YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #284: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (XCIV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXX)**

In this *shiur* we would like to present the Netziv's interpretation of Yerovam's conduct as is found in his commentary *Meitiv Shir* on the book of *Shir ha-Shirim*, on the verse: "Turn away your eyes from me, for they have overcome me" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 6:5).

The Netziv deals at length and in depth with the *mitzva* of loving God, as it found expression across the generations. After opening with the supreme importance of the *mitzva* of loving God and its relationship to various other *mitzvot*, such as Torah study and the practice of lovingkindness, he examines this relationship against various events in Jewish history. He demonstrates that on various occasions people were lax about other *mitzvot* owing to the *mitzva* of loving God.

The Netziv begins with the two hundred and fifty people who joined Korach in his challenge to Moshe. According to his understanding, they were so eager to express their love for God that they burned incense before God, even though they knew that they would be punished for this. It was for this reason that they died a death different than that of Korach, Datan and Aviram; since their intentions were for the sake of heaven, they were burnt to death with a fire that issued forth from the Holy of Holies.

The Netziv then moves on to discuss King Shelomo's love of God. He explains that Shelomo delayed building the Temple for four years because he knew that once the Temple would be built, it would be forbidden to offer sacrifices on the *bamot*, and thus Israel's love of God would diminish.

Before the Temple was built, anyone could sacrifice anywhere, which would no longer be the case after the Temple would be built. Then it would be permitted to offer sacrifices only in the Temple. Shelomo was so immersed in his love of God that he was negligent about building the Temple, in order to prolong the time that it would be permitted to offer sacrifices on *bamot* in all places.

The Netziv then discusses the status of the image fashioned by Mikha. Because the *Mishkan* was at that time in Shilo, and offering sacrifices on *bamot* was forbidden, the people of Israel became distanced from spiritual devotion and love of God. Thus they came to the image of Mikha, and though he was an idolater, he saw himself as serving the God of Israel (Judges 17: 3).

Now let us present and explain his understanding of Yerovam:

And similarly the calves of Yerovam – initially Yerovam did not come to incite Israel to practice idolatry, but rather he misled them and said that it was for the sake of God, as is explained in the words of Yerovam: "You have gone up long enough to Jerusalem" (I *Melakim* 12:28). But he did not say: "You have served God [long enough"]. Thus we find in *Sanhedrin,* where they say: "Does it enter your mind that a great man like Yerovam served idols?" (*Sanhedrin* 101b). And the people thought that the calves were not idolatry, but rather [service] for the sake of God, and that it was permitted to them to offer sacrifices on *bamot* in all places. And Yerovam seduced them, [saying] that just as the *Shekhina* rests on the *keruvim*, which are one of the figures on the Divine chariot, so the *Shekhina* will rest on a calf, i.e., an ox, the second figure on the chariot. And only if we go to Jerusalem, the place chosen by God, are we commanded about the *bamot*, but when we are separated from there, and surely it was [God's] will to divide the kingdom, at the word of Achiya the Shilonite, we are subject to the allowance of *bamot*. And owing to the Israel's great desire for this, they were seduced and they accepted the calves. (Netziv, *Shir ha-Shirim* 6:5).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Netziv understands that Yerovam misled the people into thinking that he was acting for the sake of God and that it was permitted to offer sacrifices on *bamot* in all places. The seduction included the assumption that just as the *Shekhina* rested on the *keruvim* which were one figure on the chariot, so too the *Shekina* would rest on a calf which is the second figure on the chariot.

Yerovam argued that the prohibition of *bamot* applies in Jerusalem, but following the division of the kingdom at the word of the prophet, *bamot* were once again permitted, and owing to Israel's great yearning to offer sacrifices in all places, based on their fierce desire to express their love for God, they were persuaded to accept the *bamot.*

Regarding the change from the *keruvim* to the calves, as a change between the different figures found on the chariot envisioned by Yechezkel, Rav Kuperman, the editor of the Netziv's commentary to *Shir ha-Shirim*, cites as a proof a Midrash in *Shemot Rabba*:

R. Avin said: Four proud ones were created in the world. The proudest of creatures is man; the proudest of birds is the eagle; the proudest of cattle is the ox; the proudest of beasts is the lion. Each of them assumed kingship and were given greatness, and they are fixed under the chariot of the Holy One, blessed is He, as it is stated: "As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man… and the face of a lion… and the face of an ox… and the face of an eagle" (*Yechezkel* 1:10). All of this, why? So that they not be proud in the world and that they know that the kingdom of heaven is above them. (*Shemot Rabba* 23, 13)

The Midrash emphasizes the fact that the four faces on the Divine chariot are essentially the four proud ones of the world – man is the proudest of creatures, the eagle is the proudest of birds, the ox is the proudest of cattle, and the lion is the proudest of beasts. The four proud ones are the four faces on the chariot, who despite their pride recognize God's kingdom above them.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Netziv continues:

It is written at the beginning of the story of the calves: "And this thing became a sin" (I *Melakhim* 12:30). But it is not written: "And by this thing there was sin to the house of Yerovam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from the face of the earth" (I *Melakhim* 13:34), as it is written after the incident involving the prophet at Bet-El. This is puzzling. Why did the arrival of the prophet in the name of God cause Yerovam's calves [to be cause] "to cut off and to destroy" more so than before the prophet's arrival? It is as we said, that the people thought that this was not idolatry, but only included in the prohibition of *bamot*, and this sin was to the favor of all of Israel, and they even thought that they were doing a *mitzva*, and this sin did not cause exile. And even though it involved a prohibition punishable by excision, it did not come "to cut off and to destroy from the face of the earth." And it is written: "And he made a house of *bamot*, and made priests from among all the people, that were not of the sons of Levi" (I *Melakhim* 12:31). That is to say, Yerovam made in Bet-El a great *bama* where the calf was located, and in this house they would record all the *bamot* in the communities of Israel that they be subordinate to the calf in Bet-El, just as they would be drawn at the time of Nov and Givon to the great *bama* that was located there, but nevertheless they were permitted to offer sacrifices everywhere.

The Netziv notes the difference between the wording of the verse at the beginning of the story of the calves: "this thing became a sin," and the wording of the verse: "And by this thing there was sin to the house of Yerovam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from the face of the earth," after the incident involving the prophet in Bet-El who admonished the people about the sin of the golden calves. According to him, the people did not think that their conduct was sinful; on the contrary, they thought they were fulfilling a *mitzva.*

When God sends them a prophet to warn them about a sin that is punishable by excision, he does not tell them that they will be exiled from the land (as Achiya the Shilonite later tells them [I *Melakhim* 14:15]). This is because at that time there was no sin of idolatry at all. After it became clear that they had been mistaken, and that *bamot* are forbidden, many people wanted to abolish the calf (except for those sinners who knew from the start that the calves were idolatry, as is stated in the *Yerushalmi*, *Avoda* Zara 1:1).

But they could no longer undo what they had already accepted, and Yerovam acted evilly in order to benefit himself to keep the calves even for idolatry. And in his wake all of Israel then stumbled, and this is what is written: "And by this thing there was sin to the house of Yerovam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from the face of the earth" (I *Melakhim* 13:34). But according to the *Rishonim* who say that "there was sin" refers to the calf, it should have said: "And this thing [was sin]." Rather, this means: "And the prophet by this thing, that he performed a sign and a wonder to show that this was not God's desire, did not help turn Israel away from the calf, but rather it was a sin to the house of Yerovam. For until now the sin of Israel was as I have written, and now it became the sin of the house of Yerovam, and also to cut off and to destroy from the face of the earth, for afterwards they accepted the calf as idolatry, and after that the prophet Achiya came and prophesied about the exile from the land.

The Netziv continues to explain that the prophet warned them about the prohibition to offer sacrifices on *bamot*, but Yerovam kept the calves even though they were idolatry. And in his wake all of Israel fell into idolatry. As a result of the Yerovam's persuading the people to worship an idol, the prophet Achiya prophesies exile from the land.

For the Lord will smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water; and He will root up Israel out of this good land, which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the river; because they have made their Asherim, provoking the Lord. And He will give Israel up because of the sins of Yerovam, which he has sinned, and with which he has made Israel to sin. (I *Melakhim* 14:15-16)

The Netziv continues by noting that even the righteous kings Asa and Yehoshafat failed to separate the people of Israel from service at the *bamot*, and that only in the days of Yechizkiyahu were they able to reach the love of God through Torah study, and they were no longer drawn to the *bamot* which involved a prohibition punishable by excision. He then concludes by comparing God's governance over Israel during the First Temple period to the relationship between a man and his wife:

This is the answer that the Holy One, blessed be He, gives to Israel. The *mitzvot* performed as commanded by the Torah maintain the worlds, for this is what the King of the universe established. And each *mitzva* in its time maintains the world to which it was attached by Him. The performance of the *mitzvot* according to the Torah was given to Israel, and not to the angels, and certainly not to the descendants of Noach.

Therefore, even though the love of God is also a great and lofty matter in its time, nevertheless, this is only when it does not involve a transgression of God's *mitzvot*. For this reason, when they transgressed God's word and the prohibition of *bamot* for the love of God, even though they did not become liable because of this for exile from the land, nevertheless it led to God's hiding His face from Israel, and thus they came because of this to the severe sin of idolatry, and because of this they went into exile and all the troubles came.

We see then that on the one hand, throughout his commentary, the Netziv notes the decisive weight of loving God and its impact on actions that are not in keeping with the Torah and with Halakha across the ages in various stations throughout the history of the Jewish people. On the other hand, regarding Yerovam's calves, he notes how Yerovam initially misled the people, and then how over time he succeed in persuading them to worship the calves as idols, which brought Achiya the Shilonite to prophesy about exile.

The Netziv's approach to the love of God and its manifestations across the generations is comprehensive, but certainly very novel. It is difficult to accept his understanding of some of the Scriptural stories (e.g., the two and hundred and fifty people who joined Korach and Shelomo's four year delay of building the Temple) as the plain meaning of the text.

From here we will continue our study of the history of the worship of God with an examination of the Divine service in the two kingdoms throughout the First Temple period.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. All of the citations in this *shiur* are from the Netziv's commentary to *Shir ha-Shirim* 6:5, s.v. *haseibi einayikh.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a previous *shiur* we dealt at length with the substitution of the calves for the *keruvim* based on the parallels between the verses in *Yechezkel*, chapters 1 and 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)