YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #263: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (L)**

 Now that we have examined the term "prostration" in the Bible and clarified its spiritual significance, let us consider two more issues connected to prostration. The first is the prohibition to bow down on an *even maskit*, a figured stone; the second is how prostration was carried out in practice in the context of the Temple service. In this *shiur* we will deal with the prohibition to bow down on an *even maskit*.

### The prohibition to Bow down on an *Even Maskit*

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You shall make no idols, nor shall you erect a carved idol, or a pillar, nor shall you install an *even maskit* (a figured stone) in your land, to bow down upon it: for I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 26:1)

 Among the various expressions of idol worship, not to make idols, and not to erect a carved idol or pillar, the command is given not to install an *even maskit*, to bow down upon it. It would appear that it was a common practice among idolaters to install such a stone for ritual purposes.

 Our first question is: What is the meaning of the word *maskit*?[[1]](#footnote-1)

### A Figured stone

 Yonatan ben Uziel translates the phrase *even maskit* as: *satyu chakik be-tziyurin u-deyoknin*, "a stone painted and engraved with figures and images" (*Vayikra* 26:1). Rav Saadya Gaon similarly explains the phrase as referring to a figured stone.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 The Ibn Ezra writes as follows:

This means: A figured stone, derived from: "The imaginations (*maskiyot*) of their heart" (*Tehilim* 73:7); "Delightful craftsmanship (*sekhiyot*)" (*Yeshayahu* 2:16). (*Vayikra* 26:1)

In *Tehilim* the Ibn Ezra explains:

Like imaginations, for *sekhvi* (*Iyov* 38:36) is a term for the heart… And an *even maskit* is figured, and figures are imaginations.

So too we find in the Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*:

For they would install a figured stone with artistic craftsmanship before the idol.[[3]](#footnote-3) (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, negative commandment 12)

### A stone that is gazed upon

The *Zekenin mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosefot* maintain that an *even maskit* is a stone with an image on it that people look at. The word *maskit* is derived from the word *sekhiya*, that all gaze upon its beauty. And similarly the Rashbam:

*Maskit* – derived from *sakhah,* just as *marbit* is derived from *rabah*. I find no other word like it, except for: *maskiyot levavo* (*Tehilim* 73:7), which means sightings of the heart. Here too: a stone that is seen, that has images and pictures to gaze at. (*Bemidbar* 26:1)

According to this explanation as well, the stone was figured, but the essence of the matter is that people would gaze upon it.

### Covering

 Rashi in several places (*Vayikra* 26:2; *Bemidbar* 33:52; *Yeshayahu* 2:16; *Yechezkel* 8:12; *Mishlei* 18:11) understands the term in the sense of covering, as in "I will cover (*ve-sakoti*) with My hand" (*Shemot* 33:22), that they would cover the ground with a floor of stones.

### Drawing attention to this place

 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch proposes a new understanding:

*Even maskit* – the meaning of *maskit* is not certain. Derived from *shin-kaf-taf* = *shin-samekh-taf* (from which we get *hasket*, to attend, to note, *maskit* would be attention, and *even maskit* a directing stone, a stone set in the earth to direct attention to that place. (*Vayikra* 26:1-2)

 Rabbi Hirsch explains that an *even maskit* is a stone that was set in the earth for the purpose of drawing attention to its place.

 He also notes that Onkelos renders the phrase as *even sagida*, "a stone of bowing down." It is clear that this understanding is directly connected to the prohibition to bow down on such a stone.

### The Reason for the prohibition

 Now that we have surveyed the various interpretations of the phrase *even maskit*, let us now examine the reason for the prohibition.

 The Rambam writes as follows:

Similarly, [a person who bows down on] the *even maskit* mentioned in the Torah receives lashes - even if he prostrates oneself upon it to God - as it is stated (Vayikra 26:1): "Nor shall you install an *even maskit* in your land, to bow down upon it." **The pagans would customarily place a stone before a false deity so that they could prostrate themselves upon it.** Therefore, this practice is not followed in the worship of God. A person is not [liable for] lashes until he spreads out his hands and feet on the stone, thus prostrating himself on it entirely. This is what the Torah means by bowing. (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 6:6)

 The Rambam, in accordance with his position regarding the reasons of many of the *mitvzot* in the Torah, draws a direct connection between the prohibition to bow down on an *even maskit* and idol worship.

 This is the way the *Sefer ha-Chinukh* explains the prohibition in *mitzva* no. 349:

That we must not bow down on an *even maskit*, even to God, as it is stated: "Nor shall you install an *even maskit* in your land, to bow down upon it." An *even maskit* is a figured stone, and so too a hewn stone that is planed with a plane is included in the prohibition of *even maskit.*

As for the roots of the *mitzva*, the Rambam writes that it is because they would do this for their idols, installing a well-crafted figured stone before the idol, and bow down upon it. It is also possible to say that the reason is because it appears as if he were bowing down to the stone itself. Since he prepared it, and painted a figure on it, and it is attractive, there is room for suspicion. But if one bows down on an attractive cloth, there is no room for suspicion, because a cloth is something that quickly wears out, and nobody would make it his god. But a stone is something that endures and it has a deity in heaven, as the Sages said in tractate *Chullin* 40a: "Here he declared it to be a sacrifice to the mountain itself, but there he declared it to be a sacrifice to the deity of the mountain," and so there is suspicion. And the Torah distances a person from doing something that will arouse suspicion about him, so that others not stumble after him.

 According to the *Sefer ha-Chinukh*, the reason for the prohibition is that a person bowing down on an *even maskit* might appear to be bowing down to the stone itself, that is, to the figure on the stone.

 The *Minchat Chinukh* understands that according to Rashi (*Megila* 22, s.v. *lo*) the prohibition of *even maskit* is like the prohibition of "You shall not make with Me" (*Shemot* 20:20), which forbids building a *Heikhal* or a *menora* or the like, similar to the one in the Temple. This is also the understanding of the Malbim and the *Kesef Mishneh.*[[4]](#footnote-4)

We find another reason for the prohibition in the Gemara in *Megila*. The Gemara relates that Rav was once visiting in Babylonia on a public fast day, and the entire congregation fell on their faces. The Gemara asks why was it that Rav did not fall down on his face, and it answers that it was a floor of stone. And surely we learned:

"Nor shall you install a figured stone in your land, to bow down upon it." Upon it you may not bow down in your land, but you may prostrate yourselves on the stones in the Temple. (*Megila* 22b)

 Based on this, Rashi writes in his commentary to the Torah:

"To bow down upon it" – Even to heaven, because prostration is [performed] with the spreading of hands and feet, and the Torah prohibits doing this outside the Temple. (*Vayikra* 26:1)

 One of the interesting questions in this context is what is the relationship between inside the Temple and outside the Temple, even if the person is bowing down to God? Why in the Temple is this permitted, but outside the Temple it is forbidden?

 The *Or Zaru'a* relates to the Gemara in *Megila* and says:

The reason for this is that one should not appear as if he were bowing down to what is before him, as Rav Hai explained. Therefore even if he turns away, he appears as if he were bowing down to what is before him. But in the Temple, there is no concern, for the *Shekhina* rests there, and he bows down before the Holy One, blessed be His name and exalted be His mention. (*Or Zaru'a*, *Hilkhot Tefila*, no. 93)

 According to this understanding, no bowing outside the Temple can be to God, owing to the place where it is being done, and perforce it involves idol worship.[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary to the Torah relates to the reason for the prohibition in the context in which it appears in the Torah, in connection with the prohibition to make an idol or pillar, on the one hand, and the command to observe the Sabbaths and reverence the sanctuary, on the other. Sections of his comments are cited below.

These three sentences – "You shall make no idols," "nor shall you erect a carved idol, or a pillar," and "nor shall you install an *even maskit* in your land," are obviously the negative opposite of the two positive commands that immediately follow: "You shall keep My Sabbaths; and reverence My sanctuary." Not idols, not a carved idol or a pillar, not an *even maskit*, but the Sabbath and the sanctuary are the institutions toward which your careful attention is to be concentrated…

But also in your relation to Me, in seeking to get nearer to Me, to My proximity, on which all your happiness, blessing and protection is dependent, do not lose your way. Not by means of a carved idol and pillar, not by any image by which you may think of My Presence, and through which you will only banish My Presence, will I really be always near to you. Also, not by a mere grateful memorial to My Rule will you obtain My blessing and protecting rule and management. **Not even at any spot of your own choice throughout the whole world may you mark, by cementing a stone there, as being specially consecrated, there to throw your whole self down in devotion.** There is only one way by which you can everywhere realize Me and My management and obtain My blessing and protecting proximity. **And there is only one place which I have consecrated to be a means for you to feel My Presence, on whose ground, as being such a marked-out place, you may throw yourself down with your whole being in prayer and devotion to Me.** Its existence in your midst is to make such demands on you to keep your lives in concord with it, that by living such holy lives, in every minute of your existence, wherever your earthly wanderings may lead you, you will be able to bring yourselves near to Me so that I can fulfill that which I have promised you: "I will dwell amongst you" (Shemot 25:8). (*Vayikra* 26:1-2)

 He appears to be saying that the prohibition to bow down anywhere outside the Temple sharpens the special meaning of sanctity in one place and not in another. It is only the ground in this place that is sanctified with special sanctity, and only upon it can one bow down and throw one's whole self in devotion to God.

And we must not set down an *even maskit* in our land to bow down upon it, and we must not throw ourselves down before God wherever we please, however filled with fervid devotion we may be. This is not the prayer that God wishes to receive. He has set His law, His Torah, in the center between Himself and us. Only in homage to His Torah does he recognize homage to Himself, and only inasmuch as we prostrate ourselves before His Torah do we prostrate ourselves before Him. **Therefore for us it is only the sanctuary which He has dedicated to His Torah on Moriya-Zion, that is the sole spot on earth which is designated as the place where one can pray to God with completely throwing one's whole self before Him in true devotion. And everywhere else we may only throw ourselves down before God, on ground which is not specially marked out by stone for that purpose.** (*Vayikra* 26:1-2)

 We are not permitted to choose a place and attribute to it special sanctity and then mark it out with stone. Rabbi Hirsch adds that only in the sanctuary which is dedicated to God's Torah is it fitting to bow down to God. Anywhere else one may only bow down to God in a place that was not specially designated for that purpose.

**And it is not prostration,** not **the outward sign of our giving ourselves completely up** to the sanctuary of the Torah, but **reverence** **of the sanctuary** – the serious thought that should always accompany us, and wherever we may be, always keep in our minds, the demands which radiate from that holy center point **to keep our lives holy, and to realize the lofty ideal of life which was laid down there,** so that in our private and public life we can think of that ideal without having to blush – this is reverence of the sanctuary of God which alone does actually make the sanctuary of God's Torah a center point which always and everywhere draws us upwards towards it and thus towards God – that it is which makes us conscious of the eye of God being always on us, and brings about all the seeds of security and blessing and happiness which the commands of His Torah sow in the fields of our life. (*Vayikra* 26:1-2)

Wherever we bow down to God we remember His Torah. In addition to prostration which is a sign of our total devotion to the Torah, we are commanded to reverence the sanctuary. In this way a connection is created between observing the Torah and fearing the sanctuary through prostration.

In the next *shiur* we will complete our examination of the matter of prostration, and consider how prostration found expression in the Temple service.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. A detailed survey of the sources is found in Yehuda Lavi's *Kara Ravatz*, pp. 515-516. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. And similarly the Radak in his commentary to *Yeshayahu* 2:16; *Sefer ha-Chinukh*, *mitzva* no. 24; and Rabbeinu Bachye. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Rabbeinu Yona Ibn Genach in his *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. *shin-kaf-heh*). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is not our intention in these *shiurim* to delve into the various opinions cited here, but only to present the main reasons that were given for the prohibition. The *Magen Giborim* 131, 7 presents a practical ramification of the disagreement between Rashi and the Rambam, whether the prohibition applies to bowing without stretching out one's hands and feet. According to the Rambam this is forbidden, because the reason for the prohibition is idol worship, whereas according to Rashi, the prohibition applies only to an action similar to the one performed in the Temple, where bowing down was carried out with outstretched hands and feet.

We will also not go into the ramifications of this *halakha* for the prostration practiced today on Yom Kippur in synagogues. It is clear that it is forbidden to bow down on a stone floor with outstretched hands and feet, even to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik (*Mesora* 3, p. 42) asks whether the distinction between inside the Temple and outside the Temple with respect to *even maskit* is the same as the distinction between the two places for other matters, or whether the fulfillment of bowing down inside the Temple cancels the prohibition of *even maskit*.

This may have ramifications for the question whether prostration is forbidden on the Temple Mount, and permitted only in the Temple courtyard, or whether prostration is permitted even on the Temple Mount.

This is not the forum for expanding upon these matters. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)