

Acknowledging a Miracle with a Berachah: Can It Be Done in the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem?

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Introduction

A Jew should see the “hand of G-d” in the natural world. In order to assist in that goal, *Chazal* have formulated appropriate blessings to be recited upon such sightings as the ocean, a rainbow, mountains or an elephant.¹ How much more so should G-d be recognized in His supernatural manifestations! Thus, *Chazal* instituted blessings to be said at sites where a national or personal miracle occurred.^{2,3} These are rare indeed and are

¹ See Ari Z. Zivotofsky, “Praising God at the Zoo,” *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, LXII (Fall 2011):43–54 and Ari Zvi Zivotofsky, “*Birkas Meshaneh Habriyos b’Gan HaChayos*,” *Tchumin* 32 (5772) 431–434.

² The obligation for this *berachah* is derived from the *berachah* recited by Jethro (Exodus 18:10). See Maharsha and Pnei Yehoshua who discuss the fact that Jethro did not mention *Shem u’Malchus*. In general, the *berachah* is only recited at the site of the miracle and Jethro was neither in Egypt nor at the Red Sea when he recited the *berachah*. *Meiri* (*Berachos* 54) and *Shittah Mekubetztes* explain that it is also recited when one sees the masses who were saved (cf *Rema* 218 and *Sbaar HaTziyun* 218:18) as was the case with Jethro. Iyun Yaakov suggests that because the Clouds of Glory flattened the mountains, Jethro was actually able to see Egypt. Maharsha suggests that the manna, miraculous well, and clouds of glory were a continuation of the Exodus miracles and it was upon seeing them that he recited the *berachah* on the entire process. *Gilyonei Hasbas* (*Shabbos* 31b) says that because all the traveling was by direct command of G-d, it is all like one location. *Imrei Emes* (*Likutim*, p. 38) says that Moshe showed Jethro a continuation of the miracle, like photographs, and it was as if he saw the place and was thus able to recite the *berachah*. (This would indicate that seeing a picture of a place where a miracle occurred warrants a *berachah* and yet no one seems to suggest that in practice.) See *Harchev Davar to Haamek Davar* on Exodus 18:10 for the difference in the philosophy and scriptural sources for the *berachos* on natural good vs. on an open miracle.

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mostly associated with the Biblical period, and the locations of most of the miracles of national salvation are no longer accurately known. An example of G-d personally intervening on the battlefield on behalf of the Jewish nation for which the location might be known was the destruction of Sancheriv's Assyrian army in its attempt to capture Jerusalem during the reign of the righteous King Hezekiah in 701 BCE. In this article we will explore the nature of the *berachah* said at the site of a miracle, the applicability of that *berachah* to the miracle wrought in Hezekiah's time, and whether the location is identifiable with enough certitude to permit or possibly even require that the *berachah* be recited.

Berachah at the Site of a Miracle

The ninth chapter of *Mishnah Berachos* opens with: "A person who sees a place where a miracle was done for Israel says, 'Baruch she'asab nissim l'avoseinu bamakom hazeh — Blessed are You Who did miracles for our ancestors in this place.'" The *Gemara* (*Berachos* 54a) specifies that this *berachah* is for a national miracle, whereas for a personal miracle the beneficiary (and his descendants and students) recite a modified version. The *Mishnah* does not detail which national miracles require the recitation of the *berachah*, so the *Gemara* (*Berachos* 54a) cites a *braisa* that lists some examples: "Our Rabbis taught: If one sees the place of the crossing of the Red Sea,⁴ or of the crossing of the Jordan River, or of the crossing of the streams of Arnon, or the stones of Elgavish in the descent of Beis Choron, or the stone which Og king of Bashan wanted to throw on the Israelites,⁵ or the stone on which Moshe sat when Joshua fought with Amalek, or Lot's wife, or the wall of Jericho which sank into the ground, for all of these he should give thanksgiving and praise to the Omnipresent."

³ The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:50) suggests that the reason Joshua barred the rebuilding of Jericho was to preserve the sunken walls and offer people a chance to personally see the result of the miracle. Regarding Joshua's ban, see: Ari Zivotofsky, "Jericho in Halakha and Hashkafa," *Tradition* 29:3, 21–39, Spring, 1995.

⁴ For this translation see "Legal-ease: What's the Truth about ... the Translation of Yam Suf?" *Jewish Action*, Spring 5770/2010 (Volume 70, no. 3), pp. 62–65.

⁵ The inclusion of these two seems to indicate that the *Gemara* accepts the *Aggadeta* about these events as literal accounts of historical events and not as some sort of parable, a very difficult position.

This seems like a relatively straightforward passage and the earlier codifiers⁶ simply quoted it without modification or comment. For example, the Rambam (*Hilchos Berachos* 10:9) ruled that: “A person who sees a place where miracles were performed for the Jewish people, such as the Red Sea or the crossings of the Jordan, should recite the blessing: ‘Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, Who wrought miracles for our ancestors in this place.’ This blessing is recited wherever miracles were performed for many people. In contrast, in a place where a miracle was performed for an individual, that individual, his son, and his grandson should recite the blessing: ‘Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, Who wrought a miracle for me in this place’ or ‘...Who wrought a miracle for my ancestors in this place.’ A person who sees the den of lions [into which Daniel was thrown] or the fiery furnace into which Chananiah, Misha’el, and Azariah were thrown should recite the blessing: ‘Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, Who wrought miracles for the righteous in this place.’”

The Shulchan Aruch (*OC* 218:1) similarly rules directly from the *Mishnah* and *Gemara* that upon seeing the location of a national miracle one recites the appropriate *berachah*, and presents a list of such locations. Presumably to emphasize that the list is illustrative and not exhaustive, it is preceded by: “for example.” There is no indication of any hesitation or limitation, and it would seem to follow that any location at which a national miracle occurred generates an obligation to recite the *berachah*.

The Shulchan Aruch stresses that this *berachah*, as well as all *birchos hare'iyah*, are said with *Shem* and *Malchus*.⁷ *Biur Halachah* observes that as a *birchas hare'iyah*, it is recited only when one is at the location of the miracle and can see the site.⁸ After leaving the site one may not pronounce the *berachah* unless he returns after a 30-day interval.

⁶ Strangely, some of the later codifiers left out the entire category of a *berachah* on national miracles and only included the *berachah* on personal miracles. See e.g. *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Ganzfried) 60:8; *Chayei Adam* 65:4–5; Ben Ish Chai, *Shana Alef, Ekev*:11.

⁷ This was debated regarding all *birchos re'iyah* (see *Beis Yosef OC* 218). The Rambam, Tosafos, Ri, Rosh, Rashba, Rabenu Yonah all agree that they are “true *berachos*” that require *Shem* and *Malchus*. The Ra’avad (see *Hasagot haRa’avad*, Rif p. 44a) disagreed. The Meiri (*Berachos* 54) explains the Ra’avad’s position and *Birkei Yosef* (218:1) tries to find support for it. See *Kaf HaChayim* 218:5 and *Yechaveh Da’as* 2:27, first footnote.

⁸ See *Shu”t B’Tzel HaChochmah* 2:16 that it is sufficient to see the site clearly even if not standing at that location. And it can even be seen through a window or binoculars.

This *berachah* is not often recited nowadays. The precise location of most of the sites listed in the *braisa* are unknown. After all, where exactly are the crossing places of the streams of Arnon or the stones of Elgavish? We certainly have no idea what happened to the stone that Og wanted to throw or to the rock upon which Moshe sat. Some might argue that the *berachah* can be recited at Tel Yericho⁹ or on the banks of the Jordan just opposite Jericho. But these are not commonly visited locations. Are there other possible sites at which a miraculous national salvation occurred, as implied by the open lists of the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch?¹⁰ This raises the titillating question about reciting a *berachah* when looking out from Ir David at the Kidron Valley and the slopes of the Mount of Olives,

⁹ This site is well known and has been extensively excavated. See, e.g., Kathleen Kenyon, *Excavations at Jericho*, London: British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1960–1983; *Archaeological heritage in the Jericho Oasis: a systematic catalogue of archaeological sites for the sake of their protection and cultural valorization*, edited by Lorenzo Nigro, Maura Sala, Hamdan Taha, Rome, 2011; Margaret Wheeler, *Walls of Jericho*, London: Arrow Books, 1959; Bryant G. Wood, “Did the Israelites conquer Jericho? A new look at the archaeological evidence,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16, 2 (1990) 44–59.

However, following the Oslo Peace Accords, Israeli citizens are in general barred from visiting the site.

¹⁰ I have found no discussion in the halachic literature about saying a *berachah* at Har Tavor. Yet its location is known and the fact that Devorah sang a *shirah* indicates an open miracle occurred. The story is recounted in Judges 4 and retold in Devorah’s song in Judges 5 where it is implied (see 4:15) that the miracle was G-d causing the Kishon to overflow (5:21). Josephus (*Antiquities* 5:5:4) relates that a cold, windy hailstorm incapacitated Sisera’s army but did not bother the Jews as it came at their backs. The possible reasons for the total lack of mention in the halachic literature are either that it was obvious that a *berachah* should be recited or, alternatively, a *berachah* is recited only for a super-natural miracle while this one occurred via natural means. The latter is difficult in that Judges 4:15, 5:20–21 and Psalms 83:10 makes it sound awfully like direct Divine intervention. Furthermore, the *Mishnah Berurah* (219:31), commenting on the *Shulchan Aruch*’s discussion of *Birkas HaGomel* for miracles such as being saved from being trampled by a bull, suggests that rather than *HaGomel*, the beneficiary should recite “He Who performed a miracle for me” at the location. Clearly, the *Mishnah Berurah* does not require a supernatural miracle for this *berachah*. Why should the national miracle at Mt. Tabor be any less significant? However, the *Shulchan Aruch* himself (218:9) seems to require a supernatural miracle for a *berachah* on an individual miracle and based on this Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Sefer Mesores Moshe*, 2013, page 55) ruled exactly opposite the *Mishnah Berurah* and said that following being saved from a car accident, *HaGomel* was preferable to the *berachah* on a miracle.

the area where (possibly) Sancheriv's army was miraculously decimated in one awesome night.¹¹

The Miracle of Sancheriv's Defeat

In 722 BCE, the Assyrian army captured the Northern Kingdom's capital city of Shomron and exiled its inhabitants, known today as the "10 lost tribes." Assyria would obviously not be content with just one of the two Jewish kingdoms, and soon headed south to Judah. At the time, Achaz and his son Hezekiah ruled together and the southern kingdom of Yehudah was a tax-paying vassal state of the more powerful Assyria. In approximately 715 BCE, Achaz died and Hezekiah began his righteous rule (II Kings 18:5) with sweeping religious reforms that included removing idol worship from Jerusalem. In addition, he modified the political allegiances, refusing to continue paying tribute to Assyria and forming an alliance with Egypt (Isaiah 30–31). Sancheriv, the relatively new Assyrian king, did not take kindly to this affront and in 701 BCE attacked Judah, destroying many of the cities,¹² and advanced on Jerusalem (II Kings 18:13–16). The story of the ensuing siege and salvation is recorded in Isaiah, II Kings, and II Chronicles.

Biblical and archeological evidence indicate that Hezekiah engaged in defensive tactics to protect the city's water source and to defend the city. Possibly among the most significant projects was the digging of the ½ kilometer (1200 *amah*) tunnel (known today as Hezekiah's Tunnel or the Siloam Tunnel) to divert the water from the Gichon Spring to the south of the city. In addition, while his great-grandfather Uzziah had started re-fortifying the city (II Chronicles 26:9; 27:3), he continued the fortification of the city walls including building a new wall, of which the "Broad Wall" in today's Jewish Quarter is a section (II Chronicles 32:1–6).

Isaiah decried the reliance on Egypt and the fortifying of the city (Isaiah 22:1–14), but Hezekiah also engaged in religious preparation, reminding the people that G-d is on their side (II Chronicles 32:7–8). The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 94b) credited Hezekiah with having made enormous

¹¹ According to tradition this occurred on the first night of Pesach (see *Rashi*, II Kings 20:1; *Tosafos Yom Tov, Megillah* 3:5). In the *Seder piyut* "*V'a'yebi b'chatzi halailah*" the stanza "*ya'atz mecharef*" refers to the defeat of Sancheriv, as do the stanzas "*sorfu mi'shmanei pool*" and "*od hayom b'Nov*" in the *piyut* "*V'amartem zevach Pesach*." Because of this miracle, the *Haftarah* for the eighth day of Pesach in *chu"l* and also read by some on Yom Ha'atzma'ut is "*od hayom b'Nov*" (Isaiah 10:32–12:6) (*Levush OC* 490:9).

¹² See פאוסט, אברהם. מסע סנחריב להר יהודה וירושלים : מבט חדש. חידושים בחקר ירושלים : 89-106 (תשס"ט), 2008.

efforts to spread knowledge of the Torah throughout the land, saying that “he stuck a sword over the entrance of the study hall announcing that anyone who did not occupy himself with the Torah would be pierced by the sword.” And it seemed to work. *Chazal* state that during this period a check from Dan to Beersheba could not find a single *am ba’aretz*, and a search from Gevat to Antipras did not find a single young boy or girl, man or woman who was not expert in the laws of ritual impurity (*Sanhedrin* 94b). It is this dedication to Torah study, according to the Talmud, which led to Sancheriv’s defeat.

There are varying accounts of what took place. According to II Kings 18:13–16, Hezekiah agreed to pay a huge sum in exchange for an Assyrian withdrawal. In order to pay the 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold, he emptied the Temple and royal treasuries and even stripped the gold from the doors of the Temple. Nonetheless, at some point Sancheriv marched on Jerusalem with a large army and laid siege. And then, in what can only be described as an overt miracle, the siege simply ended.

The Taylor Prism and Sennacherib Prism, discovered in the 19th century, are clay prisms inscribed with the annals of Sancheriv. Such texts generally boast of the king’s successful military campaigns and indeed these texts, dated from 690 BCE, record that Sennacherib destroyed 46 Judean cities and trapped Hezekiah in Jerusalem “like a caged bird.” It then continues with the Assyrian king returning to Assyria. There is no mention of Jerusalem capitulating or what happened to the “caged bird,” suggesting that Hezekiah escaped defeat. Josephus (first century CE; *Antiquities* 10:1:5) reports that G-d sent a pestilential distemper on the Assyrian army on the first night of the siege that killed 185,000 soldiers. The Egyptian version of the Assyrian defeat is recorded by Herodotus (c.484 BCE – c.425 BCE). This account relates that the Assyrians were camped at Pelusium in Egypt and during the night a huge number of field mice “attacked” the Assyrian camp and gnawed their quivers, bows and shield-straps, so as to render them useless. In the morning the panicked Assyrians fled and the Egyptians pursued them, killing a large number.

What does the *Tanach* say? In no less than three places it is reported that Sancheriv laid siege to the Holy City (2 Kings 18:17; 2 Chronicles 32:9; Isaiah 36), and in all three accounts the entire Assyrian army was destroyed in one night by “the angel of the Lord.” In II Kings 19:35 it is recorded that 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were killed in that single night.¹³ The conclusion of the Talmudic discussion about how G-d struck Sancheriv’s army is that He opened the ears of all the soldiers so that they

¹³ This story is memorialized in a popular 1813 poem by Lord Byron, “The Destruction of Sennacherib.”

heard the song of the angelic Chayos, and out of sheer rapture at such beauty, their souls flew out and they simply expired (*Sanbedrin* 95b).

Is an Artifact Necessary for a *Berachah* to Be Recited?

It would seem that the site of this miracle certainly warrants a *berachah* and yet it is not mentioned in the context of a *berachah* in the *Gemara* or *tosefta* or any other tannaitic or amoraic sources. However, it seems to be obvious that one should recite a *berachah* at that location. The first one to explicitly mention this is *Tosafos* (*Berachos* 54b *sv anei*), who initially states that in addition to all the locations mentioned in the *Gemara*, one should make a *berachah* at the site where Sancheriv's army was defeated, but that the *braisa* did not bother to mention it because the place is well known.¹⁴ *Tosafos* then does an abrupt about-face and quotes Rabenu Yehudah's¹⁵ position that only if the miracle is evident by artifacts at the site is the *berachah* recited; otherwise it is only recited by those who experienced the miracle. The site of Sancheriv's defeat, he argues, is not like the examples cited in the *braisa* and thus does not warrant a *berachah*.

Tosafos in these few lines introduced a far-reaching novelty that would seem to have no source. He distinguishes between a site of a miracle and an artifact of a miracle and further distinguishes between national and private miracles. For a *berachah* to be recited commemorating a national miracle, *Tosafos*, in this second position, posits that it is not enough to be at the location but there must be an artifact, while for a personal miracle the location suffices. This requirement of an artifact seems contra the *Mishnah* which states explicitly "one who sees a **location**" This requirement also seems to have no basis in the *Gemara*. It is not obvious that the citing of Rabenu Yehudah's dissenting opinion indicates that *Tosafos* is rejecting his initial position. The *Piskei Tosafos* records only that "*kol adam*" say the *berachah* even if there is no artifact and does not record that on a national miracle an artifact is required. The *Meromei HaSadeh* (Netziv; *Berachos* 54a) attempts to find a hint to Rabenu Yehudah's position in the fact that the *Mishnah* includes the word "*bo*" and similarly that the *Shulchan Aruch* includes that word, but in contrast leaves it out in *se'if* 4 when discussing personal miracles. *Nabar Shalom* (Rav Shabtai Vintura, first printed

¹⁴ It is not clear to me how *Tosafos*, located in France, knew the location and called it well known.

¹⁵ This is most likely Rabbi Yehudah Sirlion (d.1224; רבי יהודה בן רבי יצחק מפריז, המכונה גם רבי יהודה שיריליאון אורבר, אפרים אלימלך, בעלי התוספות : תולדותיהם, See p. 602 who, partially based on this, thinks Rabbi Yehudah Sirlion is the main author of *Tosafos* to *Berachos*.

1775) suggests that Rashi (*sv ha'roeh*), by stating that the site must be similar to those listed in the *Gemara*, is hinting to Rabenu Yehudah's rule. *B'mchilas kevodo*, this seems to be quite a stretch and there does not seem to be any hint that a requirement of an artifact ever occurred to Rashi.

The Rambam (*Berachos* 10:9) simply states "any place in which a public miracle was performed," indicating any place, without the need for an artifact. So too Roka'ach (end of 342) repeats the language of the *Mishnah* and provides the list from the *Gemara* with no indication of a caveat. If there was one, it certainly should be mentioned and it is not.

Despite the novelty and difficulty with Rabenu Yehudah's position, it has found its way into normative *halachah*. The *Mordechai* (*Berachos* 211) quotes *Tosafos* with the opinion of Rabenu Yehudah without comment, seemingly in agreement. The *Magen Avraham* (218:1) quotes *Tosafos* and the *Mordechai* as the accepted opinion that a site must be similar to those listed in that the miracle is recognizable via the location, and that this is as opposed to the Sancheriv miracle near Jerusalem. Regarding that miracle, writes the *Magen Avraham*, even if one can identify the exact location, because the miracle is not evident from the location because it did not happen in "the ground," no *berachah* is recited. He thus rules not to make a *berachah* at the site of Sancheriv's defeat and this is cited in the *Be'ir Heitev* (218:1).¹⁶ *Kaf HaChayim* (OC 218:1) also cites this position, but then also quotes a book, *P'dah es Avraham*, which quotes *Kometz Minchah* that at all of the resting stops mentioned in *Parashas Masei* one must recite this *berachah*. Clearly, there is no physical evidence at these locations.

Aside from the lack of textual support for Rabenu Yehudah's position, there is an obvious challenge from the Talmudic examples as raised by the *Aruch HaShulchan* (OC 218:3). The *Aruch HaShulchan* points out that some of the miracles in the Talmudic list can indeed be seen in the artifacts, such as the *avnei Elgavish* or the stones of Moshe and Og. However, the Red Sea and the Jordan River are flowing and it is simply the location where the miracle occurred. This, according to the *Aruch HaShulchan*, is exactly parallel to the situation with Sancheriv's army. He agrees that the site of Sancheriv's defeat is not similar to *avnei Elgavish* in regard to an

¹⁶ An alternate reason why not to recite a *berachah* at that site could have been offered. One could argue not to say it because not all of *Klal Yisrael* were rescued; only the remaining tribes, and this is not enough to warrant a *berachah* (*Shulchan Aruch* OC 218:2). This issue is not raised by *Tosafos* or by the others who discuss the topic. Either they understood that those remaining tribes now constitute *Klal Yisrael* (this can have ramifications for the celebration of Yom Ha'atzma'ut) or they felt that the refugees from the north who were exiled in Jerusalem gave this miracle the status of one affecting all of Israel.

artifact, but, he argues, it is certainly similar to the crossing points of the sea and river. He therefore remains perplexed at *Tosafos*'s ruling and at the Magen Avraham for quoting it.

The Mishnah Berurah (218:7) quotes the Magen Avraham and even attempts to answer the Aruch HaShulchan's problem. He explains that at the crossing points when one sees the water flowing it is recognized that the water stopped flowing so that the Jews could cross.¹⁷ However, the miracle of destroying Sancheriv's army had nothing to do with the ground and thus there is no physical indicator of the miracle at the site. But the Chofetz Chaim was clearly bothered by this explanation because in his *Sha'ar HaTziyun* (218:1) he brings two challenges to it. First he notes that *Tosafos* HaRosh quotes Rabenu Yehudah as the initial position in *Tosafos*, that the *berachah* is said. And furthermore he observes that the *Gemara* gives no indication that there is any difference between national and private miracles in regard to the qualification of the location, and just like for a personal miracle there is no artifact requirement, there should not be for national. He does not like to argue with earlier authorities and thus concludes with "*tzarich iyun*" — there is need to further investigate how to act. However, he is clearly not accepting the Magen Avraham and his position as the final word. The Aruch HaShulchan and the Mishnah Berurah both seem to be leaving room to recite the *berachah* at the site where Sancheriv's army was miraculously defeated. The question that then needs to be answered is: is this location identifiable?

Location of the Destruction of Sancheriv's Army

Is the location of this miracle known? *Tosafos* actually said the location is known! The question is, where was Sancheriv's army located as it besieged¹⁸ Jerusalem? Archeologists have provided rough ideas of the borders of the city at the time of Hezekiah, but nonetheless they cannot be said to be definitively identified. That is, with one exception. The eastern

¹⁷ Note that in *Biur Halachah* (sv *k'goan*) he seems to agree with the *Kafkor Va'ferach* that the *berachah* is only said at the crossing point. Yet the water there is no different than the water flowing further up- or downstream.

¹⁸ This is assuming that the Assyrians had actually imposed a full-fledged siege on Jerusalem. That seems to be the implication of Sancheriv's description of "a caged bird" as well as the plain meaning of II Chronicles 32:10 and possibly II Kings 18:26, 19:32, and Isaiah 37:33. On the other hand, one could read II Chronicles 32:9 as indicating that the bulk of the Assyrian force was in Lachish when it was destroyed. Nonetheless, the bulk of commentators unequivocally understand that the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem even if Sancheriv was not personally present.

border of Jerusalem was always the Kidron Valley. The city never developed across the valley, not under the Canaanites, not during any of *Bayis Rishon*, and not during *Bayis Sheni*; in fact, not until about 150 years ago.

In general it would seem that an attacking army that is besieging a city would have one principal camp. Jerusalem has historically been surrounded on three sides by steep valleys. The original city was surrounded by the Kidron Valley and the central or Tyropean Valley, and in the later years of the First Temple period and in the Second Temple period it was surrounded by the Kidron Valley and the Hinnom Valley. A valley is not an ideal location in which to pitch a military camp. Josephus twice (*Jewish War* 5:7:2 [303] and 5:12:2 [504–507]) refers to a location as the “camp of the Assyrians.”¹⁹ Clearly, the Assyrian siege left a large psychological mark on the city, such that almost 800 years later the inhabitants had a location that they associated with the site of the Assyrian camp.²⁰ From Josephus’ description it can be deduced that the location was northeast of the besieged city, rather than in the valleys to the east and west. Depending on what the borders of the city looked like, it may have been just northwest of the Temple Mount, in the present-day Old City, or further northwest in the general area of today’s Russian compound or municipality building, in either case on the so-called North-west Hill. Another old source that identifies the site of this miraculous demise of Sancheriv’s army is the *Targum* on Jeremiah. Near the end of chapter 31, Jeremiah describes the rebuilding of Jerusalem and in delineating the northern boundary, says “and the whole valley of the *pigrim*” which the *Targum Yonasan* says is the plain where the Assyrian troops died. He too identifies the main camp as being north of the city and not in any of the adjacent valleys.²¹

The question of relevance here is whether the fact that the main camp was north of the city precludes the presence of troops to the east on the Mount of Olives or in the Kidron Valley, troops that would have been miraculously killed and generated a requirement to recite a *berachah*? Josephus mentioned Sancheriv’s camp in the context of the Roman camps that besieged the city in 70 CE. The Roman army was certainly far larger than Sancheriv’s, but it can shed light on where an attacking military might position itself. The Romans under Titus surrounded the city on the north-

¹⁹ See “The Camp of the Assyrians in Jerusalem,” *IEJ* 29(1979):137–42.

²⁰ It is always possible that the collective memory was faulty. Josephus’ identification of Ir David is erroneous. However, there is no reason to suspect error in this instance.

²¹ ב"צ לוריא, כיצד תכנן חיזקיהו את מפלתו של סנחריב, בית מקרא ק' ניסן תשמ"ז

western side with three legions (V Macedonica — Fifth Macedonian Legion; XII Fulminata — Twelfth Legion; and XV Apollinaris — Fifteenth Apollonian Legion) and, importantly, with a fourth legion (the famed X Fretensis — tenth legion) on the Mount of Olives to the east.²² There are of course differences in the methods used by the two attacking armies: the Romans had superior technology compared to the Assyrians and were capable of hurling large stones considerable distances, and these projectiles indeed caused heavy damage to the ramparts. But this troop placement demonstrates that despite the rough terrain, there is a purpose in stationing troops on the eastern side. If one wants to cordon off and besiege the city, the eastern side cannot be neglected. In one of the earliest battles for Jerusalem, King David fled his son Avshalom's rebellion by going east to the desert.

In preparation for the siege, the Assyrians engaged in quite a bit of psychological warfare (II Kings 18:17–35; Isaiah 36; II Chronicles 32:9–19) and the location chosen for the Assyrian harangue was “by the conduit of the upper pool, which was on the path to the fullers' field” (II Kings 18:17; Isaiah 36:2). This seems to say that at least some of Sancheriv's troops were surrounding Jerusalem,²³ and while their location cannot be identified with certainty, it is certainly not north / northwest of the city where the permanent camp was located. The upper pool in the verse is often identified with the area of the Gichon spring, and hence there were certainly Assyrian troops to the east of the city.

It seems likely that the main Assyrian camp was, as described by Josephus, northwest of the city at a location that is not currently known precisely. But it also seems highly likely that in the siege of the city there were troops stationed on the eastern side, on the Mount of Olives that overlooks the principal water source of the city. It is impossible that a siege could have been successful without troops overlooking the Kidron Valley. The Bible (II Kings 19:35; II Chronicles 32:21) states that on “That night the angel of the Lord went out and smote in the Assyrian camp 185,000. When the people got up the next morning, they were all dead corpses.” The verse does not state that the attack was only against the main camp, but rather implies that the entire army, presumably including also those soldiers stationed on the east, were killed.

²² Levick, Barbara (1999). *Vespasian*. London: Routledge, pp. 116–119.

²³ See, however, *Rashi* to II Kings 19:25 who says the army was in Nov near Jerusalem when they were killed. But see *Sanhedrin* 95a that implies that the army reached and besieged Jerusalem.

Conclusion

The Aruch HaShulchan (OC 218:1) points out that in “*Modim*” we thrice daily say that we thank G-d for his daily miracles. There is indeed an imperative in recognizing G-d’s role in the hidden miracles of nature. But this does not preclude the importance of also recognizing the overt historical miracles that G-d has done for our nation. This is the basis of many of the holidays when we acknowledge the miracles temporally, in the time of year in which they occurred. The *berachah* of “*she’asah nissim l’avoseinu bamakom hazeh*” provides a means for acknowledging G-d at the spatial location of miracles, and according to the *Gemara* it is an obligatory and not an optional *berachah*.²⁴ There are today few sites at which we can do this, and it is thus a shame to exclude yet one more. Rather, when visiting the historic, ancient, original Jerusalem one can take the opportunity to recall the miracle that saved the Kingdom of Judah from the same fate that befell the 10 lost tribes.

There is little question that a portion of Sancheriv’s army was positioned on the slopes of the Mount of Olives as it drops towards the Kidron Valley and the Gichon Spring, the sole water source of ancient Jerusalem. Standing in Ir David and looking out at those slopes, it is fairly certain that one is gazing upon the ground where Sancheriv’s soldiers menacingly stood until the fateful night in which they were miraculously struck down. Furthermore, despite the fact that Magen Avraham cites it, the second opinion in *Tosafos* is difficult to defend and seems to be rejected by the Aruch HaShulchan and the Chofetz Chaim (in *Sha’ar HaTziyun*). These facts together might support one who is inclined to recite a *berachah* at the site.

It is worth noting that *Chazal* harshly criticized Hezekiah for not reciting *shirah* (a song of praise) for his salvation. According to the Talmud, but for the fact that Hezekiah failed to sing a song of praise to G-d for all the miracles performed for him, he would have been Mashiach (*Sanhedrin* 94a). May our *berachah* at the site of his salvation be a repair for Hezekiah’s failure and truly usher in Mashiach. ❧

²⁴ The *Gemara* says (*Berachos* 54a) “*m’chayvai livruchay.*” Rashba (*Berachos* 54a) says that the first time it is obligatory; thereafter (if 30 days have elapsed) it may be recited. An interesting question is whether one who has recited it within the previous 30 days may say it on behalf of someone who is now seeing it for the first time.