YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levi**

**Lecture #261: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XLVIII)**

In the framework of our account of David's service of God in the book of *Tehilim*, we saw that prostration plays a significant role for him, and we also saw that this finds expression in two incidents connected to David in the book of *Shemuel.*

In this *shiur*, we wish to complete our examination of the spiritual meaning of prostration.

### The spiritual meaning of prostration

In the previous *shiur* we saw how the Gemara in *Berakhot* distinguishes between *kida* (bowing the head), *keri'a* (kneeling) and *hishtachava'a* (full prostration). By contrast, the Halakha recognizes in the context of prayer additional states of *keri'a* and *hishtachava'a*.

Even though every instance of *keri'a* during prayer has a reason of its own, they are all connected in their very essence to the world of *keri'a* and *hishtachava'a*, and in certain cases the explanations given by the various commentators relate to our matter.

### Submission and Fear

The Gemara in *Berakhot* discusses the blessings of the *Shemona Esrei* prayer during the saying of which one must bow down:

Our Rabbis taught: These are the blessings during the saying of which one bows [in the prayer]: The blessing of the patriarchs, at the beginning and at the end, and the thanksgiving [blessing], at the beginning and at the end. If one wants to bow down at the end of each blessing and at the beginning of each blessing, he is instructed not to do so.

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, reporting Bar Kappara: An ordinary person bows as we have mentioned; a High Priest at the end of each blessing; a king at the beginning of each blessing and at the end of each blessing.

Rabbi Yitzchak bar Nachmani said: It was explained to me by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that an ordinary person does as we have mentioned; a High Priest bows at the beginning of each blessing; and a king, once he has knelt down, does not rise again [until the end of the service], as it is stated: "And it was so that when Shelomo had made an end of praying…, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees" (I *Melakhim* 8:54).

Our Rabbis taught: *Kida* [bowing] is upon the face, as it is stated: "Then Bat-Sheva bowed with her face to the ground" (I *Melakhim* 1:31). *Keri'a* (kneeling) is upon the knees, as it is stated: From kneeling on his knees, Prostration is spreading out of hands and feet, as it is stated: "Shall I and your mother and your brothers come to prostrate ourselves before you on the ground" (*Bereishit* 37). (*Berakhot* 34a-34b)

Rashi there explains:

"'A high priest at the end of each blessing' – Whoever is especially grand must submit and humble himself. (*Berakhot* 34b)

The fact that the Amoraim distinguish with respect to *hishtachava'a* based on the type of person engaged in that behavior teaches us about the very nature of the action. According to both opinions, the scale is ordinary person, High Priest and king. The opinions differ as follows:

An ordinary person – according to both opinions an ordinary person must bow down at the beginning and at the end of the patriarchs blessing and the thanksgiving blessing.

The High Priest – according to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in the name of Bar Kappara must bow at the end of each blessing. According to Rabbi Yitzchak bar Nachmani, he must bow at the beginning of each blessing.

The king – according to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi in the name of Bar Kappara must bow at the beginning and at the end of each blessing. According to Rabbi Yitzchak bar Nachmani, once he has knelt, he does not rise again. He infers this law from Shelomo's prayer at the time of the dedication of God's Temple, where Shelomo arose at the end of his prayer from kneeling on his knees. From here we learn that the entire prayer offered at the Temple was done kneeling before God's altar.

A basic condition for proper royalty is humility on the part of the king. It is not by chance that one of the most important conditions laid down in the Torah passage summarizing the special laws applying to a king is that his heart must not be lifted up:

That his heart not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children in the midst of Israel. (*Devarim* 17:20)

This connects with another *mitzva* applying to the king:

And it shall be, when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: and it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to do them. (*Devarim* 17:18-19)

A king of Israel must take a Torah scroll with him wherever he goes so that he should remember at every moment that there is a heavenly King above him. It is the king's role to serve as God's agent on earth and to govern his realm in accordance with the Torah.

The Gemara in *Chullin* expresses this idea through the following parable:

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi pointed out a contradiction [between verses]. One verse says: "And God made the two great lights" (*Bereishit* 1:16), and immediately the verse continues: "The greater light… and the lesser light." The moon said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe! Is it possible for two kings to wear one crown? He answered: Go then and make yourself smaller. (*Chullin* 60b)

Why is the matter of kingship likened to the sun and the moon? The sun is the source of light. The moon is not an independent source of life, but rather it reflects the light of the sun and illuminates the night with it.

*Chazal* likened kingship to the moon. In the blessing over the moon, mention is made of the fact that "David, king of Israel, lives and exists." The *Zohar* says with respect to kingship that "it has nothing of itself." Kingship, by definition, has nothing of its own.

As long as a king of flesh and blood relates to himself as a moon, as an agent who receives all of his authority from above, his kingship is proper and will be conducted with the fitting humility.

If, however, a king sees himself as the source of light, he does not understand his role and he oversteps the limits of his rule. In such a case there is reason and real danger that the king's heart will be lifted up above his brothers.

### David's bowing

There are few figures like David who frequently prostrates himself, demonstrating thereby his submission, fear and humility as king. *Chazal* described this characteristic of David in different ways, and we will cite here some of the sources.

We start with *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin*:

"My heart was not haughty" (*Tehilim* 131:1) when Shemuel anointed me. "Nor were my eyes lofty" when I killed Golyat. "Nor did I exercise myself in great matters" when I brought up the ark, "or in things too high for me" when I was returned to the throne. "My soul within me is like a weaned child" (*Tehilim* 131:2), like a child who emerges from his mother's womb. (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 2:4)

In the Gemara in *Megila*:

Just as in his [David's] youth he humbled himself before anyone who was his superior in Torah, so in his kingship he humbled himself before anyone who was his superior in wisdom. (*Megila* 11a)

In *Midrash Shochar Tov*:

He was king, but he said: I am not the king, God made me king. He was mighty, but he said: I am not mighty. He was rich, but he said: I am not rich. He went out to war and emerged victorious, but he said: It is not through my might that I won, but rather He helped me, He brought me victory, and I emerged victorious, and He fashioned me to wage war, as it is stated: "God that girds me with strength" (*Tehilim* 18:33). (*Midrash Shochar Tov* 144a)

With his many prostrations, David expresses his perception of his kingship and his total subordination to God in the profoundest way. The submission that is manifested through bowing is required from a king more so than from any other person, owing to his great power and rule. Since David is the ideal king of flesh and blood, who with his deep humility fully understands the limits of his kingship, he bows before God.

### Thanksgiving

There is an essential connection between thanksgiving and prostration. The following verse exemplifies this connection:

I bow down towards Your holy Temple, and thank Your name for Your lovingkindness and for Your truth. (*Tehilim* 138:2)

In the Temple every act of thanksgiving is accompanied by bowing, for anyone offering thanks while standing erect is regarded as denying his own words and his thanksgiving is not considered thanksgiving.

### dwelling in his shadow

*Midrash Talpiyot* draws a comparison bowing down to one's fellow man and bowing down to God:

Since one who bows down [to another person] acts as if he were dwelling in His shadow and saying: I submit myself to you, fulfill my request, even though I am not worthy… since he submitted himself to him with bowing, moving his entire body, his heart softens and he fulfills his request, seeing his exceeding lowliness. All the more so the Holy One, blessed be He, who is filled with mercy… when one lowers his body by bowing before Him, He will fulfill his wish and deliver him from all trouble. (*Midrash Talpiyot*, *hishtachavaya* 108a)

Rabbi Avraham son of the Rambam in his book, *Ha-Maspik le-Ovdei Hashem* (*A Comprehensive Guide for the Servants of God*) (I, chap. 25) expands upon the matter of bowing, explaining the differences between the various forms of bowing: bowing the head, kneeling and prostration. He implies that bowing is the highest level of Divine service, there being no higher way of serving Him.

To complete this discussion, let us cite the words of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook in *Ein Aya* on *Berakhot* (34b), where he explains in his own special way the differences between bowing the head, kneeling and prostration, and through which we can understand the special significance of prostration:

115. "*Kida* [bowing] is upon the face… *Keri'a* [kneeling] is upon the knees… *Hishtachava'a* [prostration] is spreading out of hands and feet…." It is fitting that a person should imagine three types of submission when he falls before Him and when he imagines the truth of the greatness of the master of all, his Creator, blessed be He: First, cancellation of human intellect and wisdom which is considered as nothing as opposed to the one who is great with counsel, whose understanding is past finding out. Second, cancellation of the fitting natural inclinations…. And third, cancellation of all actions, that one should recognize that all his actions are considered as null in comparison to God's actions. For even all his actions and creations, surely it is only the hand of God who did this. And man with all his freedom is but like an axe in the hand of the woodchopper… Prostration which involves total submission demonstrates the true image, with the nullification of all of man's actions and vigor, that he is as nothing in comparison to God's great actions, and that no action is possible without man's narrow control of the laws of nature. Therefore, prostration involves separation of one's hands, the organs of the rational actions, with wisdom, reasoning, and understanding, and one's natural feet, for even the amazing combination of man's control, by way of his freedom and reason, over his natural powers, should not incline his heart to haughtiness and arrogance, that will bring him to abandon morality, which is the foundation of man's strength and integrity. For he will recognize that all his wisdom and skills are as nothing in comparison to God's actions that are performed with infinite wisdom. (*Berakhot* 34b)

According to Rav Kook, *hishtachava'a* is the level that includes *kida* and *keri'a*, cancelling all of man's actions. Therefore it involves both the subjugation of his intellectual processes (wisdom, reasoning and understanding) and the defeat of his natural powers that they should not turn his heart away, and in that way a person will acquire a full image of God's truth.

In this *shiur* we dealt with several meanings of *hishtachava'a*. In the next *shiur* we will complete our consideration of the issue, examining the way this obligation was fulfilled in the Temple.

(Translated by David Strauss)