

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
YISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS**

**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Shiur #23: Chapters 18-19 – Sancheriv's Siege of Jerusalem**

Last *shiur* we discussed Chizkiyahu's rise to power. We noted his devotion to God and we charted his initial accomplishments: his repudiation of his father's idolatry, his nationwide campaign to expunge pagan worship from the kingdom, the purification and reopening of the Temple and his ambitious strategy to reunify the northern and southern kingdoms. We recall that this last aspiration materialized in a grand, national celebration of Pesach at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The subsequent story of Chizkiyahu is narrated through three dramatic episodes:

1. 18:13-19:37      The Assyrian attack on Jerusalem
2. 20:1-11            Chizkiyahu's sickness
3. 20:12-19          The diplomatic visit of Berodakh Baladan from Bavel

Despite some question as to the correct chronology<sup>1</sup> of these three independent literary segments, we shall study each story according to the order that it features in *Sefer Melakhim*.

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<sup>1</sup> We shall address some of the chronological issues in our upcoming chapter. For now, let us note a significant disparity between the timeline in Tanakh and the Assyrian timeline, adopted by historians. Shomron falls in Chizkiyahu's sixth year. Historians date this event to 722 BCE. But the siege in Jerusalem is dated to 701 BCE, some twenty-one years later. This is problematic because *Melakhim*, *Yeshayahu* and *Divrei Ha-yamim* all agree that the siege occurred in the fourteenth year of Chizkiyahu's reign. It is difficult to resolve these dates. The

## YEHUDA ATTACKED

Despite Chizkiyahu's smooth and strident religious beginnings, the international environment quickly becomes complicated and perilous. In Chizkiyahu's fourth year, Shomron is besieged by Ashur, and in his sixth year Shomron falls (18:9-12). The powerful Assyrian empire is the dominant regional force; clearly Chizkiyahu should exercise caution. And yet, we read how "he rebelled against the king of Ashur and would not serve him. He overran Peleshet as far as Azza and its border areas..." (18:7-8). What prompted Chizkiyahu to challenge Ashur?

Chizkiyahu's insurgency incites Ashur to attack the southern kingdom and to lay siege against Jerusalem. The devastation wrought by Sancheriv is unprecedented. Forty-six walled cities – "all the fortified cities of Yehuda" (18:13)<sup>2</sup> are attacked and defeated,<sup>3</sup> including the impressive fortress city of Lakhish (18:14),<sup>4</sup> second in strength only to Jerusalem. The victorious

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*Olam Ha-Tanakh* commentary suggests that the fourteen years must be dated to another event. Rav Yoel Bin Nun and Rav Binyamin Lau, in their recent volume on Yeshayahu (see p.195-6), propose that Chizkiyahu was crowned over all Israel in his eleventh year at the celebratory Pesach celebration. Thus, the fourteenth year is marked from the second coronation and coincides with Chizkiyahu's twenty-fifth year. Despite the scant textual support for this approach, it succeeds in resolving the disparity.

<sup>2</sup> The Assyrian attack on Jerusalem is one of the most extensively documented events in Biblical history. Beyond the Biblical account (recorded in *Melakhim*, *Yishayahu*, *Mikha*, and *Divrei Ha-yamim*), there are a wealth of archeological and Assyrian records that verify, enrich, and sometimes challenge aspects of the Biblical account. The statistic of 46 cities is recorded in Sennacherib/Sancheriv's own annals which document his war prowess, written in cuneiform on a baked terracotta prism, just 38cm in height, discovered in ancient Nineveh. Three identical clay prisms have been discovered inscribed with the same text: the Jerusalem Prism in the Israel Museum, the Taylor Prism (discovered 1830 - British Museum) and the Oriental Institute Prism (Chicago.) We shall discuss some of the text of these Assyrian texts at the end of this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Sancheriv's throne room in Nineveh was decorated with an incredibly elaborate and detailed relief, in thirteen huge panels, depicting the siege, attack and eventual fall and enslavement of Lakhish. It is evident that this victory was a significant mark of pride for Sancheriv and it is

Assyrian war machine then marches against Jerusalem and besieges it. Yeshayahu depicts the capital city, vulnerable and lonely, as a “hut in a vineyard” (*Yeshayahu* 1:8), an unsteady, flimsy structure, surrounded by a land laid waste by war.

"Your land is a waste  
Your cities burnt down;  
Before your eyes, the yield of your soil  
Is consumed by strangers -  
A wasteland; like Sodom overthrown.  
And Zion is left  
Like a hut in a vineyard  
As a hut in a field,  
Like a city beleaguered." (*Yishayahu* 1:7-8)<sup>5</sup>

This imagery drives home the question with greater veracity. Why did Chizkiyahu provoke Ashur? Was he not aware of the ruinous consequences that he was bringing upon his kingdom?

In order to answer this question, we would do well to understand the historical background to the period.

## FROM SARGON TO SANCHERIV

The Assyrian king Sargon II (722-705 BCE) was known as a cruel and determined ruler. It is likely that this king started his reign by presiding over the despoiling and exile of Shomron.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the distastefulness of

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fascinating to see how a small province such as Judea could muster such significant opposition to a colossal empire like Assyria. When Lakhish was excavated in 1932-1938, the defenses and attack ramps were found to match the Sancheriv relief quite accurately.

<sup>5</sup> There is some debate as to the precise events depicted in *Yeshayahu* 1-5. Here we follow the approach of *Da'at Mikra*, who sees these chapters as a description of Chizkiyahu's reign.

<sup>6</sup> The Tanakh describes Shalmanesser as besieging and vanquishing Shomron (18:9). But Assyrian records chart Sargon II as responsible for exiling its inhabitants. The final fall of Shomron probably transpired around the time of Shalmanesser's death and the ascent to the throne of Sargon. This may be hinted at by the mention of an anonymous “king” in 18:11, rather than an explicit reference to Shalmanesser.

being vassal to Ashur and the substantial annual tribute to its king, Chizkiyahu appreciated that to throw off the Assyrian yoke meant courting disaster.<sup>7</sup> But in 705 BCE Sargon was killed in battle. His body was never found, and he was not given a royal burial. The death of an emperor always presented an opportunity for revolt, but the circumstances of Sargon's death, widely seen as a bad omen for Ashur, exacerbated the unrest. Rebellion broke out at both extremities of the sprawling empire. In Bavel, Merodakh Baladan crowned himself as ruler. In the south, Yehuda allied itself with Peleshet and Egypt in rejecting Assyrian power. Since *Melakhim* records that Merodakh Baladan visited Chizkiyahu (20:12-13), we may suggest that the resistances in the East and West were coordinated. We can appreciate that for Chizkiyahu, the death of Sargon seemed the opportune moment, after two decades, to overthrow foreign domination. For four years, Chizkiyahu prepares assiduously for war. He carves a magnificent water tunnel through the bedrock,<sup>8</sup> a marvel of ancient engineering, rerouting the waters of the Gichon spring away from the

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<sup>7</sup> An insurrection was attempted by Azuri, the king of Ashdod, in 711 BCE. The catalyst for this revolt appears to have been shifts in power in the Egyptian government, changes that led regional states to believe that Egypt would have the strength to protect them and actively resist Ashur. On the basis of *Yeshayahu* 20, it is likely that Chizkiyahu contemplated joining the rebellion. Yeshayahu warns against this alliance. In this regard, Assyrian records document a conspiracy of "the kings of Philistia, **Judah**, Edom, Moab." If Chizkiyahu indeed joined the revolt at all, he seems to have adopted Yeshayahu's advice and withdrawn in time, as Ashdod and Peleshet were devastated under the orders of Sargon's official Taratan, whereas Yehuda escaped unscathed.

<sup>8</sup> No tour of the "City of David" is complete without sloshing, flashlight in hand, through "Chizkiyahu's Tunnel," which winds for 533 meters deep in the bedrock with only a 30 cm. (0.6%) gradient. A tablet written in ancient Hebrew script, now housed at the Istanbul archaeology museum in Turkey, records the method of construction, in which teams started from opposite ends and met at the middle! Recently there has been some debate as to the period in which the tunnel was constructed. See R. Reich and E. Shukron, "The Date of the Siloam Tunnel Reconsidered," *Tel Aviv* 38 (2011), pp. 147–157 and H. Shanks, "Will King Chizkiyahu Be Dislodged from His Tunnel?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, September/October 2013.

exposed outer wall of the city, into the center of Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> The city walls are raised and fortified, arms and foodstuffs are stockpiled,<sup>10</sup> the army trained.

And yet, Sancheriv fights back. In 703-702 BCE he puts an end to the Babylonian revolt. In 701 BCE he invades Judea, crushing the rebellion. He defeats the Egyptian and Ethiopian forces and then sends his army to besiege Jerusalem.

Initially, Chizkiyahu attempts to bribe Sancheriv:

Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, sent this message to the king of Ashur at Lakhish: "I have done wrong. Leave me, and I will pay whatever tribute you impose on me." The king of Ashur exacted three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold from Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda.<sup>11</sup> Chizkiyahu paid him all the funds there were in the Temple of the Lord and in the palace treasuries. At that time, Chizkiyahu cut the doors of the Temple of the Lord which King Chizkiyahu had overlaid with gold, and gave them to the king of Ashur. (18:14-16)

Despite Chizkiyahu's remorse and the extensive bribe, no response is heard from the king of Ashur. Instead, the narrative turns to an expansive dramatic enactment of Sancheriv's official delegation to Jerusalem.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Melakhim* II 20:20, *Yeshayahu* 22:10 and *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:3. For the assessment of the four-year duration, the death of Sargon II took place in 705 BCE, while the Assyrian attack occurred in 701 BCE. See also A. Sneh, E. Shalev and R. Weinberger, "The Why, How, and When of the Siloam Tunnel Reevaluated," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 359 (2010), pp. 57–65.

<sup>10</sup> Excavations in Lakhish demonstrate an unusually large concentration of handles from earthenware storage jars stamped with a "*la-melekh*" (belonging to the king) seal indicative of their status as royal property. These are dated to the period of Chizkiyahu. One theory explaining this phenomenon suggests a stockpiling of food to withstand an extensive siege.

<sup>11</sup> Sancheriv's annals testify that Chizkiyahu paid "30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, antimony, large cuts of red stone, couches inlaid with ivory, nimeru-chairs inlaid with ivory, elephant hides, ebony wood, boxwood and all kinds of valuable treasures, his own daughters and concubines." This is a more generous bribe than mentioned in *Melakhim*. But it is highly possible that in light of his defeat at Jerusalem, Sancheriv made the bribe look more attractive to save face.

## THE STORY IN *MELAKHIM*

We have described the political and military background to the Assyrian siege, a campaign which threatened the very existence of Yehuda. And yet, *Sefer Melakhim* adopts an entirely different angle to narrate this drama, presenting the military attack and the political negotiations as a religious and theological drama, more a verbal offensive than a military attack, as it transforms Sancheriv's aggression and Chizkiyahu's defense into a discourse about man's hubris or his reliance on God, as well as a direct test of God's power.

The central drama is expressed in the speech of Rav-shakeh, the Assyrian official who leads Sancheriv's heavily armed force to Jerusalem. It is a dramatic standoff, as three Assyrian high officials<sup>12</sup> confront three senior Israelite government figures.<sup>13</sup> The speech seems aimed at evincing surrender on the part of the city:

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<sup>12</sup> These were the *Taratan* (military commander and deputy to the king), the *Rav-saris* (chief official, lit. "head eunuch") and the *Rav-shakeh* (lit. head wine butler). *Rav-shakeh* may be a title for a central government position. Alternatively, he may actually be of lower official stature, but functions as the spokesman for the group because he speaks Hebrew.

<sup>13</sup> Elyakim ben Chilkiya "over the house", Shevna the "*sofer*" and Yoach ben Asaf, the "*mazkir*." See *Shmuel* II 8:16-18, 20:23-25, *Melakhim* I 4:1-5, 18:3. We don't know with any certainty the precise functions of these government positions. The character of Shevna is intriguing. Isaiah 22 depicts a situation during the siege of Jerusalem in which the city is enthralled by a carefree celebratory atmosphere: "Why have you gone up to the housetops? Celebration, a tumultuous joyous city ... joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!" (22:1,13) It seems that Jerusalem has adopted a carefree upbeat attitude, assuming that if life will be sharp and short, at least it should be enjoyed. Isaiah challenges this in God's name: "God has called for weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth" (22:12) in other word, God wishes that the people would turn to Him. Who is responsible? One government figure is named: "Go to see this steward, Shevna who is "over the house", and say, What have you here? and whom have you here, that you have hewn out a tomb for yourself here? ... The Lord is about to shake ... and violently toss you ... to a broad land. There you shall die ... I will drive you from your station, and you shall be torn from your stand. And in that day, I will call my servant Elyakim ben Hilkiyah. I will clothe him with your robe, and

Rav-shakeh said to them: "You tell Chizkiyahu: Thus said the Great King, the King of Ashur: 'What is the security [*bitachon*] on which you have relied [*batachta*]?... on whom are you relying [*batachta*], that you have rebelled against me? You rely [*batahta*] on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which enters and punctures the palm of anyone who leans on it! That's what Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is like to all who rely on him. And if you tell me that you are relying [*batachnu*] on the Lord your God, He is the very one whose shrines and altars Chizkiyahu removed... do you think I have marched against this land to destroy it without God? God Himself told me: Go up against that land and destroy it.'" (18:19-25)

Rav-shakeh's arrogance and disdain is apparent as he addresses Chizkiyahu devoid of a royal title, in contrast to Sancheriv, "the Great King." His speech, ostensibly directed to Chizkiyahu, is in reality an exercise of mockery, demoralization and intimidation aimed at the common people of Jerusalem, suffering from scarcity of food in the lengthy siege, who mass on the wall to hear the enemy speak. This is evidenced by the following exchange:

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strengthen him with your girdle, and I will commit your government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. (22:15-21) Shevna, it seems, is trying to generate a festive mood in the city. But God doesn't approve. He instructs Isaiah to prophecy against Shevna and to indicate that he should be replaced by Elyakim. Fascinatingly, our chapter in *Melakhim* presents Elyakim as the minister "over the house" indicating that Chizkiyahu replaced Shevna with Elyakim. This indicates that Chizkiyahu was receptive to Isaiah's rebuke.

The Rabbis see Shevna as a sinister figure. His policy of revelry hides his true motive; that he was looking out for himself and willing to betray his king: "What is [the reference to] 'a confederacy of wicked men'? ... When Sennacherib 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." (Sanhedrin 26a) Shevna is willing to betray the king and surrender the city to ensure his own political future. His motive is unclear. Does he support an alliance with Assyria? Is it self-interest? Does he merely seek to please the population of Jerusalem?

Elyakim son of Chilkiya, Shevna and Yoach replied to Rav-shakeh: “Please! Speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; do not speak to us in Judean in the earshot of the people on the wall.” But Rav-shakeh answered them, “Was it to your master and to you that my master sent me to speak those words? It was precisely to the men who are sitting on the wall – who will have to eat their dung and drink their urine...” (26-27)

The royal edict (18:36) that forbids the common people to respond or react to the Assyrian provocation gives us an appreciation of the psychological impact of this exchange. The issue is not whether the starving Jerusalemites will be shaken, but that their reactions to the taunts of Rav-shakeh not convey an impression that may galvanize the Assyrians to greater confidence. It is critical that Jerusalem retain its stoic face. Let us make no mistake that this is a war of words in the most literal sense.

When we read Rav-shakeh's speech, we cannot help but notice the sevenfold repetition of the verb *betach*; the central issue relates to “*bitachon*” – one's source of fortitude or strength. Upon whom do we depend? From where do we draw confidence and strength? Here Rav-shakeh raises two possibilities. First, it may be that Israel is relying on Egypt. Rav-shakeh responds that Egypt will fail to support them.<sup>14</sup> Like a Nile reed, when Israel leans on it it will simply pierce their hand. The second source of strength, Rav-shakeh suggests, is God. This too he debunks, claiming that it was God who had sent Sancheriv against Jerusalem, and that God was angry with Chizkiyahu.

In Rav-shakeh's second speech, he again appeals to the people of Jerusalem, ignoring Elyakim's request that he speak Aramaic rather than “Judean.” Rav-shakeh is basking in the intimidation he is wreaking against the besieged Israelites, grandstanding to the assembled throngs “in a loud Judean voice” (18:28). Now a new *leitwort* features: “*hatzel*” – indicative of salvation, deliverance or rescue. He undercuts the king – “Don't listen to

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<sup>14</sup> Yeshayahu has already warned of this. See *Yeshayahu* 30:1-5, 31:1-3.

Chizkiyahu” – and he continues with his smug oratory, seeking to convey that the people will be much better off under Assyrian rule:

Don't let Chizkiyahu deceive you, for he will not be able to save (*le-hatzil*) you from my hands. Don't let Chizkiyahu make you rely (*yavtach*) on God, saying: “God will surely save (*hatzel yatzilenu*) us – this city will not fall into the hands of the king of Ashur.” Don't listen to Chizkiyahu. For thus said the king of Ashur: “Make your peace with me and come out to me, so that you may all eat from your vines and your fig trees and drink water from your cisterns, until I come and take you away to a land like your own, a land of grain and vineyards, of bread and wine, of olive oil and honey, so that you may live and not die.” Don't listen to Chizkiyahu, who misleads you by saying, “God will save (*yatzilenu*) us.” Did any of the gods of other nations save (*hahatzel hitzilu*) his land from the king of Ashur?... Did they save Shomron (*hitzilu*) from me?... Will God save (*yatzil*) Jerusalem from my hand?

Rav-shakeh's words aspire to entice the trapped population. Sancheriv will save them; they can abandon Jerusalem and return to their farms and villages. Echoing the language of *Sefer Devarim*, he promises to transport them to “a land of grain and vineyards, of bread and wine, of olive oil and honey” (parallel to *Devarim* 8:7-8). His rhetoric also recalls the peace of Shlomo's era: “each man sitting under his vine and fig tree” (parallel to *Melakhim* I 5:5). But after promising Assyrian salvation, the rhetoric returns to God, as Rav-shakeh profanely disparages God, mocking His incapability to save His people.

*Sefer Melakhim* quotes Rav-shakeh's lengthy and provocative speech verbatim.<sup>15</sup> We might question the necessity of expansively presenting the offensive taunts of Israel's enemy. The goal, it seems, is to accentuate the

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly enough, other original Assyrian letters reveal an almost identical style of intimidation and mockery in the face of their enemy. See Letter 1-3 in Saggs, H. W. F., *The Nimrud Letters, 1952* (Cuneiform Texts from Nimrud 5), 24-33.

Assyrian smugness on the one hand, and their blasphemy on the other.<sup>16</sup> For now the battle will escalate a notch. The Assyrian king's challenge has attracted a new adversary. The chief antagonist Sancheriv and his army will now be forced to contend with a divine protagonist. Furthermore, Sancheriv's conceited braggadocio will be a stark contrast to Chizkiyahu's earnest and humble appeal to God.

## CHIZKIYAHU'S APPEAL TO GOD

Chizkiyahu's men return with torn clothes, a sign of mourning<sup>17</sup> and crisis.<sup>18</sup> Chizkiyahu responds by appealing directly to God. He does this in two ways. First, Chizkiyahu too tears his clothes, dons sackcloth and ascends to the Temple to pray. He then immediately sends his delegation (also now in sackcloth) to consult with the prophet Yeshayahu:

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<sup>16</sup> The *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* 60a suggests that Chizkiyahu's men tear their clothes specifically due to Rav-shakeh's blasphemy. It is in this Talmudic passage that Shmuel is quoted as suggesting that Rav-shakeh is a Jewish apostate: "Rav Yehuda said in Shmuel's name: 'He who hears the Divine Name blasphemed by a gentile need not rend his clothes. But if you will object: What of Rav-shakeh? — He was an apostate Israelite.'" Several strands of the story lend credence to this theory. First, Rav-shakeh is fluent in Hebrew, yet he works for the enemy. Second, he has intimate knowledge of Chizkiyahu's cult of the *bamot* (the local worship sites). In fact, Rav-shakeh's argument in 18:22 is that God will be angry with Chizkiyahu due to his removal of the *bamot*. Rav-shakeh accuses Chizkiyahu of dismantling the *bamot* so that all Israel would worship at the royal altar in the Temple. In other words, he suggests that Chizkiyahu has harmed God in order to serve his own political or egotistical aspirations. Abarbanel suggest that this line of argument proves that he is familiar enough with Israelite religious norms but that he adopts an attitude alien to Torah law. Third, we may suggest that Rav-shakeh's vicious vilification of king and God indicate his alienation from and antipathy for his own origins.

<sup>17</sup> See *Bereishit* 37:29, *Shemuel* II 1:11, 3:31, 13:19, 15:3 and others.

<sup>18</sup> See *Bereishit* 44:13, *Bamidbar* 14:6, *Melakhim* I 21:27, *Melakhim* II 5:8, 11:14, *Yoel* 2:13, *Esther* 4:1 and others.

This day is a day of distress<sup>19</sup> and rebuke and disgrace! The children have come to birth-stool and there is no strength to give birth. Perhaps the Lord your God will take note of the words of Rav-shakeh whom his master, the king of Ashur. has sent to blaspheme the living God... (19:3-4)

The metaphor of childbirth is a powerful one, as the Radak explains:

Like a woman in the throes of agony of childbirth as the baby is about to emerge... And the pain is greatest; if the midwife has no strength to extract the baby, [the mother] is abandoned to the intensity of the pains of childbirth without any hope of relief. Similarly, the great crisis is upon us and we lack the strength to escape it if God will not assist us.

The plight of Jerusalem seemed desperate. All the neighboring states, partners in Chizkiyahu's alliance against Assyria, had surrendered or were crushed. Egyptian aid had proved worthless, the country was overrun by the enemy, and now Jerusalem is alone and besieged. In his helplessness Chizkiyahu understands that he can rely only on God, and he casts the future of his capital city and his kingdom at God's door.

## GOD'S RESPONSE

Yeshayahu answers Chizkiyahu's messengers at the moment they arrive:

Thus says the Lord: "Do not be frightened by the words of blasphemy against Me that you have heard from the minions of the king of Ashur. I will put a spirit in him; he will hear a rumor and return to his land and I will make him fall by the sword. (19:7-8)

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<sup>19</sup> "Yom tzara" – This is a fascinating phrase. In many instances it indicates God's immediate salvation to a situation of distress. See for example *Bereishit* 35:3; *Yirmiyahu* 16:19-21; *Nachum* 1:7; and *Tehillim* 20:2, 50:15.

And so it happens. Almost immediately, Rav-shakeh calls off the attack as the army must relocate due to a pressing military crisis in another location. Nonetheless, a second Assyrian assault follows swiftly, with further blasphemous rhetoric. Once again, Chizkiyahu's recourse is a purely religious one. He takes the offensive Assyrian letter and spreads it before him in the Temple as if to force God to confront the abuse and insult being hurled at Him. He then prays, and the text of that prayer is a classic formulation of direct appeal to God from the depths of distress. (Nowadays many of the phrases are incorporated in our *Tachanun* liturgy.)

God accepts the king's appeal. Although God responds to Chizkiyahu through the prophet Yeshayahu, it is implied that he is speaking directly to Sancheriv:

Have you not heard? Long ago, I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass, that you have turned fortified cities into piles of stone. Their people, drained of power, are dismayed and put to shame.

But I know where you are,  
and when you come and go,  
and how you rage against Me.  
Because you rage against Me,  
and because your insolence has reached My ears,  
I will put my hook in your nose,  
and My bit in your mouth,  
and I will make you return by the way you came. (19:25-28)

God uses Sancheriv's argument. Sancheriv claims that he is God's messenger. God affirms that very fact. But, says God, Sancheriv has abused his power; he has profaned the God that empowered him, and now he will be demoted and treated as a slave, a mere horse, with a hook in his nose and a bit in his mouth. God is firmly in control.

As for the current siege on Jerusalem, Yeshayahu assures Chizkiyahu that not even a single shot will be fired. It will be over sooner than anyone anticipates“Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:

'He will not enter this city

or shoot an arrow here.

He will not come before it with shield

or build a siege ramp against it.

By the way that he came he will return;

he will not enter this city,'

declares the LORD.

'I will defend this city and save it,

for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.'"(19:32-34)

This must have seemed quite improbable, even absurd. But it is fulfilled that very night:

That night an angel of God went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. And the following morning they were all dead corpses. (19:35)

The final prophecy of the chapter points to Sancheriv's assassination at the hands of his own sons and the Tanakh records the realization of that prophecy. We now possess the Assyrian annals of Esar-haddon which report that this was precisely how Sancheriv died, albeit, some twenty years hence in 681 BCE.

## HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REFERENCES

For centuries, this remarkable miracle seemed unsubstantiated by any external source. It almost seems too fantastical to imagine a huge army of 185,000 just expiring in their sleep. The Biblical account aroused skepticism. The Greek historian Herodotus (485-425 BCE) reported a similar story, although there the adversary is Egypt. In that account, field mice invaded the Assyrian camp and gnawed the quivers, bow strings, and leather shield

handles, thus disarming the military force. As a consequence, many of the soldiers were killed and others fled. Josephus too reports the miracle of Jerusalem's reprieve in the days of Chizkiyahu, ascribing the death of the Assyrian troops to a devastating plague (Antiquities X:21-23). These sources notwithstanding, there was little to verify the Biblical version of the events.

However, with the discovery of Sancheriv's own records (see footnote 2) almost two centuries ago, we have greater backing for the veracity of the story described by *Sefer Melakhim*. Sancheriv's war records demonstrate a strange anomaly at the siege on Jerusalem. As Prof. Haim Tadmor<sup>20</sup> has observed,<sup>21</sup> Sancheriv's annals use a standardized formula when describing the conquest of an enemy town: "Four elements which constitute a fixed structure, without which one cannot speak of a description of battle against a renegade enemy." The four elements are how Sancheriv: 1. conquered a kingdom (including the capital city); 2. killed the king; 3. appointed his own vassal in place of the former king; and 4. imposed a heavy taxation. These are fixtures in recording every one of Sancheriv's conquests except one – the war against Jerusalem in 701 BCE. Sancheriv describes the siege and Chizkiyahu's tribute, but fails to record the fall of Jerusalem and the execution or incarceration of its king.<sup>22</sup> This leads Prof. Tadmor to assume that Sancheriv abandoned his siege, failing to vanquish the city. What could explain the failure of the world's most devastating military source?

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<sup>20</sup> H. Tadmor. "Sennacherib/Sancheriv's Campaign to Judah: Historical and Historiographical Considerations." *Zion* 50 (1985) 65–80. [Hebrew]

<sup>21</sup> H. Tadmor, "Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: Historical and Historiographical Considerations," *Zion* 50 (1985), 65–80 [Hebrew].

<sup>22</sup> (Hezekiah) himself, like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city. I threw up earthworks against him—the one coming out of the city-gate, I turned back to his misery. His cities, which I had despoiled, I cut off from his land, and to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Silli-bêl, king of Gaza, I gave (them). And thus I diminished his land. I added to the former tribute, and I laid upon him the surrender of their land and imposts—gifts for my majesty. As for Chezekia, the terrifying splendor of my majesty overcame him, and the Arabs and his mercenary troops which he had brought in to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, deserted him ... To pay tribute and to accept servitude, he dispatched his messengers.

Sancheriv's annals yield other gems which corroborate and enrich our reading of the account in Tanakh. One particular phrase sheds some light upon an unusual metaphor in the book of Yishayahu. Sancheriv, in his own words, boasts: "[Chizkiyahu] himself, **like a caged bird** I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city." This may explain the language of Yeshayahu's prophecy: "**Like birds in flight**, so will the God of Hosts protect Jerusalem; He will protect and deliver it; He will spare and rescue it" (*Yeshayahu* 31:5).

Until this Assyrian document was uncovered, we didn't appreciate the significance of Yeshayahu's language. Now we realize that Yeshayahu's phraseology was a direct retort to the language of Sancheriv. We see now that the discovery of Sancheriv's annals has added historical veracity to this episode and has contributed to our understanding of the events described in Tanakh.

## HISTORIC IMPACT

An interesting criticism of Chizkiyahu can be found in the *Gemara*:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Chizkiyahu as the Messiah and Sancheriv as Gog and Magog. The Attribute of Justice said before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of the Universe! If You did not make David the Messiah, who uttered so many hymns and psalms before You, will You then appoint Chizkiyahu as such, who did not praise You despite all these miracles which You performed for him?" (*Sanhedrin* 94a)

If one places this state of affairs into perspective – the world's most destructive military attacks Jerusalem, the city is on the verge of annihilation, and then suddenly and unexpectedly is saved by a miracle – one's mind cannot help but be drawn to similar eschatological scenarios elsewhere in Tanakh. One of the prime examples of this paradigm is the vision of Gog and Magog (see *Yechezkel* 38-39 and specifically 39:21-23), which depicts Gog gathering forces to decimate Israel, and then God's salvation. In the Talmudic passage quoted above, *Chazal* suggest that this war had the potential to be

the messianic moment, the war to end all wars. A devastating war leader of Sancheriv's power and force, a man who had conquered all civilization fulfills the character description of Gog. The supernatural death of the enemy forces matched God's role in the messianic vision. All that was left was for Chizkiyahu to recognize God's guiding hand in the victory. But somehow, Chizkiyahu failed to channel this moment into a religious trajectory. In his distress, Chizkiyahu desperately turned to God; in victory, he failed to respond with praise to the Almighty. We wonder why this happened. We might offer one suggestion: Despite Jerusalem's reprieve, the entire landscape of Yehuda remained war-torn, tens of thousands of captives had been taken by Sancheriv, and cities were burnt and destroyed with heavy casualties. To Chizkiyahu, this may not have felt like a moment of jubilation.<sup>23</sup>

We shall have to examine the roots of this rabbinic statement in our upcoming *shiur*, but for now, let us be impressed by the Talmud's assertion that this event powerfully evokes messianic allusions.<sup>24</sup> This deliverance was beyond any expectation – no superlative could contain it. As such, this miraculous victory over Ashur made a colossal impression upon our national psyche: “The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the peoples of the world, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem” (*Eikha* 4:10).

When the Temple was eventually destroyed, kings and commoners alike were astonished. They simply failed to comprehend that Jerusalem could fall. Why? Because the victory against Sancheriv had evinced the belief that Jerusalem was under divine protection – that it was invincible.

Similarly, Yirmiyahu seeks to persuade the people of Jerusalem to stop believing blindly that the Temple is fundamentally indestructible, that God would never destroy his Temple. He tries to prove his point from the destruction, some four hundred years earlier, of the *mishkan* in Shilo, but to no avail (*Yirmiyahu* 7). Ironically, the wondrous miracle of Jerusalem's rescue from Sancheriv's attack made it harder in

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<sup>23</sup> Rav Yoel bin Nun and Rav Binyamin Lau, p. 275.

<sup>24</sup> For more on these messianic allusions, see A. Grossman, *Nevuah le-dorot ke-babuah le-metziut ha-historit* in Y. Z. Rimon, *Mussar, Milchama Ve-kibbush*, Tevunot, Alon Shevut (1994), 68-71 [Hebrew].

subsequent generations for anyone to believe the prophet when he warned about the impending demise of the city. The people recalled God's promise – "I will defend this city and save it, for My sake and for the sake of David My servant" (19:34)