YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #290: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (C) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXVI)**

In this *shiur* we will examine the deeds of Asa king of Yehuda. Regarding Asa we must distinguish between two different periods in his forty-one year reign.

The first period which begins with his ascent to the throne is exceedingly impressive. Scripture emphasizes that "Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David his father" (I *Melakhim* 15:1; and the parallel verse in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:1) – eradicating idolatry from his realm, removing sodomites from the land, and getting rid of all the abominations made by his forefathers. The struggle with his grandmother Maakha the daughter of Avishalom, which included burning the abominable image that she had made and removing her from being queen, required great courage on the part of the young king who had just begun to rule.

Scripture states that:

The high places were not taken away; nevertheless the heart of Asa was whole with the Lord all his days. (I *Melakhim* 15:14)

And in *Divrei ha-Yamim* it is noted:

And he commanded Yehuda to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to do the law and the commandment. Also he took away out of all the cities of Yehuda the high places and the sun-images; and the kingdom was quiet before him. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:3-4)

### The War Against Zerach the Kushite and Making a Covenant with God

Later in *Divrei ha-Yamim* an account is given of the war fought against Zerach the Kushite:

And Asa cried to the Lord his God, and said, Lord, there is none beside You to help, between the mighty and him that has no strength; help us, O Lord our God; for we rely on You, and in Your name are we come against this multitude. You are the Lord our God; let not man prevail against You. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:10)

Scripture then describes God's smiting of the Kushites. The enemy breaks before God and the fear of God falls upon them.

The prophet Azarya ben Oded reveals himself and turns to Asa, saying:

The Lord is with you, while you are with Him; and if you seek Him, He will be found of you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:2)

Immediately afterwards the prophet gives a difficult account of what appears to be the period that preceded Asa:

Now for long seasons Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:3)

However, with Asa's reformation it is stated:

But when in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found of them. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:4)

In the wake of the words of the prophet, Asa removes the detestable things out of all the land of Yehuda and Binyamin, and out of the cities that he had taken from the hill country of Efrayim. So too he renews the altar of the Lord that was before the porch of the Lord. We are apparently dealing with a repair and renovation of the altar in the house of the Lord. Why did Asa see a need to renew the altar of God? It is very possible that Asa's main challenge regarding the Divine service was what to do with all the works and influence of his grandmother Maakha the daughter of Avishalom. These could reach the impurity of the outer altar in the house of God. In addition to removing her from her elevated position, he tries to cancel her impact in the entire kingdom. The renewal of the altar is one example of the reforms introduced by the king in the early years of his reign.

In the continuation Scripture describes the arrival of the representatives of the kingdom of Israel:

And he gathered all Yehuda and Binyamin, and them that sojourned with them out of Efrayim and Menashe, and out of Shimon; for they fell to him out of Israel in abundance, when they saw that the Lord his God was with him. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:9)

This may be a continuation of what happened in the days of Yerovam. We already noted in previous *shiurim* that priests and Levites from all of Israel came to Yehuda. But the text here also emphasizes that:

And after them, out of all the tribes of Israel, such as set their hearts to seek the Lord, the God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord, the God of their fathers. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 11:16)

That is to say, it was not only Levites who came from the kingdom of Israel to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to God, but rather people from all of the tribes. In the days of Asa, in addition to the people of Yehuda and Binyamin which were part of the kingdom of Yehuda, Scripture also mentions the people of Efrayim, Menashe and Shimon, which were territorially close to the kingdom of Yehuda, who came to Jerusalem. This can be seen as the beginning of a trend of the reunification of the two kingdoms.

The prophecy of Oded the prophet together with Asa's victory over Zerach the Kushite, and representatives of the kingdom of Israel coming to Yehuda and to Jerusalem – all these things greatly strengthen the king to enter into a new covenant with God:

So they gathered themselves together at Jerusalem in the third month, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Asa. And they sacrificed to the Lord in that day, of the spoil which they had brought, seven hundred oxen and seven thousand sheep. And they entered into the covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul; and that whosoever would not seek the Lord, the God of Israel, should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman. And they swore to the Lord with a loud voice, and with shouting, and with trumpets, and with horns. And all Yehuda rejoiced at the oath; for they had sworn with all their heart, and sought Him with their whole desire; and He was found of them; and the Lord gave them rest round about. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:10-15)

The content of the covenant is "to seek the Lord the God of their fathers with all their hearts and with all their souls." The Torah's rebuke in *Parashat Va'etchanan,* according to which God will scatter the people of Israel among the nations, states: "But from there you will seek the Lord your God; and you shall find Him, if you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 4:29). At the beginning of his reign, Asa commanded "Yehuda to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to do the law and the commandment" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:3), whereas here this demand is anchored in a covenant that is accepted with an oath that includes the death penalty for anyone who does not seek the Lord, the God of Israel.

The oath here is taken with a loud voice, in an impressive public assembly that is reminiscent of the revelation at Mount Sinai, both because of the date – the first of Sivan – and because of the sounding of the shofar. So too in its very essence, we are dealing with a full-hearted and free-willing joyous acceptance of the Torah.

Scripture emphasizes that "the Lord gave them rest round about." This is a continuation of the fulfillment of the words of Azaryahu ben Oded that we cited earlier. Indeed, verse 19 notes: "And there was no more war until the five and thirtieth year of the reign of Asa" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 15:19).

### The War Against Aram and the End of the Period of Asa

*Chazal* have a very interesting interpretation of the meaning of the dates of the war between Asa and Baasha:

Asa ruled for forty one years. In his days the land was quiet for ten years. In the fifteenth year of Asa's reign, Zerach the Kushite came and returned to Asa all the booty that Shishak the king of Egypt had taken from Jerusalem, and Asa took it. This was the thirty-fifth year since the death of Shelomo, and God raised up an adversary to Israel, Rezon the son of Eliyada… What is the meaning of "of Asa"? This corresponds to the thirty-six years during which Shelomo was married to the daughter of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and it corresponds to the thirty-six years that were decreed against the kingdom of the house of David that it be divided, and that in the end will be returned to them… Therefore it is stated: "In the sixth and thirtieth year of the reign of Asa." In the sixteenth year of Asa, after Zerach the Kushite fell into his hands, it being the thirty-sixth year since the death of Shelomo, God raised up an adversary to him, Rezon the son of Eliyada (I *Melakhim* 16). At that same time the king of Israel and the king of Aram made a pact to go up and provoke Asa, and Asa sinned, and brought out silver and gold… a pact between me and you… and Ben Hadad heard… and at that time Chanani came… And the kings of Aram didn't stop being adversaries of Israel…. (*Seder Olam Rabba*, 16)

What this means is as follows: Regarding the dates, it is explicitly stated (I *Melakhim* 16:8) that Baasha died in the twenty-sixth year of Asa. Why does Scripture note here the thirty-sixth year of Asa? *Chazal* understand that a decree was issued against the kingdom of the house of David that it be divided for thirty-six years. According to this, this is the thirty-sixth year to the death of Shelomo. That is to say, according to this calculation, the kingdom should have become reunited and the great covenant with the oath was supposed to mark this special event. Indeed, the participation of the people of Efrayim, Menashe, and Shimon from the kingdom of Israel express this tendency in a very small measure.

But at the same time the king of Israel and the king of Aram entered into an alliance to attack Asa. Asa sinned and brought out silver and gold from the treasures of the house of the Lord and from the house of the king, and sent a request to Ben Hadad, the king of Aram, that he cancel his pact with Baasha king of Israel, and indeed this is what he did.

If indeed Zerach the Kushite took from Shishak all of the booty that he had taken from Rechavam, and Asa recovered this booty through his victory over Zerach the Kushite, only in order to send it afterwards to Ben Hadad king of Aram, we have here sort of a closing of a circle. According to *Chazal*, an opportunity presented itself to end the division between the kingdom of Yehuda and the kingdom of Israel, but Asa squandered it through his action.

Indeed Chanani the seer turns to Asa in the wake of this action and says to him:

Because you have relied on the king of Aram, and have not relied on the Lord your God, therefore is the host of the king of Aram escaped out of your hand. Were not the Kushim and the Lubim a huge host, with chariots and horsemen exceeding many? yet, because you relied on the Lord, He delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is whole toward Him. Herein you have done foolishly; for from henceforth you shall have wars. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 16:7-9)

The prophet judges with severity the alliance made between Asa and the king of Aram, so that Asa could overcome Baasha king of Israel. The plain and simple meaning of relying on a foreign king is not to rely on God. In addition, this was accomplished through the removal of gold and silver from the treasures of the house of the Lord.

Thus begins the second period of Asa's reign, which differs in its very essence from the first. The prophet emphasizes the clear difference between the two wars fought by Asa.

In the war against Zerach the Kushite, Asa's absolute reliance on God led directly and miraculously to his victory over him; in this war, on the other hand, the result of relying on the king of Aram while giving away the treasures of the house of the Lord as a bribe was continued war.

Ostensibly, Scripture uses here the phrase, "Because you have relied," in contrast to Asa's prayer, "For we rely on You, and in Your name are we come against this multitude" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:10). The reliance on God turned into reliance on the king of Aram.

Asa's response to the words of the prophet is very severe: "Then Asa became angry with the seer, and put him in the prison house; for he was in a rage with him because of this thing. And Asa oppressed some of the people the same time" (*Divrei ha-Yamim* 16:10). In his great anger, Asa imprisons Chanani the seer and imposes heavy taxes on that sector of the people that supported the prophet. Asa's punishment is stated explicitly: "And in the thirty and ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet; his disease was exceedingly great; yet in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 16:12).

Scripture emphasizes that parallel to Asa's conduct on the national and royal level, i.e., his failure to rely on God, so too on the personal level he did not seek God, neither by turning to a prophet, nor by turning directly to God through prayer. Scripture describes his burial in a burial cave that he had hewn out for himself and how he was placed in his grave, perhaps in a stone coffin filled with various kinds of spices. Perhaps this was connected to his disease. It would appear that his bier and personal effects were also burned in a scented fire.

### Summary

It is therefore possible to point to two distinct periods in Asa's reign.

In the first period he deals with the eradication of idolatry, with the seeking of God, and with the performance of the Torah and its commandments. Asa brings the people to make a great covenant with God under oath. This renewed covenant with God bears a certain similarity to the revelation at Mount Sinai with respect to the date and the essence of the covenant. By virtue of his walking with God, he defeats Zerach the Kushite and merits the prophetic support of Azaryahu the son of Oded.

In the second period he relies on the king of Aram in order to defeat the kingdom of Israel and Baasha while removing the treasures of the house of the Lord and sending them as a bribe to Ben Hadad. In this period Chanani the seer delivers a harsh prophecy in his regard, in the wake of which Asa becomes angry with him, puts him in prison, and imposes taxes on that sector of the population that identified with him.

It is interesting to note that the account of the kingdom of Asa in *Divrei ha-Yamim* is much longer and detailed than that in *Melakhim.* Mention is made in *Divrei ha-Yamim* of two prophetic revelations to Asa, of which there is not even a hint in the book of *Melakhim.* There may be two different points of view here. The prophet Yirmeyahu, who examines the situation from the perspective of the end of the First Temple and the destruction of the kingdom, emphasizes Asa's righteousness. The account in *Divrei ha-Yamim* which cites the prophecies that were said in his regard put greater emphasis on his sins.

In the end, despite the harsh criticism of his actions at the end of his life, including his relationship to the prophet and the diseases from which he suffered, he is viewed overall as a righteous king. There are two good examples of this in the text. Regarding the deeds of Yehoshafat, it is stated: "And he walked in the way of Asa his father, and turned not aside from it, doing that which is right in the eyes of the Lord" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 20:32). Whereas in the prophet's critique of the actions of Yehoram the son of Yehoshafat, it is stated: "And there came a writing to him from Eliyahu the prophet, saying, Thus says the Lord, the God of David, your father: Because you have not walked in the ways of Yehoshafat your father, nor in the ways of Asa, king of Yehuda" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:12), and in the continuation he spells out Yehoram's sins when he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and made Yehuda go astray.

In the next *shiur* we will turn our attention to the kingdom of Yehoshafat.

(Translated by David Strauss)