

Pesach in the Days of Chizkiyahu - the Dream and the Reality

Rabbi Ezra Frazer

Judaic Studies Faculty, Yeshiva College

Divrei HaYamim II (Chapter 30) tells the story of a major Pesach celebration in the days of King Chizkiyahu of Judah (8th century BCE).¹ This essay examines the significance of that event within the broader context of Chizkiyahu's reign.

Religious and Political Background

Chizkiyahu inherited the throne following the death of his father, the wicked King Achaz, who defiled the Temple, as Divrei HaYamim II (Chapter 28) describes:²

21. For Achaz took away a portion from the house of the Lord, and from the house of the king, and from the princes, and gave it to the king of Assyria; but he did not help him. 22. And in the time of his distress he trespassed still more against the Lord; this is that king Achaz... 24. And Achaz gathered together the utensils of the house of God, and cut in pieces the utensils of the house of God, and shut the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem. 25. And in every city of Judah he made high places to burn incense to other gods, and provoked to anger the Lord God of his fathers.

כא כִּי־חִלַּק אַחָז אֶת־בַּיִת ה' וְאֶת־בַּיִת
הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים וַיִּתֵּן לַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשׁוּר וְלֹא
לְעִזְרָה לוֹ: כִּב וּבָעַת הַצָּר לוֹ וַיִּוֹסֶף
לְמַעוֹל בְּה' הוּא הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחָז...
כִּד וַיֹּאסֶף אַחָז אֶת־כְּלֵי בַיִת־הָאֱלֹהִים
וַיִּקְצֹץ אֶת־כְּלֵי בַיִת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּסָּגֵר
אֶת־דַּלְתוֹת בַּיִת־ה' וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ מִזְבְּחוֹת
בְּכָל־פְּנֵי בִירוּשָׁלַם: כֵּה וּבְכָל־עִיר
וְעִיר לַיהוּדָה עָשָׂה בְמוֹת לְקַטֵּר
לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִּכְלֵם אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵי
אֲבוֹתָיו:

Chizkiyahu opened his reign by immediately reversing his father's sinful policies. According to Divrei HaYamim (II Chapter 29), he summoned the Kohanim (Priests) and Levites as soon as he ascended the throne, and he ordered them to rectify his father's behavior toward the Temple:

3. [Chizkiyahu], in the first year of his reign, in the first month, | ג הוּא בַשָּׁנָה הָרִאשׁוֹנָה לְמַלְכוֹ בְּחֹדֶשׁ

¹Shortly after King Shlomo's death (approximately 200 years before Chizkiyahu's reign), his kingdom split in two: the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The kings of Judah descended from David and Shlomo and maintained Jerusalem as their capital city.

²Translations of the Bible in this essay were copied from Davkawriter (Version 6.6.3) with minor changes.

opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them. 4. And he brought in the Kohanim and the Levites, and gathered them together into the east street, 5. And he said to them, “Hear me, you Levites, sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the holy place. 6. For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs.

הָרְאִשׁוֹן פִּתְחָה אֶת־דְּלֹתַיִת בַּיִת־ה'
וַיְחַזְקֵם: ד וַיִּבְאֵר אֶת־הַכֹּהֲנִים
וְאֶת־הַלְוִיִּם וַיֹּאסְפֵם לְרִחּוֹב הַמְּזוּרָה:
ה וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שְׁמַעוּנִי הַלְוִיִּם עַתָּה
הַתְּקַדְּשׁוּ וְקַדְּשׁוּ אֶת־בַּיִת ה' אֱלֹהֵי
אֲבֹתֵיכֶם וְהוֹצִיאוּ אֶת־הַנִּדָּה מִן־הַקֹּדֶשׁ:
ו כִּי־מָעַלְו אָבֹתֵינוּ וַעֲשׂוּ הַרַע כְּעֵינֵי
ה'־אֱלֹהֵינוּ וַיַּעֲזֹבֵהוּ וַיִּסָּבּוּ כַּנְּיָהִם
מִמִּשְׁכַּן ה' וַיִּתְּנוּ־עַרְף:

During this same period of history, a major political change was transpiring in the Ancient Near East. Assyria was rising as a superpower, and the Assyrian army subjugated many smaller nations. Achaz allied Judah with Assyria, whereas his northern neighbor, the Kingdom of Israel, resisted Assyria. During the early years of Chizkiyahu’s reign, the Assyrians destroyed and exiled Israel. Hence, as Chizkiyahu’s reign progressed, his northern Israelite neighbors lost their independence and were reduced to a small number of survivors of the Assyrian exile.

The Goals of Chizkiyahu’s Pesach

Divrei HaYamim II Chapter 30 recounts how Chizkiyahu organized a major Pesach celebration in Jerusalem. Based on the aforementioned religious and political background, it appears that Chizkiyahu sought to accomplish two distinct goals through this celebration:

1. Chizkiyahu saw Pesach as an opportunity to formally rededicate the Temple—the culmination of his mission to purify the Temple from his father’s defilement.
2. In light of the Kingdom of Israel’s collapse, Chizkiyahu hoped that his major Pesach celebration would attract remnants of Israel’s tribes to Jerusalem and thus reunite them under his rule.

However, Chizkiyahu’s lofty goals faced formidable challenges. He apparently could not successfully prepare the Temple for rededication by the 14th of Nisan, “because the Kohanim had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, nor had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem” (30:3). The northern tribes had been living as a separate kingdom for roughly 200 years, so—not surprisingly—many of them scoffed at the idea of traveling to Jerusalem—the capital of a foreign kingdom—to observe Pesach.

Chizkiyahu’s Attempted Solution

Sensing that they were not ready to rededicate the Temple, Chizkiyahu consulted with other leaders and citizens, and they decided to delay Pesach by one month. During this extra time, Chizkiyahu sent letters to the remnants of Israel, urging them to “return to the Lord” (30:9) by joining the Pesach celebration in Jerusalem. Although most remaining Israelites mocked this message, “A few men of Asher and Menashe and of Zevulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem” (30:11).

A cursory reading of the text indicates that when the Pesach observance finally took place —one month late—it was a smashing success. The text depicts such tremendous joy that the nation stayed for an additional week after the formal holiday concluded: “And the whole assembly took counsel to keep another seven days; and they kept another seven days with gladness” (30:23). Hence, it would appear that Chizkiyahu made the correct decision to delay Pesach by one month.

Delaying Pesach

However, a closer look at this event raises serious questions about Chizkiyahu’s course of action. While the decision to delay Pesach succeeded in increasing the number of participants, the text never provides us with Chizkiyahu’s legal justification for this bold action. Two possible halachic models exist for this decision:

1. **Pesach Sheini** – An individual who legitimately cannot bring the *korban Pesach* in Nisan is permitted to bring it one month later, on the 14th of Iyyar.
2. **A Leap Month** – According to Talmudic law, an extra month of Adar can be added before Nisan when certain circumstances would cause Pesach to occur too early in the year.

Of these two models, a simple reading of Divrei HaYamim seems to indicate that Chizkiyahu followed the model of *Pesach Sheini* by actually moving Pesach to Iyyar. Divrei HaYamim II 30:3 provides two reasons for Chizkiyahu’s decision to delay Pesach— כִּי הִכְהֲנִימוּ לֹא־הִתְקַדְּשׁוּ לְמִדְיָ (“because the Kohanim had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, nor had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem”) —and they parallel the two legitimate reasons that the Torah gives for waiting until *Pesach Sheini* to bring one’s sacrifice: a) ritual impurity, and b) geographic distance from the Temple (Bemidbar 9:10-11):³

10. If any man of you or of your posterity shall be *impure because of a dead body*, or is *in a journey far away*, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. 11. On the fourteenth day of the second month at evening they shall keep it.

יֵאֵשׁ אִישׁ כִּי־יִהְיֶה־טָמֵא | לְנֶפֶשׁ אִוֹ
בְּלִדְרוֹ רַחֲקָה לָכֶם אִו לְדַרְתֵּיכֶם וְעָשָׂה
פֶּסַח לַיהוָה: יֵא בַּחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁנִי בְּאַרְבַּעָה עָשָׂר
לַיּוֹם בֵּין הָעֲרֵבִים יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ

Moreover, the text repeatedly refers to Chizkiyahu’s Pesach as taking place “in the **second** month,” which is the biblical date for *Pesach Sheini*. These similarities to the circumstances described in Bemidbar 9 seemingly lead to the conclusion that Chizkiyahu essentially advised the entire nation to withhold their sacrifices until *Pesach Sheini*. Indeed, one view in the Tosefta (*Pesachim* 8:4) and Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 12b) asserts that Chizkiyahu “coerced the congregation to observe *Pesach Sheini*” (מעשה בחזקיה מלך יהודה שהעשה את הצבור לעשות פסח שני).⁴

Despite this evidence, most commentators reject the possibility that Chizkiyahu’s celebration was a communal *Pesach Sheini*. They note that the Torah presents *Pesach Sheini* as a solution for

³ For detailed parameters of which circumstances entitle someone to participate in *Pesach Sheini*, see Rambam, *Hilchot Korban Pesach*, Chapters 5-6.

⁴ This quote comes from the Tosefta; the Gemara presents this view with a slightly different formulation. These two sources also differ regarding the author of this statement—R. Yehudah (Tosefta) or R. Shimon b. Yehudah citing R. Shimon (Gemara).

individuals who are unable to observe *Pesach* with the rest of the nation in Nisan, whereas Chizkiyahu delayed the holiday for **the entire nation!** Furthermore, *Pesach Sheini* is a one-day event on the 14th of Iyyar in which individuals bring the *korban Pesach* (the ritual sacrifice) that they could not bring in Nisan. Those individuals still observe the seven-day festival and its restrictions on leavened products in the month of Nisan, along with the rest of the nation.⁵ But Chizkiyahu did not merely delay the **sacrifice** by one month; he delayed the **entire seven-day festival!** As Ibn Ezra observes (Long Commentary to Shemot, Introduction to Chapter 12), the claim that Chizkiyahu told everyone to observe the seven-day festival as *Pesach Sheini* in Iyyar, must assume:

that [Chizkiyahu] ate and fed chametz to all of Israel in Nisan... and that he devised on his own to observe the Festival of Matzot in Iyyar for seven days... because God did not command to observe the Festival of Matzot in Iyyar, but rather to eat the Pesach sacrifice one night [in Iyyar]. Indeed, all of the impure individuals [who bring their sacrifice in Iyyar] eat matzah with the rest of Israel in Nisan. Heaven forbid that Chizkiyahu would have done such evil things!

שאכל והאכיל כל ישראל חמץ בחדש הראשון... שבדא מלבו לעשות חג המצות בחדש השני שבעת ימים... כי השם לא צוה לעשות חג המצות בחדש השני, רק על אכילת הפסח לילה אחד; כי כל הטמאים אוכלים בחדש הראשון מצות עם כל ישראל. חלילה חלילה, שעשה חזקיהו רעות כאלה

Most commentators therefore assume that Chizkiyahu did not instruct the nation to withhold their sacrifices until *Pesach Sheini*. Instead, they argue that Chizkiyahu added a leap month before Pesach, so that “the second month” was not, in fact, Iyyar, but rather was Nisan delayed by a month. While this assumption would explain why they observed the entire seven-day festival in “the second month,” the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 12a-b) still takes issue with Chizkiyahu’s conduct. The Gemara suggests that Chizkiyahu behaved improperly, either because the nation’s ritual impurity was not a sufficient reason to add a leap month,⁶ or because Chizkiyahu waited too long to declare this leap month.⁷

Ibn Ezra (ibid.) and Radak defend Chizkiyahu. After adopting the view that Chizkiyahu’s only error was declaring the leap month too late, Ibn Ezra downplays the severity of such an error by claiming that God would not have responded favorably to this holiday if it had entailed grave sins. Radak (*Divrei HaYamim* II 30:2) goes even further by asserting that no textual evidence supports the claim that Chizkiyahu waited too long to declare the leap month.⁸

⁵ In the words of the Mishnah (*Pesachim* 9:3), one may possess chametz and matzah together in one’s home while offering the *korban Pesach* on *Pesach Sheini* (והשני חמץ ומצה עימו בבית).

⁶ According to this line of reasoning, no leap month is necessary when most of the nation is impure, since halachah permits the *korban Pesach* to be offered in a state of impurity when most of the nation is impure (טומאה הותרה) (בציבור). For the details of this legal principle regarding Pesach, see Rambam, *Hilchot Korban Pesach*, Chapter 7.

⁷ The Gemara explains that once the month of Adar ends, the next month automatically becomes Nisan, so a leap month can no longer be added. The Gemara claims that Chizkiyahu failed to declare the leap month until the date that could have been the first day of Nisan.

⁸ Although Radak is clearly correct that *Divrei HaYamim* never specifies the date on which Chizkiyahu proclaimed the leap month, the Talmud presumably based its claim on textual evidence from the previous chapter of *Divrei HaYamim* (II 29:17), where the Kohanim began a 16-day process of purifying the Temple on “the first day of the first month.” The Talmud likely assumed that Chizkiyahu began his plans for a national Pesach celebration on the

Ritual Impurity

In addition to the issue of delaying Pesach by a month, Chizkiyahu engaged in another legally problematic decision during the Pesach celebration. Divrei HaYamim lists which group performed each step of the process for offering the *korban Pesach*:

16. And they stood in their place according to the form prescribed for them, according to the Torah of Moshe the man of God; the Kohanim sprinkled the blood, which they received from the hand of the Levites. 17. For there were many in the congregation who were not sanctified; therefore the Levites slaughtered the paschal lamb for everyone who was not clean, to sanctify them to the Lord. 18. For a multitude of the people, many of them from Ephraim and Menashe, Yissachar and Zevulun, had not cleansed themselves, so that they ate the paschal lamb otherwise than what it was prescribed. But Chizkiyahu prayed for them, saying, “May the good Lord pardon every one 19. Who prepares his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, even though he is not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary.”

טז ויַעֲמְדוּ עַל־עַמֻּדָם כַּמִּשְׁפָּטִים
כְּתוּרַת מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ־הַאֲלָקִים
הַכֹּהֲנִים זָרְקִים אֶת־הַדָּם מִיַּד
הַלְוִיִּם: יז כִּי־רַבַּת בְּקֹהֶל אֲשֶׁר
לֹא־הִתְקַדְּשׁוּ וְהַלְוִיִּם עַל־שְׁחִיטַת
הַפֶּסַחִים לְכֹל לֹא טָהוֹר לְהַקְדִּישׁ
לָהּ: יח כִּי מֵרַבִּית הָעָם הָרַבַּת
מֵאֲפֹרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה יִשָּׁשָׁר וּזְבֻלוֹן
לֹא הִטְהָרוּ כִּי־אָכְלוּ אֶת־הַפֶּסַח
בְּלֹא כְפָתוּב כִּי הִתְפַּלֵּל יְחִזְקִיָּהוּ
עָלֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר ה' הַטּוֹב יְכַפֵּר בְּעַד:
יט כָּל־לִבָּבוּ הָלְכוּ לְדַרְוֹשׁ
הַאֲלָקִים | ה' אֲלֵקֵי אֲבוֹתָיו וְלֹא
כְּטָהֳרַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ:

This passage indicates the Levites slaughtered each sacrifice, the Kohanim sprinkled its blood, and the sacrifice's owners ate it. According to normative halachah, any Jew from any tribe may slaughter a sacrifice,⁹ which raises the question of why only the Levites slaughtered the sacrifices. Pseudo-Rashi¹⁰ (30:16-17) suggests that the text emphasizes the fact that many of the people were ritually impure for this reason—Levites were charged with slaughtering the sacrifices, because ritual impurity disqualified many of the owners from slaughtering their own sacrifices.

However, the fact that many of the Pesach's participants were ritually impure calls into question whether they should have been offering sacrifices at all, since impure individuals are forbidden to offer a *korban Pesach*. Chizkiyahu apparently recognized this problem, which is why he prayed that the “good Lord” should pardon them. Yet Chizkiyahu's prayer begs a further question: if he knew that their impurity precluded them from offering or eating their *korban Pesach*, and not just from slaughtering the animal themselves, then why did Chizkiyahu not prevent them from bringing a *korban Pesach* to the Temple.

I believe that the following analogy to our times might best explain Chizkiyahu's conduct. Imagine a rabbi who invites a group of unaffiliated Jews to his seder. As Pesach arrives, he

same day that the Temple's purification began (i.e. “the first day of the first month”), which would mean that he decided to add a leap month on the day that should have been the first of Nisan. The Kohanim presumably worked straight through the 16th day of the first month, without concern for the fact that the 15th of the month was a holiday, because it was understood that this “first month” was a leap month and thus was not Nisan.

⁹ Gemara, *Zevachim* 31a; Rambam, *Hilchot B'iat HaMikdash* 9:6.

¹⁰ Rashi did not write a surviving commentary to Divrei HaYamim, so scholars use “Pseudo-Rashi” to refer to the medieval Ashkenazic commentary on Divrei HaYamim that is labeled as Rashi in most printed editions of Tanach with commentaries. See Eran Viezel, *The Commentary on Chronicles Attributed to Rashi* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 2010) for an analysis of this commentary.

realizes that a) some of his guests plan on driving home after the seder, and b) some of his guests are not halachically Jewish, and his wine is not *mevushal* (cooked).¹¹ In order to ensure that no non-Jewish guests pour the wine, the rabbi tells everyone that only the host family pours wine at the seder, so that the guests can experience freedom. In truth, there is no halachic prohibition against guests pouring their own wine, but the rabbi invents this rule, because he wants to guarantee that the wine will be served according to halachah, without embarrassing his non-Jewish guests by saying that only they are forbidden to touch the wine. Although the rabbi knows that many guests will be violating Yom Tov by driving home after the seder, he does not disinvite them, since his entire purpose in hosting this seder is to reach out to unaffiliated Jews. Indeed, he hopes that God will forgive these individuals for driving home, since they at least made the sincere effort to observe the seder despite their unfamiliarity with halachah.

In essence, Chizkiyahu faced a similar situation with the residents of the Northern Kingdom. Despite the extra month that he delayed Pesach, many of these people failed to purify themselves. Once he knew that they were still impure, Chizkiyahu could have simply told them that impure people may not participate in the *korban Pesach* at all. However, if he did so, then he would alienate precisely those members of the Northern Kingdom who cared enough to come to Jerusalem when most of their neighbors had mocked Chizkiyahu's invitation. So instead, Chizkiyahu implemented a policy in which only Levites were permitted to slaughter the sacrifices. Although Israelites are normally permitted to slaughter sacrifices, Chizkiyahu restricted the slaughtering to Levites in order to prevent impure Israelites from slaughtering their own sacrifices without embarrassing them. Chizkiyahu knew that these impure people would anyway eat from their sacrifices outside the Temple, but he did not want to bar them from the entire event. Therefore, he controlled what happened in the Temple and prayed that God would pardon any other transgression that well-intentioned but impure people might commit.¹²

Assessing the Event

The story of Chizkiyahu's Pesach concludes with a seemingly happy ending:

5. And all the congregation of Judah, with the Kohanim and the Levites, and all the congregation that came from Israel, and the foreigners who came from the Land of Israel, and who lived in Judah, rejoiced. 26. And there was great joy in Jerusalem; for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. 27. Then the Kohanim the Levites arose and blessed the people; and their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to His holy dwelling place, to heaven.

כה וישמחו | כל־קהל יהודה ויהונתן
והלויים וכל־הקהל הבאים מישראל
והגרים הבאים מארץ ישראל
והיושבים ביהודה: כו ותהי שמחה
גדולה בירושלם כי מימי שלמה
בן־דוד מלך ישראל לא כזאת
בירושלם: כז ויקמו הכהנים הלויים
ויברכו את־העם וישמע בקולם ותבוא
תפלתם למעון קדשו לשמים:

¹¹ See *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh De'ah* 123) for the details of how and when uncooked wine can become forbidden through contact with a Gentile.

¹² The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* *ibid.*) treats Chizkiyahu's prayer for divine forgiveness as proof that Chizkiyahu sinned by delaying Pesach. However, Radak (30:2) points out that a simple reading of the biblical text clearly demonstrates that Chizkiyahu's prayer relates to ritual impurity and has nothing to do with the date of Pesach.

Ralbag (30:26) observes that the comparison to Shlomo's time alludes to the holiday of Sukkot in the year that Shlomo inaugurated the Temple. Shlomo juxtaposed a seven-day celebration of the Temple to the seven days of Sukkot, thus creating 14 consecutive days of celebration (Melachim I 8:65, Divrei HaYamim II 7:9). Chizkiyahu's rededication of the Temple once again entailed a seven-day biblical festival juxtaposed to an additional seven days of celebration.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent success of Chizkiyahu's Pesach, it soon lost its standing as the greatest Pesach of the First Temple Era. Chizkiyahu's great-grandson, King Yoshiyahu, organized his own major Pesach celebration, about which the text attests: "And there was no Passover like that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; **nor did any of the kings of Israel keep such a Passover**" (Divrei HaYamim II 35:18). Radak (*ad. loc.*) remarks that Yoshiyahu's Pesach overshadowed his great-grandfather's Pesach due to the aforementioned drawbacks of Chizkiyahu's event—the scorn of those residents of Israel who refused to attend and the impurity of many of the people who did participate.

The story of Chizkiyahu's Pesach blends hope and optimism with difficult realities. It was remarkable to host an event 200 years after the nation split into two kingdoms, where people now came from throughout the Holy Land to rededicate the newly-cleansed Temple. In modern terms, Chizkiyahu could have arranged a "photo-op" to prove that he accomplished his two goals—rededicating the Temple and bringing residents of the north to Jerusalem. On the other hand, that photo-op would conceal the reality that most members of the northern tribes boycotted the entire event, that most of those who did attend ate their *korbanot* in a state of impurity, and that the event was delayed by a month through a questionable legal procedure. Chizkiyahu's Pesach thus reminds us of the constant challenge of pursuing one's ideals while remaining pragmatic enough to implement them to the best of one's ability in a complex reality.