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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #268: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXVIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LV)**

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-267-history-divine-service-altars-lxxvii-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-liv) we began to consider the world of sacrifices as it finds expression in the book of *Tehilim*. In this *shiur* we will complete our examination of this matter, we will address its connection to prayer and to the Temple, and we will thereby conclude our study of King David's worship of God, as it is reflected in the book of *Tehilim.*

### The world of Sacrifices

We find in many places in *Tehilim* a connection between David's offering of a sacrifice and his feelings of gratitude and thanksgiving to Him. For example, in Psalm 54:

I will sacrifice a free-will-offering to You; I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good. (*Tehilim* 54:8)

And in Psalm 56:

Your vows are upon me, O Lord; I will pay You my offerings of thanksgiving. (*Tehilim* 56:13)

The psalmist accepts upon himself to offer a sacrifice in payment of a vow, and together with that offer an offering of thanksgiving to God.

Psalm 66 expands to other sacrifices:

I will go into Your house with burnt-offerings: I will pay You my vows, which my lips have uttered, and my mouth has spoken, when I was in trouble. I will offer unto You burnt-sacrifices of fatlings, with the sweet smoke of rams: I will offer bullocks with goats. Sela. (*Tehilim* 66:13-15)

The psalmist brings burnt-offerings, including fatlings, together with rams that are brought like incense on the altar.[[1]](#footnote-1) The entire psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving, the reciting of which appears to have accompanied the offering of sacrifices that were brought in payment for vows taken in a time of trouble.

Psalm 69 continues along the same lines:

I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving. And it shall please the Lord better than an ox or a bullock that has horns and hoofs. (*Tehilim* 69:31-32)

Once again a connection is made between thanksgiving and the offering of sacrifices, and here the thanksgiving is deemed more precious in God's eyes than the sacrifice. We already saw this principle in Psalm 40:

You do not desire sacrifice or meal-offering: You have dug open my ears; burnt-offering and sin-offering have You not required. (*Tehilim* 40:7)

In addition there is a connection between our chapter and Psalm 22 (*Tehilim* 22:26-27).[[2]](#footnote-2)

The wording of the two psalms is similar, only that in Psalm 22 the meek are called upon to eat at the feast accompanying the sacrifice, whereas in Psalm 69, there is no sacrifice and no feast, and the meek are only called upon to rejoice in what they see.

*Chazal* expound that the verse: "And it shall please the Lord better than an ox or a bullock that has horns and hoofs" (*Tehilim* 69:31), alludes to a sacrifice that was offered by Adam. The psalmist does not vow to offer a sacrifice, but only to sing a song of praise, which is deemed preferable even to the sacrifice offered by Adam which symbolizes all the pure and fit sacrifices that have been offered throughout the generations.

We do find a yearning to offer sacrifices. Psalm 54 opens:

To the chief musician upon the Gittit. A psalm for the sons of Korach. How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts. My soul longs, indeed, it faints for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young. Your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King, and My God, happy are they who dwell in Your house; they are ever praising You. Sela. (*Tehilim* 84:1-5)

This psalm of the sons of Korach was apparently one of the psalms recited by pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem on the pilgrim festivals. We see here fierce yearnings for the Temple, the courts, and the altars. All these things refer to the Temple.

This psalm relates to the Temple, for it deals not only with the offering of sacrifices, but also to two altars, the burnt-offering altar and the incense altar, which were found only in the Temple, but not at any *bama.*

The thanksgiving-offering with which we started is mentioned in many psalms. So we find in Psalm 100:

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise; be thankful to Him, and bless His name. (*Tehilim* 100:4)

The expression, "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving," means that the most fitting and elevated way to enter the gates of the Temple is with a thanksgiving-offering. This idea is repeated again in Psalm 107 which deals with the four people who must offer thanksgiving:

Let them praise the Lord for His steadfast love, and for His wonderful works to the children of men. And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing. (*Tehilim* 107:21-22)

A comprehensive examination of all the psalms teaches that relatively little mention of sacrifices in the book of *Tehilim.* Prayer itself in all its forms, thirst for God and yearnings for the Temple play a much more central role in the book than do sacrifices.

Nevertheless, even if relatively speaking sacrifices play an insignificant role in the book of *Tehilim*, one of the most common sacrifices found there is the thanksgiving-offering.

It seems that there is nothing like a thanksgiving-offering to give expression to David's profound awareness throughout his life, in every situation in which he found himself, that his entire life attests to God's lovingkindness.

Therefore the thanksgiving-offering is one of the most common sacrifices. In addition to the gratitude that it expresses, a thanksgiving-offering also attests to the truth. This reflects David's spiritual world and his fundamental closeness to God the most comprehensive manner.

### Prayer and the temple

The psalmist says in Psalm 3:

I cried to the Lord with my voice, and He heard me out of His holy hill. Sela. (*Tehilim* 3:5)

The psalmist turns to God and God answers him from His holy hill. This implies that prayers are directed to the holy hill, and from there they are answered.

On the practical level, full expression of this idea will become manifest with the building and dedication of the Temple. King Shelomo in his prayer describes a world in which the people of Israel (and also the nations), in all their troubles, turn to God and pray to him through the city that was chosen by God and through the house that he had built for Him, and God answers their prayers.

Shelomo asserts that even in the lands of their captivity, the people of Israel will return to God -

And pray to You towards their land, which You did give to their fathers, and the city which You have chosen, and the house which I have built for Your name: then hear You their prayer and their supplication in heaven Your dwelling place, and maintain their cause. (I *Melakhim* 8:48-49)

When Shelomo dedicates the Temple, he declares that its main function is prayer and through it Israel's prayers will be heard. The novel idea here is that all prayers pass through the Temple and that from there, as it were, they rise to heaven.

But the greater novelty is with David when there was still no Temple. We do not know whether Psalm 3 was written before or after the revelation of the site of the Temple at the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi. Either way, David describes a reality in which God answers him from His holy hill in the wake of his calling out to Him.

It is reasonable to assume that David did not intend at this time to point to a specific place (unless this psalm was written after the revelation of the site of the Temple), but the very fact that he sees before his eyes a Divine response from His holy hill indicates how he relates to the connection between prayer and the Temple even before the Temple was built.

Psalm 11 deals not with God's holy hill, but with His holy Temple:

The Lord in His holy Temple, the Lord whose throne is in heaven, whose eyes behold, whose eyelids try, the children of men: the Lord tries the righteous: but the wicked and him who loves violence His soul hates. (*Tehilim* 11:4-5)

God is presented here as dwelling in His holy Temple, from where His eyes test man. This image teaches that David sees before him Divine presence in the Temple itself, and it is from there that His eyes examine the actions of men.

Let us expand upon the matter of prayer itself. In Psalm 28 the psalmist says:

Hear the voice of my supplications, when I cry to You, when I lift up my hand toward Your holy sanctuary. (*Tehilim* 28:2)

Here the prayer is directed toward the Holy of Holies, as the Mishna rules in *Berakhot*: "One should direct his heart toward the Holy of Holies" (*Berakhot* 4:5).

It was customary to pray with outstretched and uplifted arms. So did King Shelomo at the dedication of the Temple:

And he stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread out his hands: for Shelomo had made a bronze scaffold, five cubits long, and five cubits broad, and three cubits high, and had set it in the midst of the court: and upon it he stood and kneeled down upon his hands towards heaven. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 6:12-13)

And similarly in the continuation:

Then whatever prayer or whatever supplication shall be made by any man, or by all Your people Israel, (for everyone shall know his own trouble and his own grief,) and he spread out his hands towards this house. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 6:29)

In I *Melakhim* 8:

And so it was, that when Shelomo had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication to the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven.[[3]](#footnote-3)(I *Melakhim* 8:54)

This is the very opposite of what we read in Psalm 44:

If we had forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god. (*Tehilim* 44:21)

One who examines the stories concerning David and Shelomo will see that the spreading of hands in not directed at God in a general sense, but specifically toward the Temple.

With respect to Shelomo this is understandable and of broad significance. Nevertheless, Shelomo states that with respect to every prayer and supplication, that of the individual and that of the people of Israel as a whole, those who engage in prayer will spread out their hands toward the Temple.

But, as was noted, the great novelty is that King David as well raised his hands toward the Temple, even though it had not yet been built.

David sees before his eyes a Temple that has already been built and he lifts his hands up toward it with the knowledge that all of his prayers are directed there, and it is from there that he awaits an answer.

This is striking in Psalm 43:

Then will I go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy: and I will praise You with the lyre, O God my God. (*Tehilim* 43:4)

It stands to reason that the reference here is not to some *bama* or another, but rather to the altar of God that stood before the *Heikhal* in the Temple.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Let is turn our attention to Psalm 141:

Let my prayer be set forth before You like incense; and the lifting up of my hands like the evening sacrifice. (*Tehilim* 141:2)

This verse indicates that David saw God's presence in the Temple as an irreversible fact, and his request was that his prayer should be fixed and permanent like the incense.

The parallel drawn between the incense and the evening sacrifice alludes to the possibility that the reference is to all things that were burned on the altar. This is in addition to the simple and more common understanding that the reference is to the burning of the incense.

The image of prayer as incense teaches that David's ideas about closeness to God and prayer were directly connected to life and activity in the Temple, and therefore prayer is likened to incense.

With this we conclude our examination of David's worship of God as it is reflected in the book of *Tehilim*.

In the next *shiur* we will begin to consider the period of King Shelomo.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Here the reference is not to spices, but to the meat of the sacrifices that were burnt on the altar. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the opinion of Amos Chakham in his conclusion to the chapter in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to Psalm 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And similarly in I *Melakhim* 8:22. Additional examples can be brought from *Shemot* 9:29 and *Ezra* 9:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As in *Tehilim* 65:5 and in *Tehilim* 66:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)