YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levi**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah z”l,

whose *yahrtzeit* is on 9 Tevet.

By Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**Lecture #259: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXIX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XLVI)**

After having examined David's attitude toward the ark and the resting of the *Shekhina* in comparison to his attitude toward the great *bama* in Giv'on and the offering of sacrifices in general, we wish in this *shiur* to consider David's attitude toward these matters in the book of *Tehilim.*[[1]](#footnote-1)We will try to understand the general directions in David's attitude toward the Divine service in all the dimensions which we have been considering in these *shiurim*.

### David's Yearnings for the house of God

In the *shiurim* dealing with Jerusalem in the days of David, we showed that David's aspiration to build the Temple was one of David's deepest and most fundamental aspirations from the very beginning of his reign.

David's transport of the ark to Jerusalem, his request to build the Temple (and the response denying him permission to do so), the many preparations for the building that would commence only after his death, all testify to David's fierce desire to join the site of his earthly kingdom to the site of God's kingdom, i.e., the Temple. This aspiration has many expressions throughout the book of *Tehilim.* The main ones will be discussed below.

But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your love: and in the fear of You I will bow down towards Your holy Temple.[[2]](#footnote-2) (*Tehilim* 5:8)

In Psalm 5, the God-fearing man accepts upon himself the yoke of God's kingdom, thanks Him for his having merited to be counted among those who come to the house of God, and petitions God to strengthen him so that he should continue to walk in the good path. At the conclusion of his request, the God-fearing man bows down towards the Temple, fulfilling the *mitzva* to fear God's sanctuary. We wish to examine the matter of prostration, and its context in *Tehilim* and for David. We will examine the sources for and cases of bowing down in the Torah and in the Prophets, and try to understand its spiritual essence and significance while considering its expressions in the Temple.

### prostration in the Book of *Tehilim*

An important term that repeats itself in the psalms of the *Tehilim* is *hishtachavaya*, bowing. Generally speaking, bowing is connected to man's total self-effacement in his standing before God.

It is not by chance that in the aforementioned verse David yearns to bow down toward the Temple. Elsewhere in the book of *Tehilim* we find:

I will bow down towards Your holy Temple, and praise Your name for Your steadfast love, and for Your truth: for You have magnified Your word above all Your name. (*Tehilim* 138:2)

Here too the bowing down is toward the Temple, the site of the resting of God's *Shekhina*.

There is, of course, a connection between *hishtachavaya* and *hodaya. Hodaya* denotes both an admission of the truth and also an offering of thanks. When a person bows down to God, he expresses his absolute submission, but at the same time he thanks God for his very existence and for all the good that God bestows upon him. So in Psalm 29:

Give to the Lord the glory due to His name; bow down to the Lord in the beauty of holiness. (*Tehilim* 29:2)

And in Psalm 95:

O come, let us prostrate ourselves and kneel: let us bow before the Lord our maker. (*Tehilim* 95:6)

In this psalm three different actions are mentioned: *hishtachavaya*, *keri'a*, and *berikha*. *Hishtachavaya* denotes full prostration on the ground with outstretched arms and legs, and the face of the worshipper looking downward. During *keriya*, the worshipper's shins are on the ground, while his body is erect. *Berikha* involves bending the knees in a bowing motion.

In Psalm 96 we come back to the idea of fearing God:

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name: bring an offering, and come into His courts. O bow down to the Lord in the beauty of holiness: tremble before Him, all the earth. (*Tehilim* 96:8-9)

Beyond the connection between bowing down before God and fearing Him, we see also a connection between bowing and the glory of God. When a person bows down before God, he recognizes the glory of God, and expresses that recognition by effacing himself before Him, and thus magnifying His glory.

Another physical context is the place, something that finds expression in Psalm 99:

Exalt the Lord our God, and bow down at His footstool; for He is holy… Exalt the Lord our God, and bow down at His holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy. (*Tehilim* 99:5-9)

In this case the bowing down is to God's footstool, that is, toward the ark of the covenant. This wording parallels the verse in *Tehilim* 132:7: "We will go into His dwelling places; we will bow down at His footstool." Both verses speak of bowing down to the ark. In contrast, at the end of Psalm 99, the formulation is: "And bow down at His holy hill," a more general formulation.

In some psalms, it is the nations that bow down before God:

And all the families of nations shall bow down before You. (*Tehilim* 22:28)

And in Psalm 72:

And may all kings bow down before Him; all nations serve Him. (*Tehilim* 72:11)

All the nations will eventually come to the recognition of their absolute submission to God, bowing down before Him being one of the most striking expressions of that recognition.

In order to understand the spiritual significance of bowing down, let us now consider where bowing down to God is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible and in what contexts.

### Bowing down to God in the Torah

In the *Akeida* story we read:

And Avraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and bow down, and come again to you. (*Bereishit* 22:5)

The Radak (ad loc.) explains:

And bow down – The young men understood that they would offer a sacrifice together with the bowing down, for they brought with them wood and fire, for in most cases, someone who goes somewhere to bow down brings a sacrifice, as it is stated in connection with Elkana: "To bow down and to sacrifice to the Lord" (I *Shemuel* 1:3). (Radak, *Bereishit* 22:5)

It would seem that Avraham is telling the young men that they are going only to bow down. The Radak understands that the young men saw the wood and the fire and understood by themselves that together with the prostration they would be offering a sacrifice.

The order as well bears significance - first bowing down and afterwards offering a sacrifice. As we noted, the prostration expresses self-effacement before God, which is then followed by the person's action – offering a sacrifice – in order to draw closer to God.

This is different from what we saw with David, with regard to whom there is no connection between bowing down before God and offering sacrifices to him. The various verses that we cited from the book of *Tehilim* speak of bowing down as an independent action.

The following incidents of bowing down are all connected to Moshe. The first mention is in the story of the giving of the Torah:

And He said to Moshe, Come up to the Lord, you, and Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and bow down afar off. (*Shemot* 24:1)

When Moshe is commanded to hew the second set of tablets, he ascends Mount Sinai with the tablets, and God passes before Him and reveals Himself by way of the thirteen attributes of mercy. In the wake of this wondrous revelation, the Torah states:

And Moshe made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and prostrated himself. (*Shemot* 34:8)

Rashi explains:

And Moshe made haste – When Moshe saw that the *Shekhina* passed by and heard the sound of the proclamation, he immediately prostrated himself. (Rashi, *Shemot* 34:8)

The *Seforno* comments on the speed at which Moshe prostrated himself:

And Moshe made haste – To magnify the submission, for the speed of prostration indicates the greatness of that to which the person prostrating himself is submitting himself. As they said: Rav Sheshet, when he bowed, used to bend like a reed[[3]](#footnote-3) (*Berakhot* 12b). (*Seforno*, *Shemot* 34:8)[[4]](#footnote-4)

The only place where the Torah commands prostration is after one brings his first fruits:

And it shall be, when you come in to the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance… that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the earth… And you shall go to the priest… And you shall speak and say before the Lord your God… And now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land, which You O Lord have given me. And you shall set it before the Lord your God, and bow down before the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 26:1-10)

The *Chizkuni* explains:

And you shall set it, and bow down – This teaches that [first fruits] require two wavings, once at the time of the declaration, and once again at the time of bowing down.

And you shall bow down – Like a person who asks permission from his teacher before going off on his way. (*Chizkuni*, *Devarim* 26:10)

According to the *Chizkuni*, the prostration that takes place at the end of the bringing of the first fruits is a way of asking permission from God before picking up and leaving the Temple.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Besides this source there is no other explicit place in the Torah indicating a general obligation to bow down to God. The question arises: Why is it that this directive is given specifically in the *mitzva* of first fruits? It may be suggested that in contrast to all the other sacrifices and activities performed in the Temple courtyard exclusively by the priests, this is the only activity performed in the Temple courtyard by a non-priest, who sets his basket of first-fruits before the altar, and in that way stands before God.

It is interesting to note that Eliezer, servant of Avraham, after succeeding in his mission, states:

And I bowed down my head, and prostrated myself before the Lord, and blessed the Lord God of my master Avraham, who had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter for his son. (*Bereishit* 24:48)

Here the bowing down may also connote giving thanks to God for the truth, that He oversees and directs what takes place in this world, and also for the lovingkindness that He allowed him to find what he was looking for.[[6]](#footnote-6)

### Bowing down in the prophets

Prostration is mentioned many times in the Prophets in connection with the sanctuary. Thus, for example, with Shaul who petitions Shemuel after the former sinned with regard to Amalek:

Now therefore, I pray you, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, and I will bow down to the Lord. (I *Shemuel* 15:25)

And so too in two contexts with David himself in *Shemuel* 2. After the death of his first son from Bat-Sheva, the text states:

Then David arose from the ground, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and bowed down; then he came to his own house, and asked them to set bread before him, and he did eat. (II *Shemuel* 12:20)

The Radak (ad loc.) explains:

Then David arose from the ground … - Since he wanted to enter the house of God to prostrate himself and offer thanks for the evil that befell him, he washed and anointed himself and changed his clothing. For a person is obligated to recite a benediction over the evil that befalls him and to thank God [for it] and receive [it] with joy, just as he recites a benediction on the good that befalls him. As it is stated: "I will sing of lovingkindness and justice" (*Tehilim* 101:1); if it is lovingkindness I will sing, and if it is justice I will sing. And it is written: "I will raise the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord" (*Tehilim* 116:13); "I found trouble and sorrow; then I called upon the name of the Lord" (*Tehilim* 116:3-4)…. And when he heard that the child died, he washed and anointed himself and came into the house of the Lord to give thanks and to bow down. (Radak, II *Shemuel* 12:20)

The mention of the house of God in this context requires explanation, for at this stage there was no Temple. One possibility is that David is referring to the tent in the City of David in which the ark was being housed. Thus we find in *Tehilim* 132, that the word "tent" can be used in the sense of "house": "Surely I will not come into the tent of my house" (*Tehilim* 132:3).

Another possibility is that the reference is to the great *bama* in Giv'on which is called "the house of God," as we see in the story of the conquest of Jericho:

And they burned the city with fire, and all that was in it: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord.[[7]](#footnote-7) (*Yehoshua* 6:24)

The second time that David bows down is in the story of his flight from Avshalom:

And it came to pass, that when David was come to the top of the hill, where he would bow down to God. (II *Shemuel* 15:32)

David ascends to the top of the Mount of Olives, which apparently was a place where David would regularly bow down. The question is to what would David bow down?

Rashi answers as follows:

Where he would bow down to God – where he would regularly bow down. When he would come to Jerusalem, he would see from there the tent in which the ark was housed and he would bow down. (Rashi, II *Shemuel* 15:32)

The Radak, on the other hand, explains as follows (ad loc.):

Where he would bow down – For it was his desire to bow down there, as it is stated: "And David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives" (II *Shemuel* 15:30). And he did this because he had been separated from the site of the Temple, and did not know whether he would return. [This is] like a person who asks permission from his friend when he goes into exile. (Radak, II *Shemuel* 15:32)

David leaves Jerusalem at this time because he did not want to confront Avshalom at all, and especially not in Jerusalem. According to the plain sense of the verse, he would regularly bow down at the top of the Mount of Olives.

The possibility raised by Rashi appears to us to be correct. It is more reasonable to assume that he bowed down to the ark found in the tent located in the City of David, as from his perspective the ark is the primary vessel expressing the resting of the *Shekhina*.

This understanding of Rashi reinforces what we said in earlier *shiurim*, according to which David would regularly ascend to the top of the Mount of Olives and prostrate himself there before God, while facing in the direction of the City of David.

According to the Radak, David prostrated himself in the direction of the site of the Temple. Since he was on the Mount of Olives, he turned directly westward, to Mount Moriya. This understanding assumes that at this stage David already knows the future location of the Temple, though we believe that the site of the Temple was not known to David at that time.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In this *shiur* we began to survey David's attitude toward the service of God as it is described in the book of *Tehilim* out of his yearnings for the house of God.

We began to examine the issue of bowing down, and we saw its appearances and its meanings in the book of *Tehilim*. We then saw its appearances in the Torah, and we began to consider its appearances in the book of *Tehilim*, and we related to two events in the book of II *Shemuel* in which David bows down before God. In the next *shiur* we will complete our examination of the matter of prostration in the Prophets, its appearances in the Temple service, and its spiritual significance.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. It is not our intention in this framework to conduct a comprehensive examination of David's attitute toward the Temple, the ark and the altar in the book of *Tehilim*. This would require a precise study of many psalms and an examination of the different tendencies in the book of *Tehilim* and the various themes discussed therein. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some understand that from the outset this psalm was meant to be recited at the morning service by those who came to the Temple to pray while the daily offering was being sacrificed. *Chazal* enacted that similar ideas be recited in the morning blessings and the blessings of *Keri'at Shema*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That is to say, Rav Sheshet would bow down quickly like a rod, sharply and all at once. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Another example is found in *Vayikra* 9:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is interesting that the Vilna Gaon in his *Aderet Eliyahu* concludes from here that "This is the rule. Whoever leaves the Temple is required to bow down." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bowing down before God is mentioned in other verses in this chapter, vv. 26 and 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the days of Yehoshua the house of God was located in Gilgal. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Radak assigns the chapter dealing with the Yevusi threshing floor to an earlier period, and therefore he maintains that at the time of Avshalom's rebellion David already knew the precise location of the Temple, and therefore he bows down toward it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)