YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #264: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXIV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LI)**

After having seen that prostration on a figured stone is forbidden outside the Temple, let us now examine how prostration was carried out in actual practice in the Temple service.

We need to examine who would bow down, where would they bow down, and when and in what context they would do so. While it is true that prostration is not counted as a separate *mitzva*,[[1]](#footnote-1) and, as was previously noted, the only explicit mention of bowing down in the Torah as part of a *mitzva* that is fulfilled in the Temple is in connection with first fruits, prostration is undoubtedly one of the elements of the Temple service.

It would appear from Scripture that the people would go up to the Temple in order to prostrate themselves there. Thus, for example, writes the prophet Yirmeyahu:

To all the cities of Yehuda, which come to bow down in the Lord's house. (*Yirmeyahu* 26:2)

And similarly in the words of *Yechezkel*:

Likewise the people of the land shall bow down at the door of this gate before the Lord on the sabbaths and on the new moons… But when the people of the land shall come before the Lord on the appointed seasons, he that enters in by the way of the north gate to bow down shall go out by way of the south gate…. (*Yechezkel* 46:3-9)

*Chazal* expounded in connection with the verse: "And you shall serve Him" (*Devarim* 13:5) – "Serve Him in His Temple" (*Sifre Devarim*, *Parashat Re'e*, 85). And concerning this the Ramban writes:

"And you shall serve Him" – to serve Him in the Temple through sacrifices, song, and prostrations there. (*Devarim* 6:13)

It is evident then that, according to the Ramban, prostration is part of the Divine service.

It would appear that the people of Israel who came to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage festivals, as well as the priests in their various services, and also the High Priest when he entered the *Heikhal* would prostrate themselves as an essential part of the service in the Temple.

### The prostrations at the Gates of the Temple courtyard and at the Breaches in the *Soreg*

The Mishna in *Shekalim* states:

There were in the Temple… thirteen prostrations. [Members of the house of Rabban Gamliel and of Rabbi Chananya the chief of the priests used to prostrate themselves fourteen [times]. And where was the additional [prostration]? In front of the store of wood, for thus they had a tradition from their forefathers that the ark was hidden away there…

But where did they make the prostrations? Four [times] in the north, four [times] in the south, three [times] in the east, and twice in the west, in front of the thirteen gates. (*Shekalim* 6:1-3)

And similarly the Mishna in *Middot*:

Within it [the wall of the Temple Mount] was the *soreg* ten handbreadths high. There were thirteen breaches in it; these had been originally made by the kings of Greece, and when they repaired them they enacted that thirteen prostrations should be made facing them….

And thirteen prostrations were made there. Abba Yose ben Chanan says: They were made facing thirteen gates. (*Middot* 2:3-6)

It turns out that there are two opinions regarding the Temple prostrations: According to the first the prostrations were made facing the gates of the Temple courtyard, whereas according to the second, they were made facing the breaches in the *soreg*.

It may be suggested that the Mishna in *Shekalim* follows the view of Abba Yose ben Chanan who maintains that there were thirteen gates in the Temple courtyard, whereas the Mishna in *Middot* according to which they would bow down facing the breaches in the *soreg* agrees with those who understand that in the Temple courtyard there were only seven gates (*Middot* 1:4).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rabbi Yehuda in *Tosefta Shekalim* maintains a third position:

There were thirteen prostrations in the Temple. Rabbi Yehuda says: Facing a gate there was prostration, facing a breach there was bowing. (*Tosefta*, *Shekalim* 2:17)

According to Rabbi Yehuda they would bow down both facing the gates and facing the breaches. Facing the gates they would bow down with full prostration and outstretched hands and feet, whereas facing the breaches they would bow down without stretching out their hands and feet.

The author of the *Tiferet Yisrael* on the Mishna explains:

When one who was circling [the Temple] from the outside would reach each gate that opened into the Temple courtyard, he would prostrate himself before God and offer praise for the beauty of the building. (*Tiferet Yisrael, Yakhin*, *Middot* 2, no. 68)

It is reasonable to assume that the prostration facing the gates was part of the process of circling the Temple. It gave expression to a special prayer and to a special public standing. The time during which one circled the Temple was apparently an especially appropriate time to offer a personal prayer. The circler would express his total subordination to God without actually entering the Temple courtyard, but merely by circling it from the outside and prostrating himself at each of its entrances.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### Prostration that accompanied each sacrifice

The previously cited *Tosefta* in *Shekalim*, after it records the position of Rabbi Yehuda, continues:

And the rest of the prostrations in the Temple which accompanied the sacrifices were a fixed obligation. Both here and here there was no bowing, but only kneeling and outstretched [hands and feet]. (*Tosefta Shekalim* 2:17)

We see from here that it was customary to bow down with each sacrifice. According to this, bowing down is considered an actual service – that is to say, a kind of sacrifice.

Safrai, in *Mishnat Eretz Israel*, emphasizes in his commentary that only priests served in the Temple. In our case, the Pharisees (and later the Sages) fought to emphasize the involvement of every individual in Israel in the Temple service. The giving of the half-shekel, the laying of hands on the head of the offering, the *ma'amadot*, and the pilgrimage festivals all come to emphasize the idea of the active participation of the entire people in the Temple service. In this context, prostration is considered the Israelite's part in the offering of the sacrifice, and from here the importance of the act.

According to the *Tosefta* the most important prostration was that which accompanied the sacrifices, they being fixed, obligatory prostrations.

As for the thirteen prostrations, it would appear that they were an obligation falling upon those arriving on the pilgrim festivals the first time they came to the Temple and circled the wall of the Temple courtyard.

Margaliyot, in his *Hilkhot Eretz Israeli*, cites a description of these prostrations from a later source from the end of the Byzantine period:

On his left side, and his left temple must be on the ground, and his two hands under his right side, and similarly his legs. But his right hand must hang and be stretched out like a lamb bound for sacrifice. (p. 134)

According to this description, we can view prostration itself as a type of sacrifice, whereby every member of Israel (and not only the priests) can totally efface himself before God in a way that indicates his readiness to be sacrificed.

In addition, according to the house of Rabban Gamliel and the house of Rabbi Chananya the chief of the priests they would prostrate themselves another time in front of the store of wood, for they had a tradition from their forefathers that the ark was hidden away there. This position maintains that there was prostration facing the ark. This brings to mind the prostration of David on the Mountain of Olives toward the tent in which the ark rested.

### they stand pressed together, but they prostrate themselves with wide spaces between them, and they extend eleven cubits behind the back wall of the Holy of Holies.

The Gemara in *Yoma* states:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When the Israelites come up to the festivals, they stand pressed together, but they prostrate themselves, with wide spaces [between them], and they extend eleven cubits behind the back wall of the Holy of Holies. What does that mean? It means that although they extended eleven cubits behind the back wall of the Holy of Holies, standing pressed together, yet when they prostrated themselves, they prostrated themselves with wide spaces [between them]. (*Yoma* 21a)

Rashi explains (ad loc.):

"They extend behind the back wall of the Holy of Holies" refers to the first clause, before the prostration: And this is what it means: Although they extended behind the back wall of the Holy of Holies, and they had to stand pressed together because of the crowd, even so when they prostrated themselves, they moved to the eastern side of the altar through the courtyard and prostrated themselves before the *Heikhal* with wide spaces between them. (*Yoma* 21a)

From this Gemara we learn that the people of Israel stood in their masses in the central courtyard of the Temple and prostrated themselves.

It follows also from the words of Rashi in the continuation that the place was so crowded with people that the pilgrims filled not only the eleven cubits of the courtyard of Israel on the eastern side of the Temple courtyard, but they reached the northern and southern portions of the courtyard, and in the end they even came to the western side, to the eleven cubits behind the back wall of the Holy of Holies. "They stand pressed together, but they prostrate themselves, with wide spaces between them."[[4]](#footnote-4)

According to Rashi, when they all came to prostrate themselves they would walk through the Temple courtyard to the east side of the altar and prostrate themselves before the *Heikhat* with wide spaces between them. The prostration was performed from east to west in the direction of the Temple.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It may be that Rashi suggests that the people moved to the east side of the Temple in order to prostrate themselves to the west because prostration to the east could have been interpreted as bowing down to the sun and engaging in idol worship.

Rashi understands that in order to avoid such a misunderstanding, the people moved to the east side of the altar, making it even more crowded there, in order to prostrate themselves toward the west, and not be thought to be bowing down to the east and to the sun.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The *Midrash* (*Vayikra Rabba* 10, 9) adds that when a person would prostrate himself before the *Shekhina* on a festival and ask for his needs, a space of four cubits would open up between himself and the others standing next to him so that the others would not hear his supplications.

### The prostrations of the people on YOm Kippur when they heard the fully-pronounced name of God come forth from the mouth of the high priest

The Mishna in *Yoma* describes the confession of the sins of all of Israel that was sounded by the High Priest over the goat that would be sent to Azazel:

And when the priests and the people standing in the Temple courtyard heard the fully-pronounced name come forth from the mouth of the High Priest, they bent their knees, bowed down, fell on their faces and called out: Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever. (*Yoma* 6:2)

When Israel arrived at the Temple on one of the pilgrim festivals, each person would prostrate himself when he wished to pray to God, but on Yom Kippur all the priests and the people would prostrate themselves together when they heard the fully-pronounced name of God issue forth from the mouth of the High Priest. We have here a combination of the people's physical presence in the Temple courtyard, their standing before God while facing the Temple, and the sounding of the fully-pronounced name of God.

The location and the sounding of God's name would make the *Shekhina's* presence very real for everybody standing in the Temple courtyard. Every person found in the courtyard came there to express his deep connection to God. Therefore, the timing, the location, and the sounding of God's fully-pronounced name would bring each member of Israel to a deep sense of God's presence and to a desire to express in the broadest way his belonging to God and his total submission to Him by way of prostration.

### The people's prostration during the Levites' singing

The Mishna in *Tamid* describes the order of the sacrifice of the daily offering and all of the actions that were required for that service. In this context it is stated:

And the Levites chanted the psalm. When they came to a pause, a *teki'a* was blown, and the public prostrated themselves; at every pause there was a *teki'a* and at every *teki'a* a prostration. (*Tamid* 7:3)

Mishna 4 lists the psalms that the Levites would sing in the Temple each day of the week. The psalm would be divided into three sections. After each section, the priests would sound a *teki'a*, a *teru'a* and a *teki'a*, and all the people in the Temple courtyard would prostrate themselves with outstretched hands and feet.

We mentioned earlier that every sacrifice was accompanied by prostration, and the implication is that this obligation fell upon the person bringing the sacrifice. Here we are dealing with an integral part of the ongoing service in the Temple, the service of the people at large that accompanied the singing of the Levites and the shofar blasts of the priests, the people participating in the service through their very prostration.

Parenthetically, it may be mentioned that the Maharit (cited in Rabbi Chayyim Alfandri's *Derekh ha-Kodesh*, 8b) maintains that anyone entering the Temple Mount was obligated to make a full circle in order to prostrate himself in all thirteen places, as may be understood from the Mishna:

All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right and went round [to the right] and went out by the left. (*Middot* 2:2)

To complete the picture, it should be noted that the Vilna Gaon maintains that the people also prostrated themselves when they left the Temple.

According to this understanding, and together with the words of the Maharit, coming to the Temple brought a person to a realm that very clearly expressed the revelation of God's presence. The supreme expression of a person's standing before God and his sense of subordination to Him is bowing with his body, thereby expressing a sort of "self-sacrifice" of the person to God. Therefore, once again before he left the Temple, he would bow down before God.

To summarize, we find with respect to the people as a whole who would come to the Temple on a regular basis several prostrations.

There was prostration at each of the thirteen gates to the Temple courtyard, where the Israelite would enter into the camp of the *Shekhina*. There may also have been another set of prostrations when the person reached the *soreg*, facing the thirteen breaches that the Greeks made in the wall.

The people standing in the Temple courtyard would prostrate themselves in the framework of the song sung by the Levites as part of the regular Temple service.

There was also prostration that accompanied every sacrifice that a person would bring to the Temple. We saw that prostration itself can be seen as a form of sacrifice – a person drawing himself close to God in complete self-abnegation.

On the pilgrim festivals a person would prostrate himself before God, apparently from the eastern portion of the Temple courtyard while facing west in the direction of the Temple. On Yom Kippur the priests and all the people would bow down when they heard the fully-pronounced name of God issuing forth from the mouth of the High Priest.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Yitzchak Shapira and Yosef Pel'i discuss this issue in the book, *El Har Ha-Mor*, in chapter 6, "*Ha-Hishtachavaya be-Har ha-Bayit*," pp. 128-141, and they mention the sources that we cite in this *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Tosafot* in *Ketubot* (106a, s.v. *shiv'a*) explain that the disagreement is not about the number of gates, but about whether the gates are sufficiently important that *Chazal* should have instituted prostration facing them. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the suggestion of Shmuel and Zev Safrai in their commentary to the Mishna, *Shekalim* 6:1, in their book, *Mishnat Eretz Israel* (Jerusalem 5770). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some suggest that this description relates to the reality in the Temple courtyard on Yom Kippur at the time of the High Priest's confession, and not that of the pilgrim festivals, as is implied by the plain sense of the Gemara. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. So too Rashi, *Avot* 5:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As stated, Rashi does not explain the people's movement to the east; we made our suggestion to explain Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)