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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #289: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (XCIX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXV)**

After having examined the sins of Rechavam, let us now look at the punishment meted out against the kingdom of Yehuda in the wake of the actions of the king and the entire kingdom. We will first see that immediately after Scripture relates the evil deeds performed by the kingdom of Yehuda, it describes the arrival of Shishak.

In the fifth year of Rechavam, "Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem; and he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house; he even took away all" (I *Melakhim* 14:25-26). When Scripture says the he took away all, it is apparently referring to all the treasures, the gold and the silver, that David and Shelomo had amassed.

### Rechavam and Shishak

The description of the reign of Rechavam in *Divrei ha-Yamim* is much more detailed. The text first describes Rechavam's desire to go to war against the kingdom of Israel in order to restore that kingdom to Rechavam. God appears to the prophet Shemayahu and tells them not to go up and fight against Israel, because of the sins of Rechavam and Yehuda. Instead, God sends Shishak against them.

On the other hand, Scripture emphasizes the fact that the priests and the Levites throughout Israel assembled in Yehuda and in Jerusalem and came to sacrifice to the God of their forefathers: "So they strengthened the kingdom of Yehuda, and made Rechavam the son of Shelomo strong, three years" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:17). In the continuation, however, as an introduction to the account of Shishak's campaign and its results, Scripture notes that "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). That is to say, after the first three years of his rule, during which time Rechavam walked in the paths of his father, once his rule is established, he abandons God's Torah, all of the people following along after him.

Shishak's invasion is Yehuda's punishment for their abandoning God. Shishak, on his part, tries to strengthen Egypt's political and military influence through this campaign, but his journey is directed against the kingdoms of Yehuda and Israel, each of which in its own way had abandoned God. This is what the prophet Shemaya says explicitly when Shishak arrives in Jerusalem:

Now Shemaya the prophet came to Rechavam, and to the princes of Yehuda, that were gathered together to Jerusalem because of Shishak, and said to them, Thus says the Lord, You have forsaken Me, therefore have I also left you in the hand of Shishak. Then the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves; and they said, The Lord is righteous. And when the Lord saw that they humbled themselves, the word of the Lord came to Shemaya, saying, They have humbled themselves; I will not destroy them; but I will grant them some deliverance, and My wrath shall not be poured out upon Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak. Nevertheless they shall be his servants; that they may know My service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 12:5-8)

With the humbling of the king and the princes of Israel, God promises that his wrath will not be poured out upon Jerusalem by the hand of Shishak, and by paying taxes to Shishak the people will learn to distinguish between serving God and serving a foreign king. Afterwards Scripture concludes its account of the kingdom of Rechavam by noting that he ruled as king for seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city in which God chose to set His name there.

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

It may be understood that after having been humbled, Rechavam returns to his wicked ways, because he does not set his heart to fulfill God's commandments and to examine them so that they would guide his governing in his kingdom. With this we conclude the period of Rechavam.

### Aviya

Let us now move on to the period of Aviya the son of Rechavam:

And he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him; and his heart was not whole with the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father. Nevertheless for David's sake did the Lord his God give him a lamp in Jerusalem, to set up his son after him, and to establish Jerusalem; because David did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from anything that He commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriya the Chittite. (I *Melakhim* 15:3-5)

The text also notes that Aviya's mother's name was Maakha, the daughter of Avishalom.

The Ralbag explains (ad loc.):

His mother's name is mentioned to testify that she would relate herself to Aviya who was a very evil man. For this reason you find that it mentions that she made an abominable image for an Ashera. It is as if it were explaining that the reason that Aviya did evil in the sight of God was that he was the son of Maakha.

In his commentary to verse 7, he adds:

It mentions that Rechavam was young and tender when Israel rebelled against him. From this it becomes evident that Aviya was older when he reigned than was Rechavam when he reigned.

According to the Ralbag, Aviya was influenced by his mother to do evil. Accordingly, Aviya's sins are the same sins mentioned in connection with Rechavam (I *Melakhim* 14: 23-24).

The text emphasizes that for the sake of David, the Lord gave Aviya a "lamp" – "to set up his son after him, and to establish Jerusalem." It fell upon Aviya to continue the project begun by David and Shelomo, and make Jerusalem the capital of the kingdom of Israel, and at the same time the site of the Temple and a holy city. The *Metzudot David* explains this emphasis as follows:

That is to say, he was so evil that he was fit to rule as king only for the sake of David.

Essentially, Aviya was not worthy on his own right to rule as king. The fact that he sat on the throne stemmed from God's desire to uphold the kingdom of the house of David and the holy city and Temple, but not at all from respect for Aviya and his actions.

### Maakha

Scripture relates to the kingdom of Aviya in its description of the days of Asa:

And Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David his father. And he put away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. And also Maakha his mother he removed from being queen, because she had made an abominable image for an Ashera; and Asa cut down her image, and burnt it at the brook Kidron. (I *Melakhim* 15:11-13)

Mention is made here of the removal of what his mother Maakha had made. But Maakha is not Asa's mother, but rather the mother of Asa's father, Aviya. This is evident from what is written in *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:11: "And after her he took Maakha the daughter of Avshalom; and she bore him Aviya," apparently referring to a daughter that was born to Avshalom at the end of his life. Josephus[[1]](#footnote-1) suggests that the reference is to a daughter of Tamar the daughter of Avshalom.

The title "*gevira*" is an honorary title given to the king's main wife and to the king's mother. Maakha appears to have borne the title *gevira* in the days of Rechavam, in the days of Aviya, and in the beginning of the days of Asa. She made an abominable image for the Ashera. Asa removed her from her high position and destroyed the idolatry that she had introduced to the kingdom of Yehuda.

It is fascinating to note that the expression *mifletzet*, "abominable image," is used in Scripture exclusively for the work of Maakha, daughter of Avshalom, and in no other context. We are dealing with a terrifying image of an idol. Yirmeyahu, relating in his prophecy to the fall of the king of Babylon, says: "A drought is upon her waters, and they shall be dried up; for it is a land of graven images, and they are mad upon things of horror" (*Yirmeyahu* 50:38). Here apparently the idol itself threatens those who behold it. It is also possible that the cult of this abominable image was associated with abominations.

King Asa also cuts down the abominable image and burns it at the Kidron brook.[[2]](#footnote-2) Scripture does not indicate where this abominable image stood, whether in the City of David or in the royal palace or in the House of God. However, if it were found in the House of God, this would have been emphasized in the text.

The idolatrous practice regarding an Ashera was to plant it as an idol alongside an altar, as it is stated with regard to Gid'on: "The altar of the Baal was broken down, and the Ashera was cut down that was by it" (*Shofetim* 6:28), and as follows from the plain meaning of the Torah prohibition: "You shall not plant for yourself an Ashera of any kind of tree beside the altar of the Lord your God, which you shall make yourself" (*Devarim* 16:21). Here Scripture does not note this. So too it does not highlight the fact that the people worshipped the abominable image. It may, therefore, be suggested that owing to the royal standing of the *gevira*, the abominable image was erected in the area of one of the royal buildings.

### The Fire in the Kidron Brook

And Asa cut down her image, and burnt it at the brook Kidron. (I *Melakhim* 15:13)

Ostensibly, this is a direct and precise fulfillment of the Torah's commandment in the book of *Devarim.* The Torah commands that all of the places where the nations worshipped their gods must be destroyed:

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* 12:3)

Earlier, the Torah uses the term *gedi'a* in connection with the Asherim, a term that is similar in meaning to *kerita*, "cutting down." The Torah is precise in its wording:

But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.

The altars that are built of stone must be broken down, the pillars that are built of a single stone must be dashed in pieces, the Ashera that is a tree that has been planted and has taken root must be hewn down, and the graven images some of which were made of wood must be burnt.

### Why Does the Burning take Place at the Kidron Brook?

The Kidron brook passes east of the City of David, the royal palace, and the House of God, and descends eastward until it reaches the Dead Sea. Therefore, topographical logic dictates, owing to the proximity, that the idolatry be burned in the Kidron brook. In addition, the fact that the brook is located outside the city allows for the idolatry to be destroyed there.

Is it possible that there is a connection between the elimination of idolatry and the words of *Chazal* who say that idolatry is brought to the Dead Sea? Thus, for example, we find in the Mishna in *Avoda Zara*:

If one finds utensils upon which is the figure of the sun or moon or a dragon, he casts them into the Dead Sea. (*Avoda Zara* 42b)

Why lead idolatry to the Dead Sea? A number of answers were given to this question. One explanation that has been suggested is that people do not traverse the Dead Sea, and there is no concern that anyone will derive benefit from the idolatry. According to this explanation, it is very clear why the destruction took place at the Kidron brook, which goes off in the direction of the Dead Sea.

Throughout the First Temple period we find several times that the eradication of the idolatry in the House of God was done toward the Kidron brook. In addition to the days of Asa, so too we find in the days of Chizkiyahu in relation to the idolatry of Achaz, and similarly in the days of Yoshiyahu in relation to the idolatry of Menashe.

Thus, we find in *Divrei ha-Yamim* regarding Chizkiyahu who removed the idolatry brought into the Temple in the days of Achaz:

And the priests went in to the inner part of the house of the Lord, to cleanse it, and brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the Temple of the Lord into the court of the house of the Lord. And the Levites took it, to carry it out abroad to the Kidron brook. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:16)[[3]](#footnote-3)

And thus we find the great removal of idolatry in the days of Yoshiyahu following the period of Menashe:

And the altars that were on the roof of the upper chamber of Achaz, which the kings of Yehuda had made, and the altars which Menashe had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord, did the king break down, and beat them down from there, and cast the dust of them into the Kidron brook. (II *Melakhim* 23:12)

And also a little earlier:

And the king commanded Chilkiyahu the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the Temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the Ashera, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them to Bet-El… And he brought out the Ashera from the house of the Lord, without Jerusalem, to the Kidron brook, and burned it at the Kidron brook, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the common people. (II *Melakhim* 23:4-6)

In this context mention is made of the fields of Kidron, that is to say, fields alongside the brook, which are also mentioned by the prophet Yirmeyahu:

And the whole valley of the dead bodies, and of the ashes, and all the fields unto the Kidron brook. (*Yirmeyahu* 31:39)

By disposing of the idolatry outside Jerusalem, the city itself is left free of idolatry.

In the days of Yoshiyahu, the ashes of the burnt idolatry were taken from the fields alongside the Kidron brook to Bet-El, in order to defile the place where the idols were worshipped, and the site of the golden calf, and the house of the *bamot* (which in the time of Yoshiyahu no longer existed, since the kingdom of Israel already went out into exile in the days of Hoshea ben Ela in the period of Chizkiyahu). This was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Hoshea, Bet-El turning into Bet-Aven (*Hoshea* 4:15).

Yoshiyahu, after removing the Ashera from the House of God and taking it out of Jerusalem, burns it at the Kidron brook, and afterwards stamps it small to powder, and casts the powder upon the graves of the common people. Presumably, these are the people who worshipped idols while they were still alive. This is what is implied by the parallel text in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

And they broke down the altars of the Baalim in his presence; and the sun-images, that were on high above them, he hewed down; and the Asherim, and the graven images, and the molten images, he broke in pieces, and made dust of them, and strewed it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed to them. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 34:4)

In addition to the fact that we learn from here about graves in the Kidron brook (we surmise that they were not located in the channel itself, but along the slopes), it is very reasonable to assume that another reason for destroying idolatry at the Kidron brook is connected to the fact that the place itself was already ritually unclean owing to the graves found there.

Thus, the Torah's rebuke in *Parashat Bechukotai* was fulfilled: "And I will destroy your high places, and cut down your sun-pillars, and cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols" (*Vayikra* 26:30). For according to the verse in Yirmeyahu, the valley of the carcasses was found nearby.

The next verse in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 34 states: "And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and purged Yehuda and Jerusalem" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 34:5). That is to say, the defiled bones of the priests who worshipped idols defiled their altars. Scripture emphasizes that just as he removed idolatry, so too the king purged Yehuda and Jerusalem.

It is clear that each of the kings who burned idolatry – Asa, Yechizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu – through their actions purified Jerusalem from the impurity of idol worship that had adhered to it in the days of Aviya, Asa, and Menashe.

### The War between Aviya and Yerovam

 The war between Aviya and Yerovam is described at length in the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim*.

We have already referred in our *shiur* on Yerovam to Aviya's oration on Mount Tzemarayim in which he rebukes Israel for their rebellion against the house of David and for their abandoning God. On the other hand, we saw that Aviya himself walked in all the sins of his father, and Asa was forced to put way the sodomites from the land and to remove all the idols that his father had made. In his war against Yerovam, God smote Yerovam and all of Israel before Aviya and Yehuda, leaving five hundred thousand casualties. The verse in *Divrei ha-Yamim* states: "Neither did Yerovam recover strength again in the days of Aviya; and the Lord smote him and he died" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 13:20).

In contrast to the simple meaning of the verse which ostensibly refers to the death of Yerovam, we noted in previous *shiurim[[4]](#footnote-4)* the passage in the *Yerushalmi* (*Yevamot* 16:3) where it is argued that the reference is to the death of Aviya:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Surely it was only Aviya who was smitten. And why was he smitten? Rabbi Yochanan said: Because he scoffed at them publicly. This is what the verse means: "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). And Resh Lakish said: Because he disgraced Achiya the Shilonite and called him a base man. This is what the verse means: "And there were gathered to him vain men, base men" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 13:7). And the Rabbis said: Because idolatry came into his hand, and he did not destroy it. This is what the verse means: "And Aviya pursued after Yerovam, and took cities from him, Bet-El…" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 13:19).

According to the Rabbis, with the conquest of Bet-El, in which were located the calf built by Yerovam and the house of the *bamot*, Aviya could have destroyed the idolatry erected there, but he failed to do so. According to the *Yerushalmi*, his failure to destroy the idolatry in Bet-El is the reason that God smote Aviya and he died.

With this we conclude our review of the kingdom of Aviya. In the next *shiur* we will move on to the kingdom of Asa.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *The Antiquities of the Jews,* VIII, 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term "cut down" may allude to the fact that the abominable image was connected to the ground. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And similarly in the parallel in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See [link](http://etzion.org.il/he/%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A2%D7%91%D7%95%D7%93%D7%AA-%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%96%D7%91%D7%97%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A6%D7%96-%E2%80%93-%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A2%D7%92), and notes 1 and 2 there. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. And similarly *Vayikra Rabba, parasha* 33, 5 (this is the view of Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)