Chizkiyahu's reign without difficulty. *Chazal* (*Seder Olam* 22) assume that the northern tribes made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem in Hoshea's reign. The captives that Chizkiyahu refers to may have been from the Assyrian attack which preceded the fall of Shomron, see *Melakhim* II 15:29.

⁵ The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 12a-b) debates the meaning of the "second month" (30:2) referenced here. One opinion suggests that it is the second month of Chizkiyahu's reign, and that Chizkiyahu added a month to the calendar, effectively creating a second Nissan. (This act was criticized by the rabbis, since a leap year may only be enacted in Adar and not in Nissan.) A second opinion sees the second month as the calendric month of Iyar – and they were celebrating a mass *Pesach Sheni*. See the various proofs in the classical commentaries to *Divrei Ha-yamim*.

⁶ See the Rambam, *Hilkhot Bi'at Ha-mikdash* 4:16-18, who explains that the community may bring the *korban Pesach* even if they are all impure. Chizkiyahu acted inappropriately by

forgives them. Clearly Chizkiyahu was determined to bring the nation together for this event.

It is possible that the rescheduling of Pesach “in the second month” was also a measure directed at tribal unity. If we recall the national rupture in which Yerov’am rebelled and the secession of the ten tribes, we should remember that Yerov’am enacted the celebration of Sukkot at a month’s remove from the southern kingdom’s celebration:

And Yerov’am established a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in imitation of the festival in Judah. (*Melakhim I* 13:32)

Some understand that Yerov’am shifted the calendar a month behind to ensure that the population in the north would not migrate to the Temple for its festive celebrations. The idea was ingenious. Since Sukkot was celebrated in the north a month after Jerusalem, there would be no opportunity to attend the Sukkot celebration in Jerusalem because it had already transpired a month earlier.⁷ Now, Chizkiyahu’s addition of a month synchronized the southern and northern calendars, allowing all of Israel to celebrate at the same time!⁸

Why was Chizkiyahu so passionate about welcoming the northern tribes to Jerusalem?

There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Shlomo son of David, King of Israel, there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. (30:26)

Immediately after the reign of Shlomo, the kingdom had split into two. This was the first religious moment celebrated in national unity at the Temple in over 200 years. Chizkiyahu sought this national unity. He wanted Jerusalem and the Temple to be a national center and not merely the shrine of a single tribe. The joy of this Pesach reflects the delight at a nation reunited.

TEACHING TORAH

We have discussed Chizkiyahu’s repudiation of his father’s regime, his battle against idolatry, his rehabilitation of the Temple and his hopes for national unity. But the *Tanakh* and *Chazal* point out a final passion of this righteous king – Torah study:

The yoke of Sancheriv shall be destroyed on account of the oil of Chizkiyahu, which burned in the synagogues and schools. What did he do? – He planted a sword by the door of the schoolhouse and proclaimed, “He who will not study the Torah will be pierced with the sword.” Search was made from Dan unto Be’er Sheba, and no

creating a leap month at the wrong time, and additionally by adjusting the calendar for the concern of ritual impurity.

⁷ See my explanation of this passage in my *I Kings: Torn in Two* (Maggid, 2013) 165.

⁸ See Zev Erlich, “To perform Passover in the Second Month,” *Hazofe*, 11 Iyar 5741, 5-6 [Hebrew] or at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/vtc/0033968.html>.

ignoramus was found, from Gavat unto Antipatris and no boy or girl, man or woman was found who was not thoroughly versed in the laws of cleanliness and uncleanness. (*Sanhedrin* 94b)

Chizkiyahu is seen as a figure who enforces national Torah study. His methods are admittedly rather violently coercive, but the results are a civilian population that is thoroughly versed in the minutiae of Jewish law.

Evidence of Chizkiyahu's interest in spreading Torah knowledge is not limited to Talmudic tradition. In *Mishlei*, after twenty-four chapters, we read:

These are also the proverbs of Shlomo, compiled by the men of Chizkiyahu, King of Yehuda. (25:1)

It seems that Chizkiyahu published a “revised and expanded edition” of *Mishlei*, including certain as yet unpublished writings of Shlomo. We see that Chizkiyahu encouraged the publication of Torah literature, like *Mishlei*. This must indicate an interest in national education. Similarly, the Talmud states:

Chizkiyahu and his company wrote *Yeshayahu*, *Mishlei*, *Shir Ha-shirim* and *Kohelet*. (*Bava Batra* 15a)

The impression is that Chizkiyahu promoted the publication and distribution of literature that would boost his religious worldview.

IN SUMMARY

This week we discussed the first year of Chizkiyahu's reign and his religious reforms. Next week we shall discuss the challenge of the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem.