YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #271: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXXI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LVIII)**

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-270-history-divine-service-altars-lxxx-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-lvii)we dealt with the background to Shelomo's building of *bamot* for idol worship. We saw the connection between the *bamot* and Shelomo's marriage to foreign women, including the daughter of Pharoah, and his many marriages.

In this *shiur* we will deal with the actual building of the *bamot*.

The plain sense of the verses indicates that there is a connection between Shelomo's love of foreign women and his building of *bamot* to their gods.

Among Shelomo's foreign wives we find Moabite and Amonite women, and the *bamot* built on the mountain east of Jerusalem were dedicated to Kemosh, the abomination of Moab, and Molekh, the abomination of Amon.

Shelomo also took Tzidonian wives. The verses dealing with King Yoshiyahu (II *Melakhim* 23:13) describe the destruction of the *bamot* dedicated to Kemosh, the god of Moab, Malkam, the god of Amon, and also Ashtoret, the god of the Tzidonim.

From here it may be inferred that Shelomo's love for Moabite, Amonite and Tzidonian women led to the building of *bamot*.

Scripture attributes the building of the *bamot* to Shelomo himself, after emphasizing that:

For it came to pass, when Shelomo was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not whole with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.  (I *Melakhim* 11:4)

Does the verse mean to say that Shelomo himself worshipped idols? This is not stated explicitly. It says that his heart was turned; it says that he went after other gods; it says about his wives that they burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods, but it does not say this about Shelomo himself.

If we compare what Scripture attributes to Shelomo to what it attributes to Achav, this point stands out even more strongly:

And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Yerovam the son of Nevat, that he took to wife Izevel the daughter of Etbaal king of the Tzidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. (I *Melakhim* 16:31)

If Shelomo himself did not actually participate in the worship of foreign gods, why does the prophet attribute to him the building of the *bamot*?

It may be suggested that even if only his wives actually worshipped at the *bamot*, Shelomo bears full responsibility for their service. According to prophetic judgment, the very fact that Shelomo builds a house for God and the first permanent king allows these *bamot* to be built east of the city and he allows his wives to worship there – this fact in itself is considered by the prophet Yirmeyahu (the author of the book of *Melakhim*) as if Shelomo himself built the *bamot* and worshipped foreign gods there.

This reading of the verses, according to which despite what we said about Shelomo the reference is actually to his wives, brought *Chazal* in tractate *Shabbat* to say that whoever says that Shelomo sinned is in error:

Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Whoever maintains that Shelomo sinned is merely making an error, for it is stated: "And his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father" (I *Melakhim* 14:4; it was [merely] not as the heart of David his father, but neither did he sin. Then how do I interpret: "For it came to pass, when Shelomo was old, that his wives turned away his heart" (I *Melakhim* 11:4)? That is [to be explained] as Rabbi Natan. For Rabbi Nathan opposed [two verses]: It is written: "For it came to pass, when Shelomo was old, that his wives turned away his heart," whereas it is [also] written: "And his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father," [implying that] it was [merely] not as the heart of David his father, but neither did he sin?...

But it is written: "And Shelomo did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord" (I *Melakhim* 11:4). Rather, because he should have restrained his wives, but did not, Scripture regards him as though he sinned. Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: Better had it been for that righteous man to be an acolyte to the unmentionable [= an idol], only that it should not be written of him: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Over the course of the discussion, the Gemara suggests several possible ways to understand the verses. First the Gemara proposes that Shelomo's wives turned his heart to follow after foreign gods, whereas Shelomo himself did not follow after them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the continuation, the Gemara mentions the verse that states that Shelomo "did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." But this was stated because Shelomo could have restrained his wives from worshipping the idols, but failed to do so.

It would appear that the last explanation can fit in with the plain meaning of the text which implies a direct connection between Shelomo's love for foreign women and the building of *bamot* for the worship of their gods.

If we adopt the view of Rabbi Yose (from the previous *shiur*), according to which Shelomo married foreign women in order to draw them in under the wings of the *Shekhina*; it may be that it was precisely this endeavor, with all the national and spiritual blessing of the hope for the perfection of the world under the kingship of God, that in the end exacted an exceedingly heavy price.

### The destruction of the *Bamot*

The Gemara in *Shabbat* also asks about the destruction of idol worship during the days of the kings of Yehuda:

This is its meaning: his wives turned away his heart to go after other gods, but he did not go. But it is written: "Then would Shelomo build (*yivneh*) a high place for Kemosh the abomination of Moab" (I *Melakhim* 11:7). That means, he desired to build, but did not. If so, "Then Joshua built (*yivneh*) an altar unto the Lord" (Yehoshua 8:30) – [does this too mean,] he desired to build but did not! Hence it [surely means] that he [actually] built; so here too it means that he built. Rather it is as was taught: Rabbi Yose said: "And the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Shelomo the king of Israel had built for Ashtoret the abomination of Moab" (II Melakhim 23:13). Now, is it possible that Assa came and did not destroy them, then Yehoshafat, and he did not destroy them, until Yoshiya came and destroyed them! But surely Assa and Yehoshafat destroyed all the idol worship in Eretz Israel! Hence [the explanation is that] the earlier are assimilated to the later: just as the later did not do, yet it was ascribed to them, to their glory, so the earlier ones too did not do, yet it was ascribed to them, to their shame. (Shabbat 56b)

Why weren't the *bamot* that were used for idol worship destroyed until the time of Yehoshiyahu? And why is there no prophetic condemnation of the *bamot* throughout the period of the First Temple?

Another question rises in connection with Rabbi Yose's question in the Gemara. II *Melakhim* 15:11 and on describes how Assa destroyed all of the idol worship in the land, including the idol worship of his mother Ma'akha. If so, why did he not destroy the *bamot* for idol worship built by Shelomo?

Also with respect to Yehoshafat it is stated: "And the remnant of the sodomites that remained in the days of his father Assa, he put away out of the land" (I *Melakhim* 22:47). But there is no mention of the destruction of the *bamot* for idol worship built by Shelomo.

The more difficult question that is not mentioned by Rabbi Yose in the Gemara relates to King Chizkiyahu. Scripture (II *Melakhim* 18:4) describes in detail how King Chizkiyahu destroyed the *bamot* and idol worship in Yehuda. If so, how did the *bamot* built by Shelomo escape destruction?

It would appear then that the *bamot* of Shelomo remained intact, but were not used in any significant manner, and so they were not destroyed. In contrast, the *bamot* that are mentioned and that were destroyed were in regular use.

This answer applies to both Assa and Yehoshafat, but as for Chizkiyahu who destroyed also the *bamot*, one might have expected that Scripture would relate to the *bamot* of Shelomo. He who eventually destroys them is King Yehoshiyahu (I *Melakhim* 23:13).

It is still very difficult to imagine that in the days of the first permanent king in Jerusalem a permanent house for God was built on Mount Moriya, and at the same time *bamot* for idol worship were built on the mountain south of the Mount of Olives.

The Radak proposes another explanation:

How did Assa and Yehoshafat, who destroyed all the idol worship before them, not destroy them? **They destroyed the idol worship, but the *bamot* they did not destroy, because they offered sacrifices upon them to [the] God [of Israel.** As it states with all of them: "But the *bamot* were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*" (II *Melakhim* 12:4). And Yoshiyahu shattered also the *bamot*, as they had originally been made for idol worship, or so that people not offer sacrifices upon them even for the sake of heaven, for since the Temple was standing, *bamot* were forbidden. Therefore Scripture writes about him: "And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul" (II *Melakhim* 23:25), because the kings who ruled before him did not remove the *bamot*, even though they were good kings. (II *Melakhim* 23:23, s.v. *asher bana Shelomo*)

The Radak presents the novel position that the kings who preceded Yoshiyahu did in fact destroy the idol worship before them, only they did not destroy the *bamot* upon which sacrifices were offered to the God of Israel.

Alternatively (as we began to explain above) it may be suggested that following the days of Shelomo, the *bamot* that were built during his time stopped being used for idol worship, and they served only as *bamot* for the service of the God of Israel east of the City of David. But according to this understanding, the question that we raised concerning the difference between Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu rises once again: Chizkiyah destroyed the *bamot*; why then doesn't Scripture relate to the *bamot* that were built by Shelomo for idol worship, and only in the days of Yoshiyahu is it stated explicitly that he destroyed them? This question remains unanswered.

### The Split of the Kingdom

Later, Scripture presents the split of the kingdom as a direct result of Shelomo's not keeping the covenant and the laws. Why is the splitting of the kingdom the punishment for idol worship?

About Shelomo it is stated: "Then Shelomo sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel hearkened to him" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:33). Shelomo's kingdom is a kingdom with the power to reveal the kingdom of God in perfect manner.

A kingdom like this in which *bamot* for idol worship are built in royal manner – *bamot* which in their very essence deny the exclusive kingship of God – has no justification to exist as it is. Therefore, the split of the kingdom comes to express that it cannot continue as a single kingdom, because it is not fulfilling its destiny.

On the other hand, the kingdom has its credits. The split will not take place in the days of Shelomo, owing to his father David, but rather in the days of his son. In addition, the kingdom will not lose all of the tribes. One tribe, that of Binyamin, will be given to the tribe of Yehuda. This will be done for the sake of David and for the sake of Jerusalem.

In other words, the selection of Jerusalem and God's relationship with His servant David determine that the Davidic kingdom will continue in practice through the tribes of Yehuda and Binyamin. In this way the kingdom of the house of David will continue in Jerusalem for more than 400 years until the days of Tzidkiyahu and the destruction of the Temple in his days.

### The Location of the *Bamot* and its spiritual significance

To complete this discussion, we will relate to the location of the *bamot* dedicated to idol worship and its meaning.

In I *Melakhim* it is stated that the *bamot* were erected "in the mountain that is before Jerusalem" (I *Melakhim* 11:7).[[2]](#footnote-2) In II *Melakhim* the *bamot* are located as follows: "And the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption (*Har ha-Mashchit*)" (II *Melakhim* 23:13). This is a good example of the rule that "the words of the Torah are poor in one place and rich in another."

The Radak (ad loc.) explains:

"The mount of corruption" – The Mount of Olives, and it is called *Har ha-Mishcha*, the mountain of anointing,[[3]](#footnote-3) and to its shame, because of the idol worship that took place there, it is called *Har ha-Mashchit*, the mount of corruption. (II *Melakhim* 23:13)

Based on this data, it would seem that the site of the *bamot* should be identified with the forested ridge to the east of the City of David and the Kidron Wadi, at the peak of the village of Silwan, south of the high peak of the Mount of Olives, where the Seven Arches Hotel stands today.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In keeping with our general approach, here too we will try to demonstrate the spiritual meaning of the topography: Why did Shelomo choose to locate the *bamot* for idol worship precisely in this place – due east of the City of David, on the eastern bank of the Kidron Wadi?

**1. Opposite the city, and not opposite the Temple of God:** First of all, it seems that Shelomo chose this ridge in particular, south of the peak of the Mountain of Olives, so that the *bamot* should not stand opposite the Temple, but rather further south, opposite the city and outside of it.

**2. Idol worship – in a high place:** We demonstrated in the past that building at the highest site is one of the characteristic features of idol worship, since idolatrous thinking saw physical height as an expression of might and greatness, and maintained that it was close to God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**3. Turning east to the gods of Amon and Moab:** Shelomo's wives worshipped the gods of Amon and Moab, and building the *bamot* east of the city allowed them to face eastward, to their homelands and their gods.

**4. Turning eastward to the sun:** Turning to the sun as idol worship is mentioned many times in Scripture. Inasmuch as it is a major source of life and vitality (daylight, heat, photosynthesis, etc.), the sun from earliest times was one of the principal objects of idolatrous rites. The natural and understandable appreciation of the sun (which has become significantly reduced in our day due to artificial lighting) quickly turned into worship of that source of light, heat and life.[[6]](#footnote-6) Even the patriarch Avraham, according to the famous Midrash, turned first to the sun and the moon, and only after they set and rose again did he understand that they both have one Master. It is not by chance, according to the Rambam, that worship of the heavenly bodies, God's "attendants," played a central role in the development of idolatrous rituals (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:1).[[7]](#footnote-7) The building of *bamot* in the days of Shelomo was done in the classical and original style of idol worship: facing eastward.

The Temple – in essential contrast to the idolatrous outlook – faces west, and its most sanctified part – the Holy of Holies – is its westernmost component.

In the framework of a discussion of prayer, the Gemara in *Bava Batra* (25b) discusses Rabbi Akiva's position that the *Shekhina* is in the west, and brings two reasons: The first reason is to counter idol worshippers who face east. Thus, for example, we find in the Mishna, *Sukka* 5:4:

When they reached the gate which leads out to the east, they turned their faces from east to west, and proclaimed: Our fathers who were in this place [stood] with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun toward the east, but as for us, our eyes are turned to the Lord. (*Sukka* 5:4)

The Rambam as well, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (III, 45), notes that at the *Akeida*, Avraham erected the altar on the western part of the mountain, in contrast to the idolaters.

The second reason is that man, as it were, joins the activity of the heavenly bodies. "And the host of heaven bows down before You" (*Nechemya* 9:6) – the Gemara sees the rising of the heavenly bodies in the east and their movement to the west as daily prostration before God. Of course, the heavenly bodies lack free will, and in this sense, the humans that worship in the Temple represent all of creation: They bear, as it were, the sun, the moon and the stars every day, and bow down to the west, toward the *Shekhina* in the Holy of Holies.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The assertion that the *Shekhina* is in the west has many expressions in the life of the Temple:

* The blood of the red heifer is sprinkled on the Mount of Olives "toward the front of the *Ohel Mo'ed*" (*Bemidbar* 19:4), and therefore the eastern wall of the Temple Mount was lower than the others, so that the priest sprinkling the blood could see the opening of the *Heikhal*.
* For the same reason all of the eastern gates in the Temple were aligned one opposite the other (in the Second Temple: the eastern gate of the Temple Mount, called the Shushan gate; the gate to the women's courtyard; Nikanor's gate; the gates of the *Ulam*, the *Heikhal* and the Holy of Holies.
* A person offering a sacrifice faces west; the animal being offered faces west (during the ritual of the laying of hands on the animal's head).
* The westernmost candle of the *menora* is the most important candle.
* The daily offering brought in the morning was slaughtered at the north-western corner of the altar, whereas the daily offering brought in the evening was slaughtered at the north-eastern corner.

To summarize, the east-west axis in the Temple gives expression to its essential opposition to idolatry, and also to the created world's subjection to the Creator and the recognition of His kingship.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We learn from this that the *bamot* built by Shelomo, with their form, their location and their direction, express turning to idol worship, and that in many senses they constitute an essential contrast to the Temple. As stated, these *bamot* stood in Jerusalem until the days of Yoshiyahu.[[10]](#footnote-10) It turns out then that almost from the very beginning of the city and for most of the First Temple period, a pilgrim arriving in Jerusalem was faced with two possibilities: To turn north to Mount Moriya and the house of God, or to cross Wadi Kidron to the east and engage in idol worship at the *bamot* standing on the ridge south of the Mount of Olives.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This Gemara requires further study. It relates only to I *Melakhim* 11:4, from which it is inferred that Shelomo did not actually sin. In the next verse, however, it is stated: "For Shelomo went after Ashtoret the goddess of the Tzidonians, and after Milkom the detestation of the Ammonites." (I *Melakhim* 11:5). What then does it mean that Shelomo did not sin if he went after Ashtoret and Milkom? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Scripture, one ordinarily faces eastward. Therefore "in front" is east, "in back" is west, "to the right" is left, and "to the left" is north.

   The issue of directions in Scripture is a broad and most interesting topic. The simple understanding is that "in front" is east because of the sun's appearance from that direction – a fundamental fact that impacts not only on people's lifestyles, but also on their religious beliefs (as will be discussed below).

   In this context there is also an interesting connection between the concepts of time and place in Scripture: The word *kedem* (east) is also used in the sense of "the past," as this is the period of time that is before us and we can see it, whereas *achor* (behind) is the future, which only the prophets can see. This is also why the future is called *acharit ha-yamim*. In modern times these concepts have become reversed, and the word *kedem* refers to the future. We dealt at length with this issue in one of our *shiurim* on the Temple in 5768. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term "*Har ha-Mishcha*" is found also in the words of *Chazal*. See, for example, Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 2:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Today a Christian hostel stands there called "The House of Avraham." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See about this at length, *shiur* 16, 5765, *"*The Territory of Binyamin, the Territory of the *Shekhina* (pt. 1)." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For this reason the east was regarded in ancient times as "in front" (*panim*). Early maps are drawn with east at the top. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christianity has perpetuated the pagan practice of facing eastward by positioning its churches so that they face east. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The idea that through the daily service man gives expression to all of creation's yearning for God rises in the Gemara in tractate *Berakhot* (9b), where support for the *Vatikin* practice is brought from the verse "They shall fear You with the sun" (*Tehilim* 72:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Scripture, the west expresses the presence of God, and in most instances going eastward indicates distancing oneself from Him. For example, after they sin Adam and Chava are sent east of the Garden of Eden; Kayin is sent eastward; Lot chooses the east; the sons of the concubines are sent eastward; Esav goes eastward to Mount Seir; the two and a half tribes choose the east bank of the Jordan; the *Shekhina* removes itself from Temple and goes eastward (*Yechezkel* 11); and others. This is a broad topic and deserves a *shiur* of its own. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is interesting that *Chazal* attribute the hiding of the ark that Shelomo brought into the Temple specifically to Yoshiyahu, the king who got rid of Shelomo's *bamot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)