YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray   
on the occasion of their tenth *yahrtzeits*   
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

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**Lecture #269: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXIX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LVI)**

The last few *shiurim* have dealt with the service of God as reflected in the book of *Tehilim.* We examined David's attitude toward and deep yearnings for a built Temple, his closeness to God through the Temple, his service and prayers to God in every state and situation, and the various thanksgiving-offerings that he sacrificed to God.

Shelomo is the first king who was also the son of a king.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this *shiur* we will relate to several issues connected to the service of God during the days of Shelomo.

### Service at the *bAMOT* BEFORE THE BUILDING OF THE tEMPLE

The Bible describes how the kingdom was prepared by Shelomo for the building of the Temple. After Shelomo married the daughter of Pharaoh, it says:

Only the people sacrificed at the *bamot*, because there was no house built for the name of the Lord until those days. And Shelomo loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only he sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*. (I *Melakhim* 3:2-3)

Ostensibly, *bamot* were permitted prior to the building of the Temple. The great *bama* at that time was located in Giv'on, even though the ark had been brought to the City of David. Why then does the verse note both with respect to the people and with respect to Shelomo that they sacrificed at the *bamot*? There may be here a certain criticism of the people that despite the allowance of *bamot*, the people are offering sacrifices at many individual *bamot*, and not at the great *bama* at Giv'on. In addition, there is an allusion here that the people are offering sacrifices at the *bamot* because they did not build a house for God until those days.

Rashi explains (ad loc.)"

He sacrificed at the *bamot* – The verse speaks of his shortcoming, as he delayed the construction of the Temple for four years. (I *Melakhim* 3:3)

Whereas R. Yosef Kara writes:

For each and every one of them built a *bama* for himself and offered an individual sacrifice upon it, because a house for the name of the Lord had not been built.

But Scripture does not assign guilt to them, as the prohibition of *bamot* depends upon the building of the Temple:

"Take heed to yourself that you offer not your burnt-offerings in every place that you see; but in the place which the Lord shall choose" (*Devarim* 12:13-14). And until this point a house for the name of the Lord had not been built until those days. (*Peirush Sefer Melakhim I le-Rav Yosef Kara*, p. 8, 3:2).

According to Rav Yosef Kara, Shelomo bore no guilt for the fact that the people were offering sacrifices to God at *bamot*. All that we have here is an explanation for the fact that the Temple had not yet been built, and this itself accounts for the fact that the people were offering sacrifices at *bamot*.

The Radak (ad loc.) comments on the verse relating to Shelomo:

"Only he sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*" – Before the Temple was built, for after the Temple was built, we do not find that he offered sacrifices at *bamot.* If so, why does it say "only"? Surely they were permitted until he built the Temple. Since it is stated: "In the statutes of David his father" (I *Melakhim* 3:3), and David sacrificed only at the altar that was before the ark in Jerusalem, or at the *bama* that was in Giv'on, and we do not find that he sacrificed or offered at other *bamot*, because multiple *bamot* lead a person to idol worship. (I *Melakim* 3:3).

### The Difference between Shelomo and David with respect to service at the *bamot*

The Radak understands, according to the plain meaning of the verses, that Shelomo conducted himself differently than his father David. David did not offer sacrifices at the *bamot* that were found in many different places, but rather he brought offerings at the altar that was before the ark in Jerusalem.

The Radak adds that perhaps David also offered sacrifices at the great *bama* in Giv'on. We do not find it stated explicitly in the verses that David offered sacrifices at the great *bama* in Giv'on, and generally speaking we do not find him offering sacrifices at all, to the exclusion of two exceptional cases.

The first time was when he brought the ark up from the house of Oved-Edom the Gitite as part of the repair of what happened at the first attempt to transport the ark:

And it was so, that when they that bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling… And it was so, as the ark of the Lord came into the city of David… and David offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings before the Lord. (II *Shemuel* 6:13-17)

These offerings were brought in the City of David in close proximity to the ark, and as part of the ceremony of bringing the ark into the tent in the City of David.

David brought a second set of sacrifices at the time of the revelation of the site of the Temple and the purchase of the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi. At that time David built an altar and offered burnt- and peace-offerings, in the wake of which God relented and the plague stopped (II *Shemuel*  24:20-25).[[2]](#footnote-2)

When David spoke with Shelomo to encourage him and strengthen him in the steps he was taking to build the Temple, he said:

Now set your heart and your soul to seek after the Lord your God; arise therefore, and build you the sanctuary of the Lord God, to bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and the holy vessels of God, into the house that is to be built to the name of the Lord. (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 22:29)

Mention is made here of the ark and the holy vessels, but there is no reference to the matter of sacrifices.

Later, at the assembly at which David prods and encourages Shelomo and the entire people to build the Temple, it is the people who offer sacrifices (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:21).

All of these events take place in Jerusalem. We do not find Scripture noting in any other context that David offered any other sacrifices in any other place, and certainly not his building of *bamot* in other places.

What is the significance of this? It is possible that David, with his fierce desire to hasten the building of the Temple, and with his knowledge that he would not build it, recognized that the building of the Temple means that offering sacrifices anywhere else is forbidden. David consciously avoided bringing sacrifices in general (even at the great *bama* in Giv'on), and in practice offered sacrifices only at events endowed with spiritual significance for the people, such as the bringing of the ark into the tentin the City of David, and the revelation of the site of the Temple, and only in Jerusalem.

In contrast to David, Shelomo offered sacrifices at *bamot*. What this apparently means is that he brought sacrifices at many *bamot* and in many places. This is indicative of Shelomo's attitude regarding sacrifices in general, and about bringing sacrifices in many places in particular. Shelomo sees this as a fitting way to serve God, and since it was permitted as long as the great *bama* was located in Giv'on, Shelomo offered sacrifices at the *bamot*.

The Abravanel too addresses this issue and writes:

"Only the people sacrificed at *bamot*"… It seems that since it was stated above (I *Melakhim* 3:1): "Until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about," the author of the book saw fit to tell us here that since a house for God had not yet been built, nor the walls of Jerusalem which are needed for the sacrifices, as I have explained, the entire people would offer sacrifices at *bamot.* Therefore it says: "until those days," that is to say, between the time of "the rest" and "the inheritance," between the *Mishkan* in Shilo and the permanent Temple, when *bamot* were permitted…."

The Abravanel first explains the halakhic reality of the period between "the rest" and "the inheritance," between Shilo and the permanent Temple, when *bamot* were permitted because the Temple had not yet been built:

It says: "Only he sacrificed at the *bamot*," to teach us that he conducted himself like the rest of the people who offered sacrifices at the *bamot*, and he did not always sacrifice at the *bama* that was before the ark of the Lord in Jerusalem or at the *bama* in Giv'on like his father David, who all his life never offered sacrifices at a different *bama*.It seems from here that David was praised for this, because having many *bamot* leads a person to sin and to be like the other nations who build a *bama* in each and every city and under every tree. Since Shelomo veered on this matter from the ways of David, it says: "Only he sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*."

Like the Radak, the Abravanel points out the difference between Shelomo and David. David offered sacrifices at the *bama* that stood before the ark of the Lord in the City of David or at the *bama* in Giv'on. The underlying assumption is that having many *bamot* leads to idolatry because of its similarity to the way that idols were worshipped.

And furthermore, Scripture says this about Shelomo because of what it says afterwards that he went to Giv'on to offer sacrifices there, because it was the great *bama*. It was called "great," because of its elevated sanctity. It was the copper altar that Moshe made in the wilderness, and upon it always burned the Divine fire that descended from heaven on the eighth day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*. Since it was sanctified to God, it was great in the eyes of all of Israel, and more sanctified than the other *bamot* that were fashioned by ordinary people… Shelomo went there and offered on that *bama* a thousand burnt-offerings, and this was on one occasion, as *Chazal* have said (*Zevachim* 59b), or during the period that he remained there before he returned to Jerusalem to seclude himself and prepare his heart for prophecy. Because sacrifices were great preparation for this, as is evident from the sacrifices that Noah brought (*Bereishit* 8:20) when he emerged from the ark, and from the burnt-offerings that Bil'am ordered (*Bemidbar* 23:1) to be sacrificed so that he would attain prophecy. And since Shelomo offered sacrifices then at that same great *bama* in Giv'on like his father David because it was greatly sanctified… God appeared to him there. This shows that it was better to offer sacrifices at the great *bama* in Giv'on, because there God appeared to Shelomo, and he did not appear to him when he offered sacrifices at the other *bamot* that did not have the same sanctity, and his father David did not sacrifice on them. (Abravanel)

In this passage the Abravanel relates to the elevated standing of the great *bama* in Giv'on in contrast to the many other *bamot* that were built in the days of Shelomo in many places.

### Multiple *bamot* – a danger of Idolatry or increased Love of God

The *Netziv* offers an original understanding of Shelomo's service at the *bamot* which is totally different from that of the Radak and the Abravanel:

Regarding Shelomo it says: "And Shelomo loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only he sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*" (I *Melakhim* 3:3). And Rashi explains: "The verse speaks of his shortcoming, as he delayed the construction of the Temple for four years." Ostensibly this is difficult: Why does Scripture speak of his shortcoming that he offered sacrifices at *bamot* which were then permitted, but it does not speak of his primary shortcoming that he was lazy about building the Temple? Rather, certainly it was not laziness that brought Shelomo to this sin of delaying the construction of the Temple. Rather, it was that he knew **that once the Temple would be built, it would be forbidden to offer sacrifices at the *bamot*, and because of this there would be a diminishment of the love of God in Israel, since offering sacrifices to God leads to love and cleaving to God… And when *bamot* were permitted, it was easy for a person who wished to cleave to God to offer a sacrifice at a *bama* wherever** he wanted. This would not be the case after the building of the Temple, when this would not be possible until a festival arrived and he would go up to Jerusalem. For this reason he delayed the construction of the Temple for four years. This is **the shortcoming of Shelomo, that he was so immersed in the love of God that because of this he was remiss about building the Temple so that he could sacrifice and offer at the *bamot.*** (*Meitav Shir*, *Shir ha-Shirim* 6:5)

In order to fully understand the position of the *Netziv* regarding idol worship, let us consider another comment in his commentary to the Torah, *Ha'amek Davar*:

Let us contemplate that **which we see that they reached… idol worship during the time of Shilo and the Temple more so than during the time of Gilgal, Nov and Giv'on!…** But the thing is that the masses of Israel had a passion for the sacrificial service since they knew its positive effect on one's livelihood… However it was difficult for each individual to come specifically to Shilo or to the Temple, and *bamot* were forbidden. Therefore they sought the worship of other gods. This was not the case when *bamot* were permitted, when they did not reach this desire at all. (*Ha'amek Davar*, *Devarim* 4:21)

The *Netziv* assumes that the fact that Shelomo put off building the Temple for four years stemmed, not from laziness, but on the contrary, from his love of God.

When *bamot* were permitted, it was relatively easy to cleave with love to God by way of the sacrificial service that could be performed anywhere, something that was not possible once the Temple was built. Shelomo's shortcoming was that he was so deeply immersed in his love of God that he was remiss in building the Temple.

The people were passionate about the sacrificial service because they knew of its positive effects upon one's livelihood, and it was difficult for each individual to get to Shilo or the Temple. On the other hand, *bamot* were forbidden, and thus they came to idol worship. During the period that *bamot* were permitted they never came to such a desire, because they worshipped God at the *bamot*.

The *Netziv* touches here upon a much broader issue:[[3]](#footnote-3) What are the costs of Divine service that is concentrated in one place, and what are the benefits of performing that service in all places?

The *Netziv* understands that during the period that *bamot* were forbidden, distance from the chosen place together with the prohibition led to idol worship, whereas during the period that *bamot* were permitted, the service of God found expression in a better manner.

Beyond the exegetical disagreement regarding Shelomo's conduct between the Radak and the Abravanel on the one hand and the *Netziv* on the other, there is here a fundamental disagreement on the question whether multiple *bamot* lead to idol worship, because multiple places of worship can lead to multiple deities (the Radak and the Abravanel), or whether multiple places of worship lead to increased love of God (the *Netziv*).

The plain meaning of the verses seems to support the understanding of the Radak and the Abravanel, and not that of the *Netziv*, and therefore multiple *bamot* constitute an essential contradiction to the building of the Temple.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In our *shiurim* for the VBM, 5765-5766, we dealt at the length with the period of Shelomo and his involvement in the building of the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In II *Shemuel* 23:16 (and in the parallel passage in I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:18), David pours out before God the water that he receives from the three mighty men. But it is clear that he poured out the water because he did not want to drink of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We dealt with this issue at length in the context of the question whether the *Mishkan* was part of God's plan *ab initio* or only after the fact, in our *shiurim* on the *Mikdash*, VBM, 5767-5768. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)