YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #285: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (XCV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXI)**

Thus far we have dealt with the worship of God from the days of David and Shelomo until the division of the kingdom in the days of Yerovam and Rechavam.

We wish now to complete our study of Yerovam's work (I *Melakhim* 13 and on); to consider the Divine service in the two kingdoms, the kingdom of Yehuda and the kingdom of Israel, until the destruction of the Temple; and to examine the nature of the worship of God during the entire course of this period, including the service at the *bamot* and the various expressions of idol worship, both in the kingdom of Yehuda and in the kingdom of Israel.

We devoted several *shiurim* to understanding Yerovam's enterprise, contemplating the essence of the calves: offering an alternative to Jerusalem in Bet-El and in Dan; offering an alternative to the priests of the tribe of Levi in priests who are not of the tribe of Levi; and offering an alternative to the yearly calendar, by intercalating the year and creating a thirty-day difference between the calendar observed in the kingdom of Yehuda and that observed in the kingdom of Israel.

Let us begin by looking at I *Melakhim* 13. It should be recalled that in chapter 12, verse 25 and on, Scripture spells out Yerovam's sins in detail – his setting up of two golden calves in Bet-El and in Dan and the other changes mentioned above. The chapter ends as follows:

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* 12:32-33)

The text describes Yerovam's ultimate application, his worldview and its application in the Divine service. The king himself in the eighth month - the month which he devised of his own heart – stands on the altar in Bet-El, which he had chosen as an alternative to the Temple in Jerusalem, and offers a sacrifice on the altar as a priest for all intents and purposes.

Against this backdrop, it is stated:

And, behold, there came a man of God out of Yehuda by the word of the Lord to Bet-El; and Yerovam was standing by the altar to offer. (I *Melakhim* 13:1)

Although the text does not mention when this happened, the context suggests that this event took place against the backdrop of Yerovam's standing on the altar to offer a sacrifice on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the fifteenth of Cheshvan. On this day, in the month that Yerovam devised of his own heart, the festival of Sukkot was being celebrated in the kingdom of Israel as an alternative to the Sukkot that had been celebrated a month earlier in the kingdom of Yehuda. At the same time, this day was the day on which the new altar in Bet-El was dedicated.

### Who is the man of God?

A man of God was sent to Bet-El. His name is not given in Scripture, but *Chazal* in several places identify him as Ido the prophet.

Ido the prophet is mentioned in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* in several contexts:

Now the rest of the acts of Shelomo, first and last, are they not written in the words of Natan the prophet, and in the prophecy of Achiya the Shilonite, and in the visions of Ido the seer concerning Yerovam the son of Nevat? (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 9:29)

Ido's book is named after his visions, and the simple understanding is that the verse is describing the acts of Shelomo as they were recorded by three different prophets according to their order, first Natan the prophet, who prophesied already in the days of David, then Achiya the Shilonite, and finally Ido the seer.

Later in *Divrei ha-Yamim* it is stated:

Now the acts of Rechavam, first and last, are they not written in the histories of Shemaya the prophet and of Ido the seer, after the manner of genealogies? And there were wars between Rechavam and Yerovam continually. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 12:15)

From here we see that the acts of Rechavam and the wars of Rechavam and Yerovam and matters of genealogy were also included in the words of Ido. Here too he is called Ido the seer (*ha-chozeh*). But later it is stated:

And the rest of the acts of Aviya, and his ways, and his sayings, are written in the commentary of the prophet Ido. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 13:20)

Here the prophet's book is called "the commentary of the prophet Ido" (*midrash ha-navi Ido*), that is to say, a book that investigates and expounds the events from a prophetic prospective.

According to this, the prophet-seer Ido prophesied in the days of Shelomo, Rechavam, Yerovam and Aviya. As stated, *Chazal* identify the "man of God" as Ido.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Does Scripture not specify his name in order to protect his honor from what happened in the end? Perhaps.

### The prophecy about the ALtar in Bet-El by the word of the lord

In any event, Scripture emphasizes that the man of God was sent from Yehuda by the word of the Lord to Bet-El. According to the simple understanding, he was sent to the place, and not to particular people, and therefore it would appear that the primary thrust of his prophecy relates to the place of Bet-El. This is supported by what is stated later: "And he cried against the altar by the word of the Lord" (I *Melakhim* 13:2).

The prophet then mentions a sign: "The altar also was rent, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the Lord" (I *Melakhim* 13:5). And when the man of God answers the king that he has no intention of eating, he says: "For it so was charged me by the word of the Lord, saying, You shall eat no bread, nor drink water, neither return by the way that you came" (I *Melakhim* 13:9).

The emphasis throughout the entire passage that everything was done by the word of the Lord highlights the fact that there was a clear Divine decision to wipe out the altar in Bet-El, thus making it clear to Yerovam and the entire kingdom that God abhorred the service being performed there.

In his address to the altar, the man of God says:

And he cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Yoshiyahu by name; and upon you shall he sacrifice the priests of the high places that offer upon you, and men's bones shall they burn upon you. And he gave a sign the same day saying, This is the sign which the Lord has spoken, Behold, the altar shall be rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out. (I *Melakhim* 13:2-3)

On the one hand, there is here a prophecy that is to be fulfilled in only another three hundred years, while on the other hand, there is a sign that is to take place now – the rending of the altar and the pouring out of the ashes upon it.

Regarding the *bamot*, it is stated in *Vayikra*:

And I will destroy your high places… and cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols; and My soul shall abhor you. (*Vayikra* 26:30)

Part of the destruction of the *bamot* and the show of God's abhorrence of them involves the casting of human carcasses upon the carcasses of the idols, as the man of God foresees in connection with Yoshiyahu. And in fact this is what Yoshiyahu does, as is stated in II *Melakhim*:

Moreover the altar that was at Bet-El, and the high place which Yerovam the son of Nevat, who made Israel to sin, had made, even that altar and the high place he broke down; and he burned the high place and stamped it small to powder, and burned the Ashera. (II *Melakhim* 23:15)

He first breaks the altar, burns the *bama,* stamps it into powder and burns the Ashera. These actions are taken against the altar and *bama* which became involved in idolatry.

The next verse states:

And as Yoshiyahu turned himself, he spied the sepulchers that were there in the mount; and he sent, and took the bones out of the sepulchers, and burned them upon the altar, and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord which the man of God proclaimed, who proclaimed these things. (II *Melakhim* 23:16)

Indeed, the prophecy of the man of God regarding the altar at Bet-El was fulfilled to precision. And Yehoshiyahu defiled the altar by burning human bones upon it.

At this stage, Yehoshiyahu was involved in eradicating idolatry from all of Israel. He did not destroy the altar in Bet-El with the deliberate intention of fulfilling the prophesy of the man of God in its regard, but rather his program of wiping out idolatry in practice included Yerovam's altar in Bet-El. The fact that there is no mention of Yerovam's calf in Bet-El is explained by the prophecy of Hoshea:

The inhabitants of Shomron 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. It also shall be carried to Ashur, for a present to King Contentious; Efrayim shall receive shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his own counsel. *(Hoshea* 10:5-6)

What this means is that the treasure of the house of the *bamot* will be brought as an offering to the calves of Ashur, and the calf itself will be brought to the king of Ashur.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the end, following the words of the man of God, the altar on which Yerovam stood to offer a sacrifice on the day of the dedication of the altar was rent and the ashes were poured out from upon it.

The destruction of the impure altar is meant to express in the clearest terms God's absolute rejection of Yerovam's selection of Bet-El, his building of an altar upon which he – a non-priest – offered a sacrifice on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the month of Cheshvan, the month which he devised of his own heart.

After Yerovam heard the words of the man of God, he put forth his hand "from the altar, saying, Lay hold of him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to him" (I *Melakhim* 13:4). The man of God answers Yerovam's plea, prays to God, and the king's hand is restored. The king invites him to his home to eat to his heart's content, but he refuses. He answers the king as follows:

And the man of God said to the king, If you will give me half your house, I will not go in with you, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place. For it so was charged me by the word of the Lord, saying, You shall eat no bread, nor drink water, neither return by the way that you came. (I *Melakhim* 13:8-9)

 It is interesting that the man of God does not refer to Bet-El by its name, but rather he calls it "this place."

Is he alluding to the emphasis given to the word "place" in the story of God's revelation to Yaakov in Bet-El?

Thus, for example, in the words of Yaakov:

And Yaakov awoke out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in **this place**; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How full of awe is **this place**! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. (*Bereishit* 28:16-17)

According to the simple understanding, however, the man of God fails to mention the name Bet-El and refers to it by the designation "this place," in order to express his aversion to a place of idolatry. Therefore, the obvious understanding of the reason for the prohibitions that God imposed upon the man of God is that Bet-El was treated as an *ir ha-nidachat,* a city whose inhabitants worshipped idols.

The Torah records the laws pertaining to an *ir ha-nidachat* in *Devarim* 13:3 and on. After it has been clarified beyond any doubt that the people of the city worshipped idols, all of the inhabitants are to be smitten with the edge of the sword, and it and all that is in it and the cattle therein are to be destroyed. "And you shall gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the broad place thereof, and shall burn with fire the city, and all the spoil thereof… and it shall be a heap forever; it shall not be built again" (*Devarim* 13:17).

There the Torah states:

And there shall cleave nothing of the devoted thing to your hand, that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of His anger, and show you mercy, and have compassion upon you, and multiply you, as He has sworn to your fathers. (*Devarim* 13:18)

The prohibitions imposed upon the man of God not to eat, nor to drink, and not to return by the way that he came may stem from the Torah's command that "nothing of the devoted thing shall cleave to your hand," if indeed Bet-El was considered in a certain sense an *ir ha-nidachat.* With this, there is no more extreme expression to describe God's rejection of Yerovam's actions. Not only is the place not sanctified and chosen, but it is an abominable place that expresses the absolute peak of impurity and idolatry. In practice, the city was not burned, but there is here an allusion that expresses the greatest distance from it, a prohibition to enjoy anything related to it, or even to return by the way he came to it.

The Radak explains:

Since it is forbidden to enter a city of idol worshippers if not to admonish them and to prevent them… in order that the people should see that he entered the city only to deliver his prophecy, He prohibited him to eat or drink there, and in order that he should not remember the way to the city and return there, He prohibited him to return by the way which he came. (Radak, I *Melakhim* 13:9)

In conclusion, it turns out that at the very climax of Yerovam's dedication of the altar in Bet-El, while he was standing on it to offer a sacrifice, a man of God appears and prophesies about the altar, and in the wake of that prophecy the altar is rent and the ashes are poured out from upon it. The prophecy is fulfilled in the days of Yoshiyahu who defiles the altar with human bones. The prohibition to enjoy anything connected to the city alludes to an *ir ha-nidachat*.

All this expresses the absolute rejection of Yerovam's actions and the most extreme opposite of Yerovam's understanding of "the sanctity of place."

This is the primary mission of the man of God on the day of the dedication of the altar, and this is the clearest prophetic expression connected to Bet-El and the actions of Yerovam.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Thus we find in *Tosefta Sanhedrin*: "And a prophet who violated his own words, like Ido" (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* [Zuckermandel] 14:15); *Pesikta de-Rav Kehana*: "'The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver' (*Mishlei* 10:20) – this is Ido the prophet. 'The heart of the wicked is little worth' – this is Yerovam. This is what is written: 'And, behold, there came a man of God out of Yehuda by the word of the Lord to Bet-El; and Yerovam was standing by the altar to offer' (I *Melakhim* 13:1)" (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* [Mandelbaum], *piska* 2, *Ki-Tisa*); and *Seder Olam* *Rabba*: "Ido the prophet prophesied about the altar in Bet-El" (chap. 20).

Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 8, 231), as well, identifies the man of God as Ido. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Radak cites Rav Saadya Gaon who understands that also the calf in Dan was exiled. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)