YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

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**Lecture #280: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (XC) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXVI)**

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-279-history-divine-service-altars-lxxxix-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-lxv) we examined whether or not the golden calf that was fashioned in the wilderness was considered idol worship. In this *shiur* we shall return to the calves that were fashioned by Yerovam and consider the same issue with regard to them.

### The calves that were fashioned by Yerovam were idols

The verses in the book of *Melakhim* consistently draw a connection between the calves that were fashioned by Yerovam and idol worship. We see this for the first time in the description of the feast ordained by Yerovam:

And Yerovam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like the feast in Yehuda, and he went up unto 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. (I *Melakhim* 12:32)

In the revelation of the prophet Achiya the Shilonite to Yerovam's wife, among the things that she is commanded to tell Yerovam is the following:

But you have done evil above all that were before you, and have gone and made yourself other gods, and molten images, to provoke Me, and have cast Me behind your back. (I *Melakhim* 14:9)

Furthermore, in the account of the reasons for the destruction of the kingdom of Israel, Scripture lists among other things the following sins:

And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made an Ashera, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. (II *Melakhim* 17:16)

This tendency continues in the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim***:**

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 unto the Lord; and he appointed him priests for the high places, and for the satyrs, and for the calves which he had made. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:14-15) 

And similarly in the words of Aviya on Mount Tzemarim to Yerovam and all of Israel:

And now you think to withstand the kingdom of the Lord in the hand of the sons of David; and you are a great multitude, and there are with you the golden calves which Yerovam made you for gods. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 13:8)

### THE pROPHETIC ASSESSMENT OF yEROVAM'S CALVES – NOT ACTUAL IDOLATRY

The prophet Hoshea ben Ela relates to the idol worship of the people themselves. In chapter 8 we read:

Your calf, O Shomeron, is cast off; My anger is kindled against them; how long will it be before they attain to innocence? For from Israel is even this: the craftsman made it, and it is no God; yea, the calf of Shomeron shall be broken in shivers. (*Hoshea* 8:5-6)

And in chapter 10:

The inhabitants of Shomeron shall be in dread for the calves of Bet-Aven; for the people thereof shall mourn over it, and the priests thereof shall tremble for it, for its glory, because it is departed from it… The high places also of Aven shall be destroyed, even the sin of Israel. The thorn and the thistle shall come up on their altars; and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us, and to the hills, Fall on us. (*Hoshea* 10:5-8)

And in chapter 13, he says:

And now they sin more and more, and have made them molten images of their silver, according to their own understanding, even idols, all of them the work of the craftsmen; of them they say, They that sacrifice men kiss calves. (*Hoshea* 13:2)

It would appear from the last verse that all of Israel contributed of their own money to the calves.

Despite the prophet's many condemnations of the calves, it is impossible to decide, based on the plain meaning of the text, whether we are clearly dealing with the phenomenon of idol worship.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi relates to Yerovam's calves in the fourth section of his *Kuzari*:

These [speculative] religions are as far removed now as they were formerly near. If this were not so, Yerovam and his party would be nearer to us, although they worshipped idols, as they were Israelites, inasmuch as they practiced circumcision, observed Shabbat, and other regulations, with few exceptions, which administrative emergencies had forced them to neglect. They acknowledged the God of Israel who delivered them from Egypt, in the same way as did the worshippers of the golden calf in the desert.

The former class is at best superior to the latter inasmuch as they prohibited images. Since, however, they altered the Kibla, and sought Divine Influence where it is not to be found, altering at the same time the majority of ceremonial laws, they wandered far from the straight path.

A wide difference should be made between the party of Yerovam and that of Achav. Those who worship Baal are idolators in every respect…

The party of Yerovam considered itself belonging to the Lord, the God of Israel, also all their actions, their prophets were the prophets of God, while the prophets of Achav were Baal's prophets. God appointed Yehu to destroy the works of Achav. He proceeded with much zeal and cunning, saying: "Achav served Baal a little, Yehu will serve him much' (II *Melakhim* 10:18). He destroyed all vestiges of Baal, indeed, but did not touch the calves. The worshippers of the first calf, the party of Yerovam, and the worshippers of the *bamot* and the image of Micha had no other idea than that they were serving the God of Israel, though in the way they did it they were disobedient and deserved death. (*Kuzari*, IV, 13)

Here Rabbi Yehuda Halevi clearly distinguishes between the party of Yerovam and the party of Achav. Achav's party were idol worshippers, about whom the prophet Eliyahu said:

And Eliyahu came near to all the people, and said, How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him. And the people answered him not a word. (I *Melakhim* 18:21)

There are only two possibilities – either the Lord, God of Israel, or the Baal.

As opposed to Achav's prophets of the Baal, all of the actions of Yerovam's party were directed to God, and their prophets were the prophets of God. One of the proofs for this is that when Yehu was sent to destroy the works of Achav, he destroyed all traces of the worship of Baal, but did not touch the calves. Yerovam's calves were not idolatry. Another proof is that Yerovam and his party acknowledged that it was the God of Israel who had taken them out of Egypt.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi includes in one group those who worshipped the golden calf in the wilderness, those of the party of Yerovam who worshipped at the *bamot*, and those who served the image of Mikha, all of whom directed their service to the God of Israel. While it is true that they engaged in worship for which they became liable for death, this was not idol worship.

The big question is: What is the spiritual meaning of this type of worship?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thus far we have seen several different approaches, but they do not necessarily contradict each other. They can be viewed as complementary:

1. If in all 3000 people were killed, it would appear that this is the number of people who actually worshipped the calf, but the rest of the people did not relate to it as a god.
2. It may further be suggested that at first the calf did not serve whatsoever as an idol, but as a tangible item that would make it easier to worship the God of Israel. But with the passage of time it turned into a quasi-idol. The means turned into an end in itself.
3. It may be understood that the calf does not represent God, but rather it symbolizes the chariot upon which the glory of God rests.

In the pagan ritual which was iconic by its very nature, they pointed visually to the images of their gods that stood on oxen, thus representing the presence of their gods in their Temples. But in Israel, on the other hand, when they said: "This is the God of Israel," they were not referring to the calf itself, but to the invisible God for whom the calf served as a chariot. Albright formulates this principle as follows:[[2]](#footnote-2)

Moreover, in presumable reaction against the representation of Yahweh in the Temple of Solomon as an invisible deity enthroned above the two cherubim… Jeroboam represented Yahweh as an invisible figure standing on a young bull of gold… Among Canaanites, Aramaeans, and Hittites we find the gods almost always represented as standing on the back of an animal… but never as themselves in animal form… It was therefore pointed out… that the "golden calf" must been the visible pedestal on which the invisible Yahweh stood. Conceptually there is, of course, no essential difference between representing the invisible deity as enthroned on the cherubim or as standing on a bull (= calf)… We may safely assume… that the pre-Mosaic Hebrews had also been accustomed to thinking of their chief god… as standing on a bull… So Jeroboam may well have been harking back to early Israelite traditional practice when he made the "golden calves."

Cassuto accepts this explanation of the intention behind the fashioning of the golden calves:[[3]](#footnote-3)

The *kaporet* on the ark, and in particular the wings of the *keruvim* that were spread over it, were like a throne for the God who sits upon the *keruvim*, an empty throne for an invisible deity. In general the nations of the ancient east represented their gods as standing or sitting on beasts or animals, such as lion, or bulls or other animals. Based on this, several recent scholars have suggested that the golden calves, i.e., the golden bulls, both that fashioned in the wilderness and the two calves of Yerovam according to what is related in I *Melakhim* 12, were not initially treated as actual deities, but rather they too were seen as the seat of an invisible deity. This seems reasonable, especially when we consider the fact that he who fashioned the calf in the wilderness was Aharon, the man who was meant to serve as priest to the God of Israel.

In fact, the Midrash draws a connection between the chariot in the vision of Yechezkel and the calf in the wilderness, and puts the following words into the mouth of God, who already at the time of the revelation at the burning bush foresees the fashioning of the golden calf:

What is the meaning of "I have surely seen" (*Shemot* 3:7)? You (= Moshe) can see them as they are now, but I can see them scrutinizing Me when I go forth in My chariot in order to give them the Torah[[4]](#footnote-4)… **and they will unhitch one of the four animals of My chariot,** as it is stated: "And the four had the face of an ox on the left side (*Yechezkel* 1:10). (*Shemot Rabba* 43, 8)

We see then that the sin committed by the people of Israel with the golden calf was that of making a representation of the **chariot**of God, or some part of it.

In this *shiur*, we examined the nature of Yerovam's calves and their connection to idol worship. We proposed to see them as part of a chariot of bulls that was meant to bear the *Shekhina.* According to this approach, the calves were not a representation of God, but only a symbolic throne for Him.

In the next *shiur* we will try to understand the essential difference between the calf in the wilderness, the calves of Yerovam, and the *keruvim*, and why the former were prohibited, while the latter were permitted.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We will make use here of the sources and solutions brought by Rav Elchanan Samet in his *shiurim* for the VBM on the sin of Yerovam (*Pirkei Nevi'im be-Sefer Melakhim*, *shiurim* 17-18). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In his book, *From the Stone Age to Christianity,* pp. 229-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In his commentary to the book of Exodus, pp. 284-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This Midrash sees God as appearing at the revelation at Mount Sinai on His chariot, and it brings the verse in *Tehilim* 68:18, which it understands as referring to the giving of the Torah: "The chariots of God are myriads, even thousands upon thousands." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)