YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #275: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXXV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXI)**

In the previous *shiur* we dealt with the background of Yerovam's kingdom. In this *shiur* we will consider Yerovam's monarchy, his actions and their spiritual significance.

Following Achiya the Shilonite's prophecy to Yerovam, Shelomo seeks to kill Yerovam who flees to Egypt and remains there until Shelomo dies. With Shelomo's death, Yerovam arrives in Shechem with the entire congregation of Israel to talk to Rechavam. Despite Yerovam's words, Rechavam accepts the advice of the young men that had grown up with him to burden the people with an even heavier yoke:

So the king did not listen to the people; for it was a thing brought about by the Lord, that He might establish His word, which the Lord spoke by the hand of Achiya the Shilonite to Yerovam the son of Nevat. And when all of Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, saying, What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Yishai; to your tents, O Israel; now see to your own house, David. So Israel departed to their tents (I *Melakhim* 12:15-16)

Without a doubt Rechavam's decision was an act of total free choice, based on his own practical considerations. At the same time, however, this choice matched the will of God as expressed in the words of Achiya the Shilonite.

The people react to Rechavam's proposals with a declaration, the practical result of which is the division of the kingdom, which takes place immediately thereafter:

And it came to pass, when all of Israel heard that Yerovam was returned, that they sent and called him to the congregation, and made him king over all of Israel; there was none that followed the house of David, but the tribe of Yehuda only. (I *Melakhim* 12:20)

In practice Yerovam rules over ten tribes to the exclusion of the tribes of Yehuda and Binyamin.

Scripture describes Yerovam's initial actions after having been made king over the tribes of Israel:

Then Yerovam built Shechem in the hill-country of Ephraim, and dwelt therein; and he went out from there, and built Penuel. And Yerovam said in his heart, Now will the kingdom return to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then will the heart of this people turn back unto their lord, even to Rechavam king of Yehuda; and they will kill me, and return to Rechavam king of Yehuda. Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold; and he said to them, You have gone up long enough to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And he set the one in Bet-El, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin; for the people went to worship before the one, even to Dan. And he made houses of high places (*bamot*), and made priests from among all the people, that were not of the sons of Levi. And Yerovam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast that is in Yehuda, and he went up to the altar; so did he in Bet-El, to sacrifice to the calves that he had made; and he placed in Bet-El the priests of the high places that he had made. And he went up to the altar which he had made in Bet-El on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and went up to the altar, to offer. (I *Melakhim* 12:25-33)

Yerovam first builds Shechem in Mount Ephraim, and lives there; and then he builds Penuel.

Shechem as the capital of the kingdom of Israel is situated on the border between the tribal territories of Menashe and Ephraim.[[1]](#footnote-1) Shechem becomes a fitting alternative to Jerusalem. Its central location in this region from a topographical and geographical perspective explains why it is such an important crossroad between east and west and between north and south.

Shechem's deep connection to Avraham, and especially to Yaakov, who is the first to buy property there for the purpose of living there, is spelled out in *Bereishit*:

And he bought the parcel of ground, where he had spread his tent, from the hand of the children of Chamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of money. (*Bereishit* 33:19)

This turns Shechem into the main candidate for Yerovam's first capital city.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Penuel is located very close to the Jordan River and to the East Bank of the Jordan, and it is reasonable to assume that Yerovam's reason to dwell there was his desire to unite the tribes who live on the two banks of the Jordan under his leadership and kingdom. In addition, Penuel also has a connection to Yaakov.

### The Golden Calves and the *Bamot*

Yerovam's primary concern is that the people will go back to offer sacrifices in the house of God in Jerusalem, and as a result the monarchy will return to David. Owing to this concern, Yerovam fashions two golden calves.

Yerovam appears to have understood that offering sacrifices and making pilgrimages to Jerusalem were of great importance to the people. He fears that the connection to the Temple in Jerusalem and the offering of sacrifices will bring the people to recognize Rechavam's kingship.

According to his understanding, the connection between the sacrificial service and the people's recognition of Rechavam's kingship is so great that in order to prevent such a connection it was necessary to offer not only a regimental alternative, but also a ritual alternative. This is the primary meaning of the golden calves in Dan and in Bet-El at the northern and southern borders of the kingdom.

It seems that Yerovam's motivation in the religious revolution that he was planning is personal, preserving his kingdom. We are not dealing here with pure religious faith or an independent desire to serve God in a different manner for spiritual or nationalistic reasons. The religious changes are a means to preserve the stability of his rule through the creation of a ritual alternative that would sever the kingdom of Israel from the house of God in Jerusalem.

According to the simple understanding, the prophecy of Achiya the Shilonite foresees Yerovam establishing a new kingdom and standing at its head by the word of God and in direct and constant connection to the house of God in Jerusalem. What this vision means is that there will be two separate and independent neighboring kingdoms that will serve the same God with the same ritual in the same place. As the prophet promises him:

And it shall be, if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in My ways, and do that which is right in My eyes, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as David My servant did, that I will be with you, and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto you. (I *Melakhim* 11:38)

Yerovam is promised here a royal dynasty that will rule over Israel on condition that he will heed the word of God and walk in His ways and observe His statutes and commandments.

In large measure Yerovam must choose between fulfilling the word of God and worrying about his continued rule. Yerovam chooses the latter. In order to preserve his rule, he must present a meaningful religious alternative that is different in its very essence from the accepted service in the house of God.

According to his understanding, the more comprehensive his alternative, on the one hand, but not too different from the ritual in Jerusalem, on the other, the greater his chances to preserve his kingdom and his rule for many years, for it was for this purpose that he introduced all these changes.

In practice, Yerovam introduces many changes, which create a new ritual system, one that is different from the one that had been accepted until now. Yerovam sets up calves in Dan and in Bet-El, on the borders of his kingdom, which replace the *keruvim* in the Holy of Holies. It would appear that alongside these calves, Yerovam also erected *bamot* at Bet-El and at Dan.

In one way or another the calves replace the *keruvim*, the innermost and holiest vessel in the Temple. Alongside them Yerovam sets up *bamot* that correspond to the altar situated in the Temple courtyard.

### Replacement of the Priests

Another change that Yerovam makes is his replacement of the ministering priests from the tribe of Levi with priests from all sectors of the people. According to the new understanding, the priesthood no longer belongs to a particular tribe, but rather anyone who wishes to be a priest can be one, regardless of the tribe of his origin.

In a certain sense, this abolishes the uniqueness of the tribe of Levi, and especially of the priests in its midst, with all that follows from the sanctity of the tribe and the special laws that apply to it as ministers in the Temple (they have no ancestral lands, they do not go out to war, they live on the priestly gifts, and the like).

From now on those who minister in the Holy are those who choose to do so, regardless of their tribal affiliation. Thus, there is no need or importance that this pass down from generation to generation as this is a matter of choice on the part of anyone who wishes to serve at the *bamot* alongside the calves at Bet-El and at Dan.

Indeed, one of the serious consequences of Yerovam's actions is the fact that the priests and the Levites in the kingdom of Israel leave that kingdom and move to Yehuda and Jerusalem. As it is noted in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

And the priests and the Levites that were in all Israel presented themselves to him out of all their border. For the Levites left their open land and their possession, and came to Yehuda and Jerusalem; for Yerovam and his sons cast them off, that they should not execute the priest's office to the Lord. And he appointed him priests for the *bamot*, and for the satyrs, and for the calves which he had made. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:13-15)

The priests choose to remain faithful to their priesthood and their tribal affiliation, and to continue serving in the house of God in Jerusalem, in total opposition to Yerovam's expectation that they would remain in the kingdom of Israel and participate in the sacrificial service at the *bamot*.

This change finds clear expression in the fact that Yerovam himself goes up to the altar that he built in Bet-El and offers a sacrifice. The new king from the tribe of Ephraim becomes sort of a High Priest, and thus serves as an example for all of Israel from all the tribes that it is fitting for all members of the people to volunteer to be a priest.

Another problem with a king serving as a High Priest is that he subjugates the priesthood and the ritual to his rule and thus unites the different powers which should remain separate.

The Torah is clearly interested in maintaining a separation of powers, to the exclusion of two short periods of time during which Moshe and later Shemuel serve in multiple capacities. Yerovam presents a new model in that he cancels this separation and includes the sacrificial service at the *bamot* under his rule and kingship.

In order to appreciate the seriousness of the matter, note should be taken of the punishment of *tzara'at* that was inflicted upon Uziyahu and the great earthquake that took place when he entered the Holy to burn incense (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 26:16 and on).

### THe calendar

Yerovam celebrates the festival of Sukkot in the eighth month (rather than in the seventh month), in a month that he fabricated.

Moving the calendar completes the total detachment from the house of God and from all of the kingdom of Yehuda. While the latter are celebrating Sukkot in the seventh month, Yerovam creates a set of holidays that parallels those celebrated in the Temple, but at a different time.

There is no change here in the content of these holidays, and it is reasonable to assume that this was done in order to convince the people that we are dealing with the service of God. But there is a change in the dates in order to create a total separation from the kingdom of Yehuda.

We have briefly summarized here the changes instituted by Yerovam. These changes teach us, first of all, that we are dealing with a comprehensive and all-embracing plan of reform. The common denominator of all these changes accords in clearest manner with the primary goal of Yerovam, namely, preservation of his rule.

The fundamental assumption is that there is a very strong connection between the ruling power and the Divine service. Therefore, in total opposition to the prophecy of Achiya the Shilonite, which mentions God's eternal selection of Jerusalem and the house of God, Yerovam chooses to detach the kingdom of Israel from Jerusalem, and to unite the ritual under his kingship.

Yerovam's action relates to all the components of the service – the location, the structure, the people performing the service, and the time. All these together create, in a certain sense, a new religion. It is clear that in each of these components there is a total deviation from the Torah's commandment, and that it is precisely the combination of all the components together that comes to create an entirely new picture.

In this *shiur* we have briefly summarized the various changes introduced by Yerovam. In the next *shiur* we will consider the meaning of these changes.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. As is stated explicitly with regard to Yosef's grave: "And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, they buriedin Shechem, in the parcel of ground which Yaakov bought of the sons of Chamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of the children of Joseph" (*Yehoshua* 24:32). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the special standing of Shechem, see our *shiurim* in the VBM for the years 5765. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)