YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #265: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LII)**

In this *shiur* we wish to complete our examination of the issue of prostration. We will begin with prostration in the service of the priests and see how prostration was carried out at the end of the service. We will then examine the question whether prostration itself is regarded as a service in the Temple. Finally, we will summarize all that we have learned with respect to prostration.

Thus far we have seen the prostration applying to all the members of Israel when they would circle the Temple, when they would offer sacrifices, during the Levitical singing, on pilgrimages undertaken on the three pilgrimage festivals and on Yom Kippur. Now we will consider the prostrations performed by the priests over the course of their service in the Temple.

### Prostration in the wake of the priests

The Mishna in tractate *Tamid* (chapter 6) lists various acts of service that were performed daily by the priests:

The one who had been chosen to clear the inner altar went in and took the *teni* and prostrated himself and went out again.

The one who had been chosen to clean the *menora* went in… [completed the lighting of the *menora*] and prostrated himself and went out.

The one who had been chosen for the firepan made a heap of the cinders on the top of the altar and then spread them about with the end of the firepan and prostrated himself and went out.

The one who had been chosen for the incense… burnt the incense and went out. (*Midot* 6:1-3)

We see that at the end of each service, the priest who performed the service prostrated himself and went out.

This prostration took place inside the *Heikhal* before God. The Rosh comments: "Like a servant who serves his master and asks permission to take leave" (Rosh, Commentary to tractate *Tamid*, 6a).

The Mishna there (*Tamid* 5:6) describes how during the course of the sacrifice of the daily offering, one of the priests would take a shovel and throw it between the porch and the altar. One of the purposes that the noise of the shovel served was that when a priest heard the sound, he knew that his brother priests were going in to prostrate themselves, and he would run to join them. From here we see that the priests who were in the Temple at that time would enter the *Heikhal* to prostrate themselves.

All this applies to the priests in general. A similar account is given of the High Priest, about whom the Mishna in *Tamid* states:

When the High Priest went in to prostrate himself, three priests supported him, one by his right and one by his left and one by the precious stones. When the superintendent heard the sound of the footsteps of the High Priest as he was about to issue [from the *Heikhal*], he raised the curtain for him. He went in, prostrated himself and went out, and then his brother priests went in and prostrated themselves and went out. (*Tamid* 7:1)

### Prostration at the end of the service

According to the Tosefta, *Shekalim* 2:17, all members of Israel would prostrate themselves in connection with the fixed and obligatory offerings at the end of the service.

Strong support for prostration at the end of the service can be brought from the account of the renewal of the Temple service by King Chizkiyahu:[[1]](#footnote-1)

And all the congregation prostrated themselves, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this continued until the burnt-offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves and prostrated themselves. Moreover Yechizkiyahu the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaf the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 29:28-30)

And so writes the Vilna Gaon in his *Aderet Eliyahu*:

This is the general rule: Whoever leaves the Temple must prostrate himself. (*Aderet Eliyahu*, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, *Devarim* 10, p. 111)

According to the aforementioned Tosefta, there is a source for what we say in the *Musaf* prayer recited on the three pilgrimage festivals: "And there we shall go up, and be seen, and prostrate ourselves before You," this because of the obligation to prostrate oneself when leaving the Temple.

We can, of course, relate to several passages in the liturgy. The Abudraham (pp. 237-238) discusses that which we say in our prayers: "And we are unable to go up, and be seen, and prostrate ourselves before You," and he brings several verses in support of this. According to the wording of this prayer, the order of events is first to go up and be seen, and only at the end to prostrate oneself. The verses cited by the Abudraham come to confirm this understanding:

Thus in *Yeshayahu* 66:

And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to prostrate themselves before Me, says the Lord.  (*Yeshayahu* 66:23)

And similarly in *Yeshayahu* 27:

And they shall prostrate themselves before the Lord in the holy mountain at Jerusalem. (*Yeshayahu* 27:13)

Additional verses describe the prostration as follows:

And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations that came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to prostrate himself before the King, the Lord of hosts. (*Zekharya* 14:16)

And similarly by the prophet Yechezkel:

And the prince shall enter by the way of the porch of the gate without… Likewise the people of the land shall prostrate themselves at the door of that gate." (*Yechezkel* 46:2-3)

It may be said in general that the obligation of prostration at the end of these services comes to express the fact that a priest who is involved in the Temple service must perform that service with submission and self-effacement, and that this prostration serves as sort of a farewell to his having been present before God.

### Prostration as service

Is prostration considered a service of God?

One answer to this question is found among the commentators to the Mishna in *Tamid*. The Mishna describes the High Priest's entry into the *Heikhal* for the purpose of prostration:

He went in, prostrated himself and went out, and then his brother priests went in and prostrated themselves and went out. (*Tamid* 7:1)

The Rosh in his commentary (ad loc.) explains:

After the burning of the incense he enters the *Heikhal* in order to prostrate himself. This is not considered needless entering, **as prostration is a service.** (Rosh's commentary to *Midot*, 6a)

R. Ovadya mi-Bartenura (ad loc.) agrees with the Rosh, and so too the *Tosafot* in *Menachot*:

As prostration is needed for the service. (*Tosafot*, *Menachot* 27b, s.v. *le-heikhal*)

This also follows from the *Kesef Mishneh.* The Rambam in *Hilkhot Bi'at ha-Mikdash* writes:

One - whether an ordinary priest or a High priest - who enters the *Heikhal* not for the sake of service, nor prostrating himself is liable for lashes. (*Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash* 2:4)

The *Kesef Mishneh* (ad loc.) writes:

Prostration is considered a service, and therefore he is not liable to lashes if he enters to prostrate himself, even not at a time of his service. (*Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash* 2:4)

On the other hand, the *Semag* (Negative commandment, no. 303) understands that only if he went in for prostration at the end of his service is he not liable for lashes. But otherwise, if he went in only for prostration, he is indeed liable for lashes.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### everything by virtue of prostration

Rabbi Yitzchak said: Everything is by virtue of prostration. Avraham returned in peace from Mount Moriya only by virtue of prostration, [as it is stated:] "And we will prostrate ourselves and return to you" (*Bereishit* 23:8). Israel was redeemed only by virtue of prostration, as it is stated: "And the people believed… then they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves" (*Shemot* 4:31). The Torah was given only by virtue of prostration, as it is stated: "And prostrate yourselves afar off" (*Shemot* 24:1). Chana was remembered only by virtue of prostration, as it is stated: "And they prostrated themselves there before God" (I *Shemuel* 1:28). The exiles will be gathered in only by virtue of prostration, as it is stated: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great horn shall be blown… and they shall prostrate themselves before the Lord in the holy mountain at Jerusalem" (*Yeshayahu* 27:13). The Temple was built only by virtue of prostration, as it is stated: "Exalt you the Lord our God, and prostrate yourselves at His holy hill" (*Tehilim* 99:9). The dead will be resurrected only by virtue of prostration, as it is stated: "O come, let us prostrate ourselves and bend the knee; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker" (*Tehilim* 95:6). (*Bereishit* *Rabba* 56, 2)

This Midrash tries to demonstrate the critical importance of prostration and its decisive influence upon the most significant events in Jewish history.

Besides the two personal events with national significance, Avraham's return with Yitzchak after the *Akeida* and Chana's conceiving of a child, the events that are said here to have occurred by virtue of prostration are all-embracing national events.

We see from this Midrash that prostration is not just one of the services that were performed in the Temple, but rather an independent and most significant service.

### Summary

To summarize our study of prostration:

Prostration is the one service that is fulfilled by every member of Israel with his own body when he arrives at the Temple.

This service has a special connection to the Temple, and it can be performed on stone with outstretched hands and feet only in the Temple.

A fundamental question arises regarding the High Priest's entry into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur: How is such an encounter between man and God possible? One of the distinctions between the general prohibition to enter the Holy of Holies and the allowance given to the High Priest to enter with burning incense is that the incense creates a barrier between man and God, and makes the High Priest's entry into the innermost sanctuary possible.

Prostration represents man's absolute self-abnegation. This is also the way we explained why when a person arrives at the Temple he must circle the courtyard and prostrate himself at each gate and at each breach in the wall.

According to this understanding, approaching the site of the resting of God's *Shekhina* requires prostration, absolute self-effacement before God. Only then can the meeting between man and God take place.

A person would prostrate himself during the daily Temple service during the Levitical singing, with each shofar blast of the priests, and also with the offering of every sacrifice – in addition to the prostrations on the three pilgrimage festivals and on Yom Kippur.

It is very symbolic that the priests would prostrate themselves after each service that they performed and at the end of all the services connected to the daily offering.

Outside the Temple there is a different type of prostration, i.e., prayer.

The essence of prayer lies in a person's very standing before God. Rav Chayyim of Brisk maintains that one of the essential and indispensable thoughts during prayer is that the person is standing before God. If someone prays but does not see himself as standing before God, it is as if he did not pray. This is the intention that is required while praying, over and beyond understanding the words that a person is reciting.

There is then an element in prayer that allows us to understand how prostration which reflects man's submission and self-effacement as he stands before God can find expression in the act of prayer.

We also saw that the higher a person's public office, the more he must involve himself in bowing and prostration. Therefore the king must remain in a kneeling position longer than the High Priest and longer than any other holder of public office.

Accordingly, nobody expressed the ideal image of the humble king better than David who throughout his life and in every possible way tried to rule over his people while remaining constantly aware that he was standing before God and that he was absolutely subservient to him.

Even when David transgresses, he immediately confesses his sin and accepts full responsibility for his action, while standing constantly before God. David's acceptance of responsibility finds expression from the time that he sinned and on (Tamar, Amnon, Avshalom, Tziva, Shimi ben Gera, Sheva ben Bikhri). We therefore understand very well why throughout the book of *Tehilim* David expresses his yearning to build the Temple through prostration, and why he demonstrates in the most physical way throughout his life and in different situations the absolute subordination of a king of flesh and blood to the King of the universe.

In order to fully understand the matter, we chose to examine prostration from various perspectives.

First, beyond the various mentions of prostration in the book of *Tehilim*, we examined prostration throughout the Bible, and we saw the various contexts and meanings of bowing down before God.

We tried to understand the various spiritual meanings of prostration, including the connection between prostration and prayer in general and confession of one's sins in particular.

We addressed the prohibition of prostrating oneself on a figured stone outside the confines of the Temple.

We examined the prostration that took place in the Temple, both that of every member of Israel when he arrived at the Temple, and that in the context of the various services that were performed in the Temple at different times.

We then considered the service of the priests and of the High Priest, when and where they prostrated themselves, and why there is reason to prostrate oneself at the conclusion of the service.

In conclusion, let us return to the relationship between prostration and prayer.

It is not by chance that even in the prayers that are recited today reference is made to the matter of prostration. One example is found at the beginning of the morning service: "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwellings, O Israel!  But as for me, in the abundance of Your lovingkindness will I come into Your house; I will prostrate myself toward Your holy temple in the fear of You."

Another example is found at the end of each service in the *Aleinu* prayer: "And we bend our knees, and prostrate ourselves, and give thanks before the King, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He… May all the world's inhabitants recognize and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue must swear loyalty."

Rav Israel Ariel[[3]](#footnote-3) notes the beginning and the end of this prayer, and says that at the end of his prayer the petitioner expresses his faith that the day will come when all the inhabitants of the world will prostrate themselves before God: "To repair the world with the kingdom of God… Before You, O Lord, they will kneel and fall… and You will speedily rule over them forever and ever."

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The sources brought here are taken from Yehuda Lavi, *Kara Ravatz*, chapter 14, "Prostration in the Temple," pp. 617-633. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to the reading of the *Kesef Mishneh* cited above. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In *Siddur ha-Mikdash*, in the chapter dealing with prayer offered in a kneeling or prostrated position, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)