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Unearthing the Shiloach Inscriptions

What's the connection between a *mishnah* in *Pesachim* and Israel's recent rapprochement with Turkey? What does a recent finding of an inscription in Yerushalayim from the times of Chizkiyahu Hamelech tell us about the Assyrian invasion of Eretz Yehudah in 701 BCE?

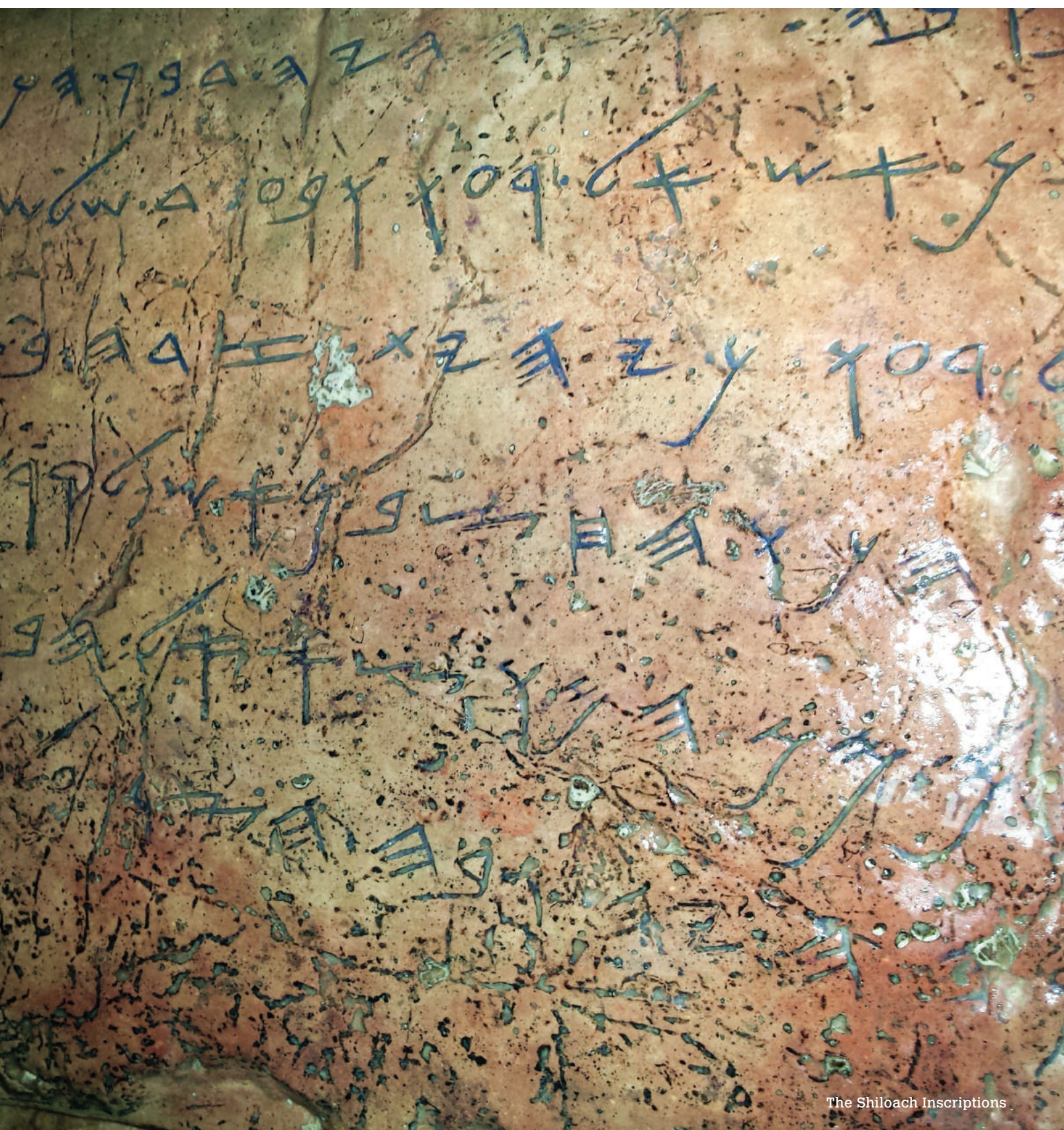
The *mishnah* in *Pesachim* (4:9) tells us about six things that Chizkiyahu did, three of which the *Chachamim* approved and three of which they did not. Among those that they did not approve is the fact that he "closed off the waters of the Upper Gichon." This event is described directly in *Divrei Hayamim Beis* (32:30). There we learn that "It was Chizkiyahu who stopped up the spring of water of the Upper Gichon, leading it downward west of the City of Dovid."

The specific historical background for this king's extensive waterworks in Yerushalayim is known from *Tanach*. This was the period of expansion of the rule of Ashur (Assyria). They had taken much of the ancient Near East, and, closer to home, they had conquered and destroyed the kingdom of Northern Israel in 722 BCE and exiled many of its inhabitants to northern Mesopotamia, sending some further

to the east along what is known as the Silk Road. This exile established the Jewish communities of northern Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and, perhaps, some places even further east. In the meantime, they had conquered small kingdoms all around Yehudah that had rebelled against Assyrian control after the death of their King Sargon in 705 BCE. Chizkiyahu apparently perceived weakness in the Assyrian Empire and began to take a more independent approach (*Melachim Beis* 18:7-8), most probably ceasing to pay tribute. In preparation for what was expected to be an impending attack by Ashur, now ruled by Sancheiriv (Sennacherib), the *Tanach* tells us that Chizkiyahu and his officers rebuilt many of the fortifications of Yerushalayim, resupplied their weaponry, reorganized the army, and stored away food for the expected siege (*Divrei Hayamim Beis* 32:29). Specifically, we learn from *Melachim Beis* (20:20) that "he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city." It is this effort that the *Chachamim* did not approve of.

These efforts were undertaken to defend the city and its people from a powerful enemy attack. So why were they not approved according to the *mishnah*? The reason is that the *navi*





The Shiloach Inscriptions

Kunteres



Yeshayahu had promised Chizkiyahu that G-d would protect the city (*Melachim Beis* 20:6, *Yeshayahu* 37:35). The *Chachamim* thought that the king should have displayed greater trust (*bitachon*) and believed the prophet's promise of divine protection. He should not have undertaken the full-scale military preparations for the attack. In fact, the same *mishnah* condemns another step of this same king. In order to stave off the attack he had earlier "cut down the doors of the *Heichal* (Temple) and sent them to the king of Ashur." This was an attempt to buy off the Assyrians and prevent the attack by sending them the gold plating from these holy doors (*Melachim Beis* 18:16). On the other hand, Chizkiyahu had undertaken a widespread religious reform, destroying pagan places of worship, refurbishing the *Beis Hamikdash*, and stamping out Jewish sacrificial worship outside of the *Beis Hamikdash*. In fact, the *Tanach* tells us that he was a righteous king.

But the *mishnah's* disapproval is not the only view of Chazal. *Avos d'Rabbi Nassan* (chap. 2) lists four things that Chizkiyahu did in which his view (*da'as*) agreed with that of G-d. One of these four is that he "closed off the waters of the Gichon." To prove this point, they quote *Divrei Hayamim Beis* (32:30), which reports this project, but they include the words at the end of the verse, "Chizkiyahu prospered in all that he did." These words were taken to indicate that G-d agreed with his decision to close off the Gichon and to lead the water directly through the tunnel into Yerushalayim. Radak (to 32:30) found it difficult to understand the *mishnah's* objections to the king's waterworks in light of the words of *Divrei Hayamim Beis* (32:3), "He consulted with his officers and warriors about stopping the flow of the springs outside the city, and they supported him." Radak understood the officers to have included the *Chachamim*. He understood the words of *Avos d'Rabbi Nassan* as supporting his positive view of the diversion of the waters of the Gichon.

Direct archaeological evidence shows the seriousness of the preparations made by Chizkiyahu, who clearly saw these preparations as part of his responsibility as king. One of the fundamental challenges that he faced was making sure to guarantee the continued supply of water to the city of Yerushalayim during the expected siege. To make this possible, the king's engineers closed up the Gichon spring at the point where it flowed into the Pool of Shiloach (English: Siloam, Arabic: Silwan) and built a tunnel about 1,750 feet long, to conduct the water into Ir David (the City of David), where they built what today is called the Spring House to allow descent to the level of the water

for those inside the city. The Shiloach Pool, by the way, was where the water was drawn for the *nisuch hamayim* (water libation) that took place in the *Beis Hamikdash* on Sukkos (*Mishnah Sukkah* 4:10). Today it is possible for visitors to wade through much of the tunnel. My first visit there was way before it had become an organized tourist spot. My wife and I gave a few dollars to an Arab boy who had candles and who took us on a private walk through the water-filled tunnel.

In 1880 an inscription was discovered that describes the building of this tunnel. The tunnel itself had been discovered in 1838 by the archaeologist Edward Robinson. He and a number of other archaeologists had studied it extensively during the 19th century, but they all missed the amazing inscription that was to be found there. Instead, it fell to a young man in 1880 to make the discovery. He found the text inscribed in the rock on the eastern side, about 19 feet into the tunnel. In 1891, the inscription was surreptitiously cut out of the wall of the tunnel and broken into pieces that were reassembled through the efforts of the British Consul in Yerushalayim. Since Eretz Yisrael was then under Ottoman rule, this amazingly important inscription was placed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. It was my bad luck, by the way, that when I had a day in Istanbul years ago this museum was closed and I ended up visiting the Museum of Classical Antiquities on the other side of the street.

The inscription was an amazing find. It is written in ancient Hebrew script (*ksav ivri*), but, with the exception of a few difficult words, in easily understandable Biblical Hebrew. Here is the translation:

... the tunnel ... and this is the story of the tunnel while ... the axes were against each other and while three cubits were left to cut through ... the voice of a man ... called to his counterpart, (for) there was a slit in the rock, on the right ... and on the day of the tunnel (being finished) the stonecutters struck each man toward his counterpart, ax against ax, and the water flowed from the source to the pool for 1,200 cubits. And 100(?) cubits was the height over the head of the stonecutters...





The Chizkiyahu's Shiloach tunnel

The inscription seems to speak in the voice of the tunnel's chief engineer, and describes the completion of the digging. Initially, two crews of workmen dug simultaneously from opposite ends of the projected tunnel. The inscription relates that as the two teams of stonecutters came close to one another they realized that they had gone slightly off course and would not meet. The workmen relied on the sound of their pickaxes and their voices to correct the trajectory in order to join the two parts of the tunnel. The meeting point is visible as a series of irregular cuts near the tunnel's midpoint.

The invasion did indeed come (*Melachim Beis* 20:1, *Divrei Hayamim Beis* 32:1). Chizkiyahu's waterworks were no doubt of great help to the inhabitants of Yerushalayim when the Assyrians besieged the city. He had secured the water supply of his city. The Annals of Sennacherib that have been discovered report on his battles with numerous small kingdoms around Yehudah and on his siege of Yerushalayim where he claims regarding the king that he "shut him up as a prisoner in Yerushalayim, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage." But apparently the Assyrians

could not break the siege and were content to accept tribute and return home, as described by the *Tanach* (*Melachim Beis* 18:14-16). We learn that at the direction of Yeshayahu, and after a series of prayers by Chizkiyahu at the *Beis Hamikdash*, the king was assured of the destruction of the Assyrian army. The *Tanach* reports that upon his return to Assyria, Sancheiriv was killed by his sons. Indeed, he was assassinated in 681 BCE by some of his sons, leading his youngest son and successor, Esarhaddon, commander of a large army, to defeat the rebellious brothers and to take control of the empire. Indeed, the rebellion had started even during Sancheiriv's campaign in Yehudah, indicating the far reach of the *Shomer Yisrael* ("Guardian of Israel") and the often complex and hidden manner in which His miracles are brought about.

So what does this have to do with Israel's rapprochement with Turkey? Visitors to Chizkiyahu's Shiloach tunnel today will see a plaque and a model of the inscription that once adorned the wall of the tunnel. Israeli archaeologists have dreamed since the rise of the state of the chance to recover this inscription and to display it in Israel. In 2007, Jerusalem's then Mayor Uri Lupolianski requested that the tablet be returned to Yerushalayim as a "goodwill gesture." His request was refused on the grounds that the inscription was Imperial Ottoman property, and thus the legitimate cultural property of the Turkish Republic. Nonetheless, then President Abdullah Gul indicated that it might be possible to have the inscription exhibited in Israel for a short period. With the break in relations between Israel and Turkey that took place as a result of the Israeli interception of the Turkish boat *Mavi Marmara* that attempted to break the Gaza blockade in 2010, relations between Turkey and Israel declined precipitously. Over time, however, Turkey found that the economic price it was paying was simply too great. With the rise of Islamist terrorism in Turkey and the 2016 coup attempt, Turkish leadership increasingly saw Israel as a valued commercial partner and even political ally. The full agreement for reconciliation, officially adopted at the end of August, 2016, has again opened up the possibility that the Shiloach inscription will return to its original home, Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh. ●

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Chizkiyahu clearly saw that the supply of fresh water was part
of his responsibility as king.