YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #296: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CVI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXXII)**

In this shiur, we intend to continue our study of the reign of Yehoash, with special attention paid to the significance of his having made himself into a god. We will focus on the second half of his reign, after the death of Yehoyada the priest, which in many senses was the complete opposite of the first half of his reign (as we outlined in the previous two *shiurim*).

It is interesting that this part of Yehoash's reign is described in detail in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, but not at all in the book of *Melakhim*. Following the death of Yehoyada, the princes of Yehuda come to prostrate themselves before the king, after which he listened to them. The special emphasis on the fact that the princes bowed down to the king brought *Chazal* to understand that they made him into a god, their bowing down to him going far beyond the conventional bow of a person appearing before a king.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is what *Midrash Tanchuma* says:

Yoash made himself into a god, as it is stated: "Now after the death of Yehoyada came the princes of Yehuda, and prostrated themselves before the king" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:17). They said to him: You are a god. Were you not a god you would not have spent six years in the Holy of Holies. A High Priest enters only once [a year] and everyone prays for him that he should enter in peace, but you spent six years there. Were you not a god, you would not have survived. At that time, he accepted what they said, as it is stated: "Then the king hearkened to them" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:17). The Holy One, blessed is He, immediately informed him that he was of flesh and blood. What is written: "So they executed judgment upon Yoash" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:24). Surely: "Let the nations know they are but men. Sela"(*Tehilim* 9:21). (*Tanchuma* (ed. Buber), *Va'era* 16)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Scripture draws a direct connection between Yehoash's growing up for six years in the Holy of Holies and his turning himself into a king.

By definition, the Holy of Holies is the expanse in the house of God that represents more than anything else the site of the seat of God, and the ark and the *kaporet* represent the site of His royal throne. It is important to note that the vessels found in the Holy of Holies are not vessels used in man's service – not the ark, not the *kaporet,* and not the *keruvim.* They are not used in any type of service whatsoever. When the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur to burn the incense, to sprinkle the blood of the bull and the blood of the he-goat, and to remove the incense shovel, he does not perform any service with the vessels found there. The most that he does is burn the incense between the two poles of the ark and sprinkle the blood between the two *keruvim.* From the days of Yoshiyahu and until the destruction of the Second Temple, when the ark, the *kaporet*, and the *keruvim* were stored away, the Holy of Holies was an empty chamber, and there was no replacement of the vessels that had been found there earlier.

### The house of God As GOd's royal palace

The more we see the Holy of Holies as the site of the seat of the King of the kings, the more it will be possible to see the entire Temple as the house that expresses the place of His kingdom. The imagery found in some of the Prophets, "the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who sits on the *keruvim*" (I *Shemuel* 4:4) ostensibly refers to the *keruvim* as God's seat. What is more appropriate than a royal throne in the innermost and most sanctified room in the palace? Whereas in pagan temples there was an actual throne and on it sat an idol, in the *Mishkan* and the *Mikdash* there was no real throne, but rather the *keruvim* themselves served as a seat, and there was nothing on them. In this sense, this understanding of the *keruvim* as a royal throne affects our understanding of the essence of the Holy of Holies and of the Temple in general as God's royal palace. A royal palace built entirely as a palace, with an inner chamber in which was found the site of the royal throne, and an outer room – the *Heikhal* – in which were found the vessels operated by the king's servants, the priests. This aspect reveals itself in various dimensions of the Temple service.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### Expressions of God's kingdom in the Temple service and its laws

A number of *mitzvot* and services that took place in the Temple are connected in their very essence to the place's character as a place of kingship:

* **The *mitzva* of fearing the Temple and the *mitzva* of prostration,** with the spreading out of one's hands and feet, as an expression of absolute self-effacement before the source of all, express a person's sense that he is in the home of the king of the world.
* One of the reasons brought for the ***mitzva* of guarding the *Mikdash*** is honoring the king: "There is no comparing a palace lacking guards to a palace that has guards" (*Sifrei Zuta*, *piska* 18, s.v. *ve-nilvu alekha*; and Rambam, *Hilkhot Beit ha-Bechira* 8:1).
* The formula that was used in the Temple as a response to blessings was not "Amen," but rather: **"Blessed is the name of the glory of His kingship forever and ever."**
* The Halakha established that **"there is no sitting in the Temple courtyard other than for the kings of the house of David"** (*Yoma* 25a). It would appear that the reason for this is that the kings of the house of David represent God's kingship, as is stated with regard to Shelomo: "Then Shelomo sat on the throne of the Lord as king" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:23), and therefore they are the only ones who are permitted to sit at the site of his kingdom.
* **On Rosh Hashana the shofarand the trumpets were blasted together in the Temple** (*Yoma* 3:3). The blast of a shofar is the clearest sign of the coronation of a king (see I *Melakhim* 1:39; II *Melakhim* 9:13). But the Gemara explains (*Rosh ha-Shana* 27a) that the combination of sounding the shofar and the trumpets together is unique to the *Mikdash*, and based on the verse: "With trumpets and the sound of the shofar shout you **before the king, the Lord"** (*Tehilim*  98:6). What is more, on Rosh Hashana that fell out on Shabbat they would blow the shofar in the Temple, but not outside the Temple (*Rosh ha-Shana* 4:1). One of the explanations offered in the *Yerushalmi* (ad loc.) connects this to the fact that the Temple is the place where one can bring a sacrifice, a *korban*, one of whose meanings is closeness to God, based on self-effacement before His kingdom; since the entire *Midash* is the site of God's kingdom, God should be crowned there as king even on Shabbat, for then too there must be recognition of God's kingdom. In this way the sanctity of time joins the sanctity of place to crown God as king of the world.

There are clear parallels between the High Priest and the king: the golden *tzitz* resembles a crown; the High Priest and the king are both anointed with anointing oil; and there is a similarity regarding the laws concerning the honor due to the king and the honor due to the High Priest.[[4]](#footnote-4) The basis of the correspondence lies in the fact that just as a king of flesh and blood is charged with running his country – the realm of temporal life – so the High Priest is in charge of the life of the Temple – eternal life.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The city of Jerusalem is situated on the border of Yehuda and Binyamin, on the border between the tribe of the monarchy and the territory of the *Shekhina*. David brings the ark to Jerusalem immediately after he is crowned king of all of Israel, and the ark remains in the city even when David leaves it at the time of Avshalom's revolt.

### The House of God as the site of God's love for the people of Israel

The second aspect of the essence of the Holy of Holies is hinted at in the name of the place where King Yehoash was kept hidden – the bed-chamber. The expression "bed-chamber" used in reference to the Holy of Holies alludes to the fact that in contrast to viewing the ark as a seat, it can also be seen as a bed.

A bed-chamber hints at a relationship between the people of Israel and God not as subjects or servants to their king, but as a mate with her lover.

One of the most important sources dealing with this issue is the Gemara in *Yoma*:

Rav Katina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the *keruvim* were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman. (*Yoma* 54a)

According to this view of the *keruvim* as a male and a female, the *keruvim* represent the intimate love and affection between God and the people of Israel. Perhaps we can say based on the words of Rabbi Akiva that "*Shir ha-Shirim* is the Holy of Holies" (*Yadayim* 3:5, *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 1), that in a certain sense the Holy of Holies is like *Shir ha-Shirim.* It should be noted that, according to this understanding, the people of Israel themselves are represented in the innermost and most sanctified chamber, and that the Holy of Holies expresses not only the kingdom of God, but also His encounter with the people of Israel. One *keruv* represents God, while the other represents the people of Israel, and together with the ark that is beneath them, they symbolize the connection between God, the Torah, and the people of Israel.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* (1), on the other hand, interprets the term, "bed-chamber," as referring to the entire Temple, and that same image is used again in reference to the Temple in *Midrash Vayikra Rabba*:

Rabbi Berechya said: It is written: "For the bed is too short for a man to stretch himself" (*Yeshaya* 28:20) – a bed cannot contain a woman and her husband and her lover together. Rather: "And the covering too narrow (*tzara*)when he gathers himself up (*ke-hitkanes*)" (*Yeshaya* 28:20) – you have caused great trouble (*tzara*) to the one about whom it is written: "He gathers (*kones*) the waters of the sea together as a heap" (*Tehilim* 33:7). (*Vayikra Rabba* [Vilna], *Metzora* 17:7)

The Midrash likens idolatry to a woman bringing a strange man into her bed: The people of Israel, as it were, brought a strange god into the Holy of Holies, instead of stretching out there by herself with her husband – God.

Another common image used for the relationship between God and the people of Israel is that of a groom and his bride. The famous dictum of *Chazal* – "If they merit, the *Shekhina* is between them, if they do not merit, a fire consumes them" (*Sota* 17a) is without a doubt based on the *keruvim*. If Israel merits, God reveals Himself and communicates with the people of Israel from between the two *keruvim*; but when the *Shekhina* does not rest there, a fire emerges from between them.

Rabbi Yitzchak has an interesting comment in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (75a): "Since the destruction of the Temple, sexual pleasure has been taken [from those who practice it lawfully] and given to sinners." From the moment that the people of Israel and God cannot express their most intimate relationship and reveal their full love for each other, the love and intimate connection between a husband and his wife can also not find expression.

It turns out that, on the one hand, the *keruvim*, the Holy of Holies and the Temple are a site of kingdom, where the basic relationship between the people of Israel and God is a relationship of fear and dread. On the other hand, the *keruvim*, the Holy of Holies and the Temple are a site of the most intimate love between the people of Israel and God, a relationship of love and endearment.

In both of these dimensions, in their roots, in the place that expresses more than any other place God's appearance and presence in this world, there is great connection and intimacy between the people of Israel and God.

In those six years, Yehoash grew up in the Holy of Holies. The assumption is that in his years there he absorbed the special spirit of the place. From that he came to the distorted idea that he himself is a god, who must be served and bowed down to.

According to our approach, that same unmediated closeness to the *keruvim* in the Holy of Holies that expresses both a place of kingship and a place of love brought Yehoash in the six years that he grew up there to such intimacy that in the end, in the second half of his reign, following the death of Yehoyada, he saw himself as a god.

In the next *shiur* we will complete our study of the second half of King Yehoash's reign.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. For example, when Nathan the prophet bowed down before King David: "He bowed down before the king with his face to the ground" (I *Melakhim* 1:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A parallel Midrash is found in *Seder Olam Rabba* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is a broad topic which must be examined separately. We dealt with the issue in a previous *shiur* concerning the roles of the *Mikdash*, a site of kingship and a site of God's love for the people of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are many parallels between a king and a High Priest, both in themselves and concerning our attitude toward them, but this is not the forum in which to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In his amazing *piyyut*, "*Lekha Dodi*," Rabbi Shelomo Alkabetz refers to the Temple and Jerusalem as "the Temple of the king, the city of kingship." The combination of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem revolves around the idea of kingship. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Zohar*, *Acharei Mot* 73a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)