YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman**

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**לע"נ**

**יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

**ת.נ.צ.ב.ה**

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**Lecture #278: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXXVIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXIV)**

In the previous *shiur* we noted that Yerovam relates to the *keruvim* in the Temple, but turns them into golden calves. In addition, he places them along the borders of his kingdom – in Dan and in Bet-El. This was done based on the assumption that the entire expanse between the two calves is sacred, and that in a certain sense the sanctity of the entire kingdom of Israel from Dan to Bet-El between the two calves substitutes for the sanctity of the Temple and the *keruvim* on Mount Moriya.

In this *shiur* we wish to deal with the question why it was specifically calves that were chosen to substitute for the Temple service in Jerusalem; what is the idea of a calf and why did Yerovam choose it.

### Yerovam's calves – a continuation of the Israelites' calf in the wilderness

It is highly likely that Yerovam's calves are to a great extent a continuation of the calf that the Israelites fashioned in the wilderness. In both places we are dealing with a molten calf, before which an altar was erected.

Strong support for this understanding may be brought from the words of Yerovam: "Behold Your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (I *Melakhim* 12:28), which are identical to the words proclaimed by the people of Israel when they made the golden calf: "And they said, This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 32:4).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the previous *shiur* we cited the words of the Radak:

And why a calf? He said to them: Surely Aharon made a calf for Israel for the *Shekhina* to rest upon instead of Moshe who was missing. So too you now who do not have the place of the *Shekhina* which is Jerusalem, let us make a calf in its place for the *Shekhina* to rest upon.

Therefore he said: "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt," as was stated regarding the calf in the wilderness, for his intention was not for idol worship. (I *Melakhim* 12:28)

Yerovam modeled what he did after what was done in the wilderness. Let us try to understand the foundations of his thinking, and thus attempt to understand the significance of Yerovam's calves.

### The vision at Mount Sinai

At the end of *Parashat Mishpatim*, the Torah describes an event that is part of the Sinai revelation:

Then went up Moshe, and Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. (*Shemot* 24:9-10)

These people are granted a unique vision, in which they see the God of Israel, but it is very difficult to understand what it is that they actually see. Trying to explain this vision, the *Rishonim* (ad loc.) refer to the vision of Yechezkel the prophet. The Ramban cites the Ibn Ezra and writes as follows:

"And they saw the God of Israel." Rabbi Avraham [Ibn Ezra] explains that [they saw this] in a prophetic vision. This is like: "I saw the Lord standing beside the altar" (*Amos* 9:1).

"And there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone" – this is what Yechezkel saw: "The likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone" (*Yechezkel* 9:1).

"And the like of the very heaven for clearness" – they saw under the paved work of sapphire stone the like of the very heaven for clearness. This is "a firmament, like the color of the terrible ice" that was spread out over the heads of the living creatures (*Yechezkel* 1:22). Here it is written: "And they saw the God of Israel," and there it is written: "This is the living creature that I saw under the God of Israel" (*Yechezkel* 10:20). For he wrote this in abridged form, as it was under the firmament which was under the throne, all of which was under the distinguished Name. (*Shemot* 24:10)

In order to understand what he is saying, we must first examine the visions described in the book of *Yechezkel*, and then see in what sense they parallel the visions that were seen at Mount Sinai.

### *Ma'aseh ha-Merkava* – the Heavenly Chariot

The prophet Yechezkel (chapter 1) describes what he sees as follows:

And I looked, and, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud, with a fire flashing up, so that a brightness was round about it; and out of the midst thereof as the color of electrum, out of the midst of the fire. And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man… As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man; and they four had the face of a lion on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four had also the face of an eagle… And when the living creatures went, the wheels went hard by them; and when the living creatures were lifted up from the bottom, the wheels were lifted up. (*Yechezkel* 1:4-19)

And in the continuation of the chapter:

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above. And I saw as the color of electrum, as the appearance of fire round about enclosing it, from the appearance of his loins and upward; and from the appearance of his loins and downward I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke. (*Yechezkel* 1:26-28)

There is a parallel here between the firmament and heaven and between the paved work of sapphire stone and a sapphire stone.

In chapter 10 of *Yechezkel* the four faces are described once again:

And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the *keruv*, and the second face was the face of a man, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle. And the *keruvim* mounted up; this is the living creature that I saw by the river Kevar. (*Yechezkel* 10:14-15)

There is a great similarity between the faces described in *Yechezkel* 1 and in *Yechezkel* 10 – the face of a man, the face of a lion and the face of an eagle. However, there is one striking difference: Chapter 1 mentions the face of an ox, and in its place chapter 10 mentions the face of a *keruv*. It would appear, therefore, that the *keruv* is an ox.[[2]](#footnote-2) The fact that in chapter 10 all the living creatures are called *keruvim* indicates that there are four oxen. It turns out then that the vision was one of a Divine chariot carried by four oxen.

The situation described in chapter 10 is part of the removal of the *Shekhina* from the Temple and from Jerusalem, which is spread out over chapters 8-11. Chapter 10 begins as follows:

Then I looked, and, behold, upon the firmament that was over the head of the *keruvim*, there appeared above them as it were a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne. (*Yechezkel* 10:1)

The removal of the *Shekhina* is then described in detail:

And the glory of the Lord mounted up from the *keruv* to the threshold of the house. (*Yechezkel* 10:4)

And then:

And the glory of the Lord went forth from off the threshold of the house, and stood over the *keruvim*. And the *keruvim* lifted up their wings, and mounted up from the earth in my sight when they went forth, and the wheels beside them; and they stood at the door of the east gate of the Lord's house; and the glory of the God of Israel was over them above. This is the living creature that I saw under the God of Israel by the river Kevar; and I knew that they were *keruvim*. (*Yechezkel* 10:18-20)

And at the end of chapter 11, the prophet says:

And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city. (*Yechezkel* 11:23)

What we have here is a detailed description of the Divine chariot. The oxen, which are the *keruvim*, are the chariot itself, and on them is the image of a throne in which is found the glory of God which is departing from the Temple, through the eastern gate, and from there eastward to the mountain that is to the east of the city, the Mount of Olives.

In the chapters of redemption, the prophet describes the return of the *Shekhina* to the Temple on top of the Divine chariot:

And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east; and His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth did shine with His glory. And the appearance of the vision which I saw was like the vision that I saw when I came to destroy the city; and the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river Kevar; and I fell upon my face. And the glory of the Lord came into the house by the way of the gate whose prospect is toward the east. (*Yechezkel* 43:2-4)

The prophet himself describes the resemblance between the three visions - the vision at the river Kevar in chapter 1, the vision of the removal of the *Shekhina* in chapter 10, and the vision of the return of the *Shekhina* to the Temple in chapter 43.

Of particularly interest is the striking use of the expression, "the God of Israel," a formulation which brings to mind the call, "This is your god, O Israel," both in connection with the golden calf in the wilderness and in connection with the calves of Yerovam.

### The vision of the divine chariot

What then did the Israelites see? Did they see a chariot carried by oxen-*keruvim*, "and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone" (*Shemot* 24:10), that is to say, they saw the lower part of that Divine chariot? This would fit the description given by the prophet: "Their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot" (*Yechezkel* 1:7), and it is very possible that they saw the lowest part of the chariot, the sole of a calf's foot.

Let us go back to the words of the Ibn Ezra. It turns out that in the special vision seen by Moshe, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, and the seventy elders of Israel, they saw the Divine chariot, the glory of God resting on the oxen and their feet appearing like the feet of a calf.

After Moshe ascended the mountain and then delayed to come down, the people asked Aharon that the *Shekhina* should return before them and lead them. The image that was created was the image of a calf that was a direct continuation of the image that was seen at the time of the revelation at Mount Sinai.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Another image of the chariot in the Temple is found on the sea of ​​Shelomo as described in connection with the building of the Temple (I *Melakhim* 7:23-26). The sea stood upon twelve oxen, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east, with the sea set upon them above, and all their hinder parts were inward. These twelve oxen are in essence the chariot in the Temple, and they carry on their backs all the purity that took place in the Temple.

The Divine chariot (*merkava*)serves as one of the symbols of God's kingship. In many Biblical verses, the letters of the word *merkava* are transposed, and it is referred to by the term *keruvim*, as in David's song: "And He rode upon a *keruv*, and did fly" (II *Shemuel* 22:11; *Tehilim* 18:11), and in the name of God: "You who are enthroned upon the *keruvim*" (*Tehilim* 80:2). Therefore the calf serves as the chariot upon which rests the glory of God.

The Ramban gives a different answer why the Israelites chose specifically a calf:

And the intention for Aharon was because Israel was in the desolate wilderness, and destruction and desolation would come from the north, as it is written: "Out of the north the evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" (*Yirmeyahu* 1:14)… But from the left the attribute of justice will come to the world to recompense all of the inhabitants of the land for their wickedness. Now in the description of the Divine chariot it says: "As for the likeness of their faces… and they four had the face of an ox on the left side" (*Yechezkel* 10:1). Therefore Aharon thought that the Destroyer would show the way in the place of destruction, because there is its great power, and when they serve God there, He will pour His spirit upon them from on high, as He did upon Moshe. (*Shemot* 32:1)

The Ramban draws a connection between the location of the ox/calf in the Divine chariot – the left which is the north (as is customary in the Bible's system of directions) – and the attribute of justice. The governance of the ox/calf is appropriate for a region of destruction and wilderness.

From here there was room for the errant to think that God would bestow His spirit upon them from there, as He had bestowed His spirit upon Moshe.

### The calves of Yerovam

Now that we have considered the meaning of the calf in the wilderness, if we return to Yerovam we see, based on the correspondence between chapters 1 and 10 in the book of *Yechezkel*,the calf is the ox which is in essence a substitute for the *keruvim.* The same "God of Israel" of the Divine chariot in *Yechezkel* became "Behold Your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (I *Melakhim* 12:28).

It may still be asked: If by Aharon there was only one calf, why does Yerovam have two calves? If the intention was to set up an alternative to the house of God in Jerusalem and the two *keruvim* in the Holy of Holies, and if indeed the selection of Jerusalem was cancelled with the division of the Davidic monarchy, there exists a cultic alternative, namely between the two new *keruvim*, between the two calves, in the entire expanse of the kingdom of Israel. This is how the special sanctity of Jerusalem is annulled.

Another way of understanding Yerovam's choosing of calves is proposed by the Abravanel in his commentary to *Melakhim*:

And because of all of this I believe that Yerovam did not intend to make golden calves to worship them as gods in similar manner to the generation of the wilderness. This did not enter his mind when he fashioned them, and nothing is mentioned of this, and he did not set them at the level of gods, and there is no mention that people bowed down to them or served them, because this was not his intention when he made them. But the idea behind them was that Yerovam saw that Shelomo fashioned two pillars and placed them at the entrance to the porch of the house of God, in memory of David and Shelomo who built the house, as I have explained. Therefore, he too thought to commemorate his kingdom, and since he came from the tribe of Yosef from the descendants of Efrayim, and Moshe said about him in his blessings: "His firstling bullock, majesty is his; and his horns are the horns of the wild-ox; with them he shall gore the peoples all of them, even the ends of the earth; and they are the ten thousands of Efrayim, and they are the thousands of Menashe" (*Devarim* 33:17), Yerovam chose to fashion one calf to commemorate his family which came from the tribe of Yosef, and he erected it in Bet-El, because he was from the tribe of Efrayim, and the beginning of his kingdom…."

The Abravanel explains that the two pillars that Shelomo fashioned in the house of God were made to commemorate David and Shelomo, the builders of the Temple. Therefore Yerovam as well decided to make something special to commemorate his kingdom, and since he was from the tribe of Yosef, from the descendants of Efrayim and Menashe, he made one calf to commemorate his family and set it up in Bet-El in the tribal territory of Efrayim.

And I believe that this calf was at the entrance of the porch of the house that he made for the *bamot* in Bet-El, similar to the pillars at the entrance of the Temple. And since the land of Israel was large, he made another calf and set it up in Dan so that it be at the far end of the country, so that there too there be a commemoration of his kingdom. And he thought that all the people of the land would go to see those golden calves, since the masses are impressed more by the tangible than by the abstract. For this reason he did not command that they should worship them or that they should treat them as gods, because when he made them, this was not his intention….

It is possible to say that… he made two calves corresponding to Efrayim and Menashe, which are there two tribes descending from the house of David. It is as if Yerovam testified thereby that the birthright had been given over to Yosef, and that the kingship suited his descendants and not the tribe of Yehuda. (I *Melakhim* 12:25)

The Abravanel proposes that the two calves fashioned by Yerovam correspond to the Efrayim and Menashe, and that Yerovam alludes through them that that the birthright had been given over to Yosef and the kingship to his descendants.

In this *shiur* we examined the connection between Yerovam's calves and Israel's golden calf in the wilderness, and its spiritual meaning, and the understanding of the Ramban and the Ibn Ezra that draws a connection between the calf that was set up on the northern side in the reality of the wilderness and the calves of Yerovam, as well as the understanding of the Abravanel that draws a connection between Yerovam's choosing of a calf and the tribe of Yosef.

In the next *shiur*, we will examine the question whether and in what sense Yerovam's calves involved prohibited idolatry.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. It is interesting that the two sons of Yerovam were named Nadav and Aviya(I *Melakhim* 14:1-20), just like the two oldest sons of Aharon the priest. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One of the primary services that an ox performs for man is plowing, and the Aramaic term for plowing is *karva*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The approach persented here accords with the ideas of Rav Wiener in his *shiur*, "*Mahu Chet ha-Egel*," *Parashat Ki-Tisa*, 17 Adar, 5766; and with the ideas of Rav Amnon Bazak in his *shiur*, "*Yesodotav ha-Ra'ayoniyim shel Chet ha-Egel*," *Torat Etzion al Sefer Shemot*, pp. 413-417. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)