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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #288: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (XCVIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXIV)**

After having dealt in the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-287-history-divine-service-altars-xcvii-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-lxxiii)with God's choosing of the city of Jerusalem "to put His name there" with special reference to Rechavam, let us dedicate this *shiur* to an examination of Rechavam's kingdom.

At the beginning of the account of Rechavam's reign, it is stated:

And Yehuda did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord; and they moved Him to jealousy with their sins which they committed, above all that their fathers had done.For they also built them high places, and pillars, and Asherim, on every high hill, and under every leafy tree; and there were also sodomites in the land; they did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord drove out before the children of Israel. (I *Melakhim* 14:22-24)

The evil deeds of the people of the kingdom of Yehuda aroused God's jealousy. Rav Yosef Kara refers us to the Torah's wording in the song of *Ha'azinu*:

Here the prophecy of Moshe was fulfilled: "They roused Him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations did they provoke Him… They have roused Me to jealousy with a no-god; they have provoked Me with their vanities. (*Devarim* 32:16-21)

The Ralbag interprets this as a general statement:

They provoked Him with the worship of idols.

If we ask ourselves how it is possible that there was idolatry in the kingdom of Yehuda immediately after the division of the kingdom, there is no direct answer to this. Surely one cannot ignore the fact that the worship of Khemosh the abomination of Moav and Molekh the abomination of Amon that had been introduced by Shelomo's Shelomo continued in Jerusalem. It may be assumed that this behavior affected the entire kingdom. However, Scripture emphasizes that they also built high places, *bamot*. That is to say, not only in the kingdom of Israel, did they build *bamot*, but also in the kingdom of Yehuda.

It is not necessary to say that the new cult that arose in the kingdom of Israel influenced what was happening in the kingdom of Yehuda. Each kingdom stood on its own, and was independent in its practical and spiritual conduct. Scripture connects the two kingdoms, apparently in light of the similarity between them, but not necessarily because the kingdom of Israel had an influence on the kingdom of Yehuda.

Since the issue of *bamot* is central in the book of *Melakhim*, let us now discuss several matters that will allow us to better understand the phenomenon throughout the book.

**The *Bamot* in the Torah**

It is interesting that in the Torah the term *bama* is directly connected to idol worship. This is the case in the section of the rebuke in *Vayikra*:

And I will destroy your high places (*bamot*), and cut down your sun-pillars, and cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols; and My soul shall abhor you. (*Vayikra* 26:30)

Ostensibly, a *bama* is a natural or artificial hill intended for worship, and is usually higher than its immediate surroundings. This is what God says to Moshe in the plains of Moav across the Jordan from Jericho:

Then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images, and demolish all their high places (*bamotam*). (*Bemidbar* 33:52)

The Ibn Ezra explains the term as follows (ad loc., s..v. bamotam):

"High places" like "the high places (*bamatei*) of the earth" (*Yeshaya* 58:14).

### "On every high hill"

Our verse reads: "For they also built them high places, and pillars, and Asherim, on every high hill, and under every leafy tree" (I *Melakhim* 14:23), and it seems to connect the three elements mentioned in the verse – the high places, the pillars, and the Asherim.[[1]](#footnote-1) The phrase, "on every high hill, and under every leafy tree," is found in the book of *Devarim* in a clear context of idol worship:

You shall surely destroy all the places, wherein the nations that you are to dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every leafy tree. And you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place. (*Devarim* 12:2-3)

The wording of the verse in the Torah that refers to the pillars and the Asherim in the context of the high mountains, the hills and under every leafy tree, greatly reinforces the understanding that the verse in *Melakhim* here refers specifically to idolatry. The pagans did indeed locate their cults in the high places, as Rabbi Akiva said: "Wherever you find a high mountain or an elevated hill or a leafy tree, know that an idolatrous object is there" (*Avoda Zara* 45a).

This principle is found in several places in the Torah and the Prophets. For example: "They shall call peoples to the mountain; there shall they offer sacrifices of righteousness" (*Devarim* 33:19); "They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and offer upon the hills" (*Hoshea* 4:13). The form of pagan rites is based primarily on a materialistic belief. Therefore, the pagans expressed their closeness to their gods on the physical plane: they perceived their gods as sitting on the mountains and in the high places, ruling over all those found beneath them. Hence, establishing their ritual sites in high places expressed their likening themselves and drawing themselves close to God. Moreover, it is very reasonable that raising themselves physically also expressed a sense of arrogance and haughtiness on the spiritual level – perhaps out of a desire to compete with their god who dwells above. From this we can understand the criticisms voiced by the prophets (see, for example *Yeshaya* 2) relating to pride and arrogance, which involve a desecration of God's name.

In contrast to this understanding, the God of Israel reveals Himself in all places, not only because of His humility, but also because of His greatness. He is not limited in any way by physical reality, and therefore He oversees what is happening in the world and reveals Himself even in low places.

**The *Bamot* in the *Prophet*’s – *Bamot* Used in the Service of God**

The term *bamot* as found in the words of the Prophets often refers to *bamot* used in the service of God.

The term is first used by the prophet Shemuel following the destruction of the *Mishkan* in Shilo. During this period, *bamot* are permitted.

In the course of Shaul's search for the asses, they go to the city where the seer is located. The verse states:

And they answered them, and said, He is; behold, he is before you; make haste now, for he is come today into the city; for the people have a sacrifice today in the high place. (I *Shemuel* 9:12)

This *bama* as well is located in a high place. This follows from the verse: "As they went up the ascent to the city" (I *Shemuel* 9:11). And similarly in the continuation.[[2]](#footnote-2)

All of the verses indicate that the *bama* is located in a high place, to which one must ascend and descend. I *Shemuel* 9:25 implies that the *bama* was above the city and outside of it. Near this *bama* there was an office, and in all likelihood, this was a meeting place.

In the verse in I *Shemuel* which refers to the city of Giv'a in the account of how Shaul become a different man after being anointed king, it is stated:

After that you shall come to the hill of God, where is the garrison of the Pelishtim; and it shall come to pass, when you are come there to the city, that you shall meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a timbrel, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they will be prophesying. (I *Shemuel* 10:5)

From here we see once again that the *bama* was located in a high place from which people came down, and also that there is a connection between the prophets and the *bama*. We also see that musical instruments were played at the site.

After the destruction of Shilo, the ark was separated from the *Mishkan* and the *Mishkan* was now called "the great *bama*" (I *Melakhim*  3:4). Later in the days of Shelomo it was located in Giv'on, and during this period it served as a public *bama*, alongside the many private *bamot* dedicated to the service of the God of Israel in every place.

Throughout the book of *Melakhim*, Scripture notes with respect to most of the kings that "the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and offered in the high places."[[3]](#footnote-3)

In most places Scripture attributes the service at the *bamot* to the people rather than to the king, the assumption being that we are dealing with *bamot* dedicated to the God of Israel. Therefore, when the kings Yehoram the son of Yehoshafat, Achaz, Menashe and Amon worship idols and fill the Temple with idolatry, it is possible that certain God-fearing people chose to continue their service of God at *bamot* dedicated to His worship, rather than in the Temple.

Chizkiyahu and Yehoshiyahu were the only kings who prohibited the worship of God at *bamot* and eradicated it from the kingdom. In practical terms, in addition to the worship of the calves and the house of the *bamot* built by Yeravam in the kingdom of Israel, there is room in the kingdom of Yehuda to distinguish between *bamot* used for the worship of the God of Israel and *bamot* dedicated to idolatry. It is clear that *bamot* for idol worship must be uprooted and destroyed, as was done from the time of Asa to the days of Yoshiyahu.

Let us go back to the time of Rechavam. We mentioned that the context of the verses indicates that we are dealing with idol worship. In addition to the *bamot,* mention is made here (I *Melakhim* 14:23-24) of pillars, Asherim and sodomites.

**Pillars**

The term *matzeva* usually refers to a structure consisting of a single stone (as opposed to altars that are built from a number of stones) that is erected for ritual purposes.

The Canaanites made pillars at which they worshipped their idols, and for this reason they were prohibited, even though they were highly desired in the time of the patriarchs, as is explicitly stated in connection with Yaakov in Bet-El (*Bereishit* 28:18-22; *Bereishit* 31:13; *Bereishit* 35:14), and with Moshe (*Shemot* 24:4). Pillars are prohibited, as it is stated: "Neither shall you set yourself up a pillar, which the Lord your God hates" (*Devarim* 16:22).

**Ashera**

Idol worshippers would plant trees near their altars. The practice is explicitly prohibited in the Torah:

You shall not plant yourself an Ashera of any kind of tree beside the altar of the Lord your God, which you shall make yourself. (*Devarim* 16:21)

The Rashbam in his commentary there mentions what was said to Gidon:

And throw down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Ashera that is by it. (*Shofetim* 6:25)

And similarly the words of Yirmeyahu:

Like the symbols of their sons are their altars, and their Asherim are by the leafy trees, upon the high hills. (*Yirmeyahu* 17:2)

Some suggest that an Ashera is a trunk of a tree that would be set next to an altar. According to another understanding an Ashera is a figurine of the Canaanite goddess called Ashera.

The Ramban, in his commentary to the book of *Devarim*, connects these different elements and explains:

And it appears to me that the Canaanites who were immersed in idolatry would build an altar in all of their houses of worship to offer sacrifices upon it, and a large stone was set near the entrance to the building upon which the priests would stand, and a tree was planted outside it to mark the road leading to it. Even today the Christians act in this manner. But God hated and despised all of their actions, and prohibited pillars and Asherim, and left only altars, as they are required for the sacrifices that He commanded Israel to bring. And it was pleasing to Him, and His will from before there was idolatry in the world was fulfilled. (*Devarim* 16:22)

**Sodomites**

The Torah says as follows:

There shall be no harlot (*kedusha*)of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a sodomite (*kadesh*) of the sons of Israel.  You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord your God for any vow; for even both these are an abomination to the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 23:18-19)

The Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah, explains the terms *kadesh* and *kedusha* as follows:

According to the commentators, the terms *kadesh* and *kedusha* denote designation, because they found: "I have commanded My designated ones (*mekudashai*)" (*Yeshayahu* 13:3). And similarly… But in my opinion, they all denote holiness. For one who removes himself from fornication is called "holy" (*kadosh*), as it is stated: "They shall not take a woman that is a harlot, or profaned; neither shall they take a woman put away from her husband; for he is holy (*kadosh*) to his God" (*Vayikra* 21:7). Now, a woman who is removed from forbidden sexual relations and debauchery is holy. And she who removes herself from holiness and becomes defiled is called a *kedesha.* This is similar to the linguistic phenomenon of "For it would root (*tesharesh*)out all mine increase" (*Iyov* 31:12); and "And they shall take away the ashes (*ve-dishnu* from the altar" (*Bemidbar* 4:13). For a known prostitute, defiled of name and full of tumult, is removed from all sanctity. The name *kedesha* is given to her not just because she is designated for this abomination, as she has no holiness whatsoever…. (*Devarim* 23:18)

The Ramban explains that just as one who removes himself from fornication is called *kadosh*, so too one who removes himself or herself from holiness is called *kadesh* or *kedesha*. He brings two examples of this phenomenon – "For it would root (*tesharesh*)out all mine increase," where the word *lesharesh* has the opposite meaning of *lehashrish*, to take root; and similarly in the case of *dishun*, removing the ashes from the altar.

If so, the prohibition is directed at the *kadeshim* who were consecrated for idol worship and worshipped through homosexual relations, and at *kedeshot,* women who practiced prostitution near the ritual sites.

Let us go back to what was stated above about the people of the kingdom of Yehuda. Scripture summarizes by stating:

They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord drove out before the children of Israel. (I *Melakhim* 14:24)

This is a summary of the idolatrous practices performed in the kingdom of Yehuda in the days of Rechavam, one generation after Shelomo. In *Divrei ha-Yamim* the process is spelled out differently. It first says:

For they walked three years in the way of David and Shelomo. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:17)

But in the next chapter it says:

And it came to pass, when the kingdom of Rechavam was established, and he was strong, that he forsook the law of the Lord, and all Israel with him. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 12:1)

And he did that which was evil, because he set not his heart to seek the Lord. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 12:14)

Here Scripture attributes these things to Rechavam and not to the people as in the book of *Melakhim*. This may come to indicate that if the king fails to object to such conduct, he is held accountable.

With this we conclude our examination of the conduct of Rechavam and the kingdom of Yehuda during his reign with regard to idol worship. In the next *shiur* we will consider the meanings and consequences of his actions from the perspective of prophetic vision.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Unless we understand – which does not seem reasonable – that only the Asherim were on every high hill and under every leafy tree. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I *Shemuel* 9:13, 14, and 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I *Melakhim* 22:44; II *Melakhim* 12:4; II *Melakhim* 14:4; II *Melakhim* 15:4; and the opposite example – II *Melakhim* 18:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)