YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #273: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXXIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LX)**

In the previous [shiur](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-272-history-divine-service-altars-lxxxii-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-lix), we began to examine the ways in which the offering of sacrifices played a central role for King Shelomo. First, at the beginning of his reign when he offered a thousand burnt-offerings in Giv'on, and later in the description of the Temple itself, and in particular in the description of the dedication of the Temple.

We noted the dimensions of the altar that were enlarged in comparison to the dimensions of the altar in the *Mishkan*. Another matter that found expression in the dedication of the Temple was the enormous number of sacrifices, which created a situation in which the altar built by Shelomo could not receive all the offerings, even with its expanded size. Thus, Shelomo had to sanctify the Temple courtyard.

The same day did the king hallow the middle of the court that was before the house of the Lord; for there he offered the burnt-offering, and the meal-offering, and the fat of the peace-offerings; because the altar of brass that was before the Lord was too little to receive the burnt-offerings, and meal-offerings, and the fat of the peace-offering. (I *Melakhim* 8:64)

What is the meaning of offering such a large quantity of sacrifices and sanctifying the court for this purpose?

### The TannaiTic dispute concerning Shelomo's action

The Tannaim (*Zevachim* 59a and on) disagree about how to understand Shelomo's action:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rabbi Yehuda says that the verses are to be understood literally. King Shelomo burned the sacrifices on the floor of the Temple courtyard because of the lack of place on the altar in the wake of the enormous number of sacrifices that were offered on that day.

Rabbi Yose raises an objection against Rabbi Yehuda. If we calculate the area of the altar built by Shelomo that is fit for the actual burning of the sacrifices, and compare it to the area of the altar built by Moshe that is fit for the actual burning of the sacrifices, it would appear that Shelomo's altar should have been large enough to receive all of the sacrifices offered at the dedication of the Temple.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The calculation is as follows: 142,000 sacrifices were offered on the day of the dedication of the Temple. The area of the altar built by Moshe that was fit for the actual burning of the sacrifices, according to Rabbi Yose, was one square *ama.* And that was large enough to receive a thousand offerings on one day. The area of the altar built by Shelomo that was fit for the actual burning of the sacrifices was twenty by twenty *ama*, or four hundred square *ama*. According to this calculation, it should have been large enough to receive 400,000 offerings on one day.

For this reason Rabbi Yose interprets the verse differently. Shelomo sanctified a stone altar to replace the brass altar. The verse which states: "because the altar of brass that was before the Lord was too little" (I *Melakhim* 8:64), uses a delicate formulation to say that Shelomo's brass altar was disqualified. It would appear that the reason for this is that the permanent Temple required an altar of stone.

Rabbi Yehuda disagrees with the method of calculation used by Rabbi Yose. In his opinion, the area of the altar built by Moshe upon which Shelomo offered his sacrifices in Giv'on was thirty-five square meters. Accordingly, the area of the altar built by Shelomo for the Temple was only 11 times as large as the area of the altar built by Moshe. According to him, that altar was only large enough to receive 11,000 offerings on one day.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### Which altar are we talking about?

In *Divrei ha-Yamim* it says:

Moreover, Shelomo hallowed the middle of the court that was before the house of the Lord… because the brazen altar which Shelomo had made was not able to contain the burnt-offerings, and the meal-offerings, and the fat. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 7:7)

We are not dealing with the brass altar built by Moshe, but rather with that built by Shelomo. This is difficult according to Rabbi Yose, for ostensibly it was Shelomo's altar that was unable to receive the large number of offerings, and not the altar of Moshe.

The *Malbim* in the book of *Melakhim* explains that at first Shelomo set up Moshe's altar and joined it to the rest of the building. This is the meaning of "which Shelomo had made."

The words of Rabbi Yose can be understood differently. The verse that states that the brass altar was too small to receive all the sacrifices refers to the altar that was built by Shelomo. Rabbi Yose understands that this altar was disqualified on that day for some unknown reason. Since the altar was damaged, and Shelomo had to sanctify the courtyard, he decided to build an additional altar.

This is what follows from the commentary of the Radak to *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

*Chazal* disagreed about this point: Some say that he sanctified the floor of the courtyard to offer there the burnt-offerings, as if it were an altar, because of the need of the hour, owing to the large number of burnt-offerings. Others say that he built there an altar because of the need of the hour. (*Malbim*,II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 7:7)

This is also the view of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook in *Mishpat Kohen* (no. 62) in his discussion of the possibility of renewing the sacrificial service and erecting an altar not in its original location.

### Sanctification of the floor of the Temple courtyard

The sanctification of the floor of the Temple courtyard gave rise to an interesting exegetical and halakhic discussion. The *Midrash ha-Gadol* states:

From where do we derive that if you cannot burn [sacrifices] on the altar, you may burn them on the ground? The verse states: "An altar of earth you shall make for Me" (*Shemot* 20:21). Rabbi Yose says: "The same day did the king hallow the middle of the court… [because the altar of brass that was before the Lord was too little to receive…]. Why is it called "little"? It was disqualified, like a person who says: He is a little priest.

Rabbi Yehuda says: The altar that Shelomo had made was little. He certainly burned [sacrifices] in the courtyard, as the entire courtyard is fit for the burning of the fats. (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, *Re'e* 604)[[4]](#footnote-4)

The expression "altar of earth" defines the altar as being part of the ground, and the ground joins with the altar for the burning of the sacrifices. According to this source, the allowance to sanctify the floor of the Temple courtyard does not require a special sanctification of the altar.

The *Tosafot* (*Zevachim* 14a, s.v. *tokh azara*, and *Menachot* 57b, s.v. *kevesh*) maintain that a special sanctification is required to hallow the floor of the Temple courtyard for burning sacrifices. Had Shelomo not sanctified the floor for that purpose, he could not have offered sacrifices there. This being the case, it would not have been possible to offer sacrifices on the floor during the period of the wilderness, or in the *Mishkan* in Shilo, Nov and Giv'on.

The wording of the *Midrash ha-Gadol*, "if you cannot burn," implies that the allowance to burn sacrifices on the floor is valid only in pressing circumstances, and that otherwise one is obligated to offer the sacrifices on the altar.

As a matter of halakha, it would appear that sacrifices can be burned only on the altar. *Midrash ha-Gadol* states explicitly that the law is in accordance with Rabbi Yose, who says that sacrifices may not be offered on the Temple courtyard floor.

### Summary

Rabbi Yehuda understands, based on the plain meaning of the verses in *Melakhim* and *Divrei ha-Yamim*, that Shelomo sanctified the entire floor of the Temple courtyard for the burning of the burnt-offerings.

Some say that according to Rabbi Yehuda this was a temporary sanctification that was permitted because of the pressing circumstances of the hour. But various passages indicate that in his opinion this is the halakha in times of pressing circumstances. Nevertheless, the ideal way of observing the *mitzva* is to offer sacrifices exclusively on the altar.

The *Midrash ha-Gadol* cites an opinion that permits the offering of sacrifices on the floor of the Temple courtyard, after it undergoes a special process of sanctification. Rabbi Yose disagrees.

Thus far we have been discussing the issue of offering sacrifices on the floor of the Temple courtyard, and the novelty here is that the floor alongside the altar is fit for that. All agree, however, that the blood of the sacrifices must be sprinkled on the altar.

The area that was sanctified for the burning of sacrifices, according to Rabbi Yehuda, is the open area of the Temple courtyard, and not the *Ulam* or the *Heikhal* (*Zevachim* 14a), and not the various offices. What is more, only the upper surface of the floor was sanctified for this purpose, and not deep in the ground.

The Abravanel, when he relates to Shelomo's act, cites *Midrash Tanchuma* in *Parashat Nasa*:

It mentions Shelomo's sacrifices which were great in number, for the king offered twenty-two thousand head of cattle, and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep. This is truly a great sacrifice, matching the greatness and loftiness of the Temple and the loftiness and generosity of the king. *Chazal* already said in *Tanchuma* (*Parashat Nasa*) that when the *Mishkan* was erected, the Nesi'im offered a present. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: This is My honor? They said to Him: Master of the Universe, we are found in the wilderness, and in accordance with [what is available in] the wilderness we offered sacrifices to You. When You shall enter Your palace, You will see how many sacrifices and how many bulls we will offer before You. This is what the verse states: "Do good in Your favor to Zion… Then shall You be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt-offering and whole-burnt offering; then shall they offer bullocks upon Your altar" (*Tehilim* 51:20-21) – these are the offerings of Shelomo. They meant by this that Shelomo greatly expanded in matters connected to the house of God in comparison to the people of the wilderness and their princes.

The huge number of sacrifices and the sanctification of the floor attest to the greatness and loftiness of the Temple and to the loftiness and generosity of Shelomo. All of these things join some of the changes made in the Temple in comparison to the *Mishkan* – expanding the size of the Temple over that of the *Mishkan*, adding vessels (ten tables, ten candelabras, ten bases and ten sinks). All of these things give expression to the greatness and permanence of the Temple.

This indicates the superiority of the first permanent house of God on Mount Moriya in comparison to the *Mishkan* in the wilderness and in all of its various stations in Eretz Israel.

With this we conclude our examination of the period of Shelomo. In the next *shiur*, we will deal with the splitting of the monarchy and we will try to understand Yerovam's behavior.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. A clear analysis of the passage is found in *Sha'arei ha-Heikhal* on tractate *Zevachim*, 138, "Burning sacrifices on the floor of the Temple courtyard." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As we saw in I *Melakhim* 3:4, when Shelomo offered a thousand burnt-offerings on the great *bama* at Giv'on. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Radak notes that the verse in *Melakhim* deals with peace-offerings, concerning which only select parts are burned on the altar, and these parts are much less than the limbs of a burnt-offering, all of which are burned on the altar. But there were also a great number of burnt-offerings. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This appears also in *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 20:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)