YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #297: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CVII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXXIII)**

In this *shiur* we wish to complete our study of the second half of King Yehoash's reign, after the death of Yehoyada the High Priest. As was already mentioned, this part of his reign is discussed in detail only in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, but not in the book of *Melakhim*.

### The Conspiracy against Zekharya

In addition to the prostration of the princes of Yehuda before King Yehoash and his turning himself into a god, as was explained at length in the previous *shiur*, and after the extensive renovations of and return to the Temple, it is stated:

And they forsook the house of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols; and wrath came upon Yehuda and Jerusalem for this their guiltiness. Yet He sent prophets to them, to bring them back to the Lord; and they admonished them, but they would not give ear. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:18-19)

A change in conduct occurs here that is the very opposite of the revolutionary change introduced by Yehoash during the lifetime of Yehoyada. It starts with the people forsaking the house of God and His regular service.[[1]](#footnote-1) Afterwards they return to the Asherim that we had seen in the days of Ma'akha, the mother of Asa, king of Yehuda, and to other idols.

Scripture does not spell out which of the two forms of idolatry they actually worshipped. This apparently is what brought the Malbim to explain against the background of Yehoash's turning himself into a god: "'Idols' – the image of Yehoash and of the Asherim that were planted for his sake" (Malbim, II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:18)

Scripture notes the wrath that was directed at Yehuda and Jerusalem because of their guilt:

For the army of the Arameans came with a small company of men; and the Lord delivered a very great host into their hand, because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers. So they executed judgment upon Yoash. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:24)

The response is direct and it apparently takes place according to these verses a year after the murder of Zekharya ("And it came to pass, when the year was come about"; II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:23). God sends them prophets[[2]](#footnote-2) to bring them to repent. That is to say, there is a direct prophetic reaction to the actions of the people of the kingdom of Yehuda, but the people do not hear the words of rebuke ("but they would not give ear" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:19). Scripture then notes the reproof given by Zekharya ben Yehoyada:

And the spirit of God clothed Zekharya the son of Yehoyada the priest; and he stood above the people, and said to them, Thus says God, Why transgress you the commandments of the Lord, that you cannot prosper? because you have forsaken the Lord, He has also forsaken you. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord. Thus Yoash the king remembered not the kindness which Yehoyada his father had done to him, but slew his son. And when he died, he said, The Lord look upon it, and require it. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:20-22)

A prophetic spirit rested upon Zekharya the son of Yehoyada the priest.[[3]](#footnote-3) Scripture emphasizes that he stood above the people. The event takes place in the courtyard of the house of God, which teaches us that the house of God had not been abandoned altogether, and it was still a place where the people would assemble together. He warns the people that just as they have abandoned God, so too God will abandon them. This principle of measure for measure often repeats itself in the words of the prophets.

This is what Shemaya the prophet prophesied to Rechavam and the princes of Yehuda when they gathered in Jerusalem because of Shishak: "And he said to them, Thus says the Lord, You have forsaken Me, therefore have I also left you in the hand of Shishak" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 12:5). And so too Azaryahu the son of Oded prophesied before all of Yehuda and Binyamin: "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).

### The Conspiracy against Yehoash

Let us return to the conspiracy against Zekharya the son of Yehoyada. This expression brings to mind the conspiracy about which Atalyahu accused Yehoyada the priest himself when he crowned Yehoash as king without her knowledge. It is as if Scripture alludes in this context to the depth of Yehoah's ingratitude. At that time Yehoyada the priest rescued Yehoash and crowned him as king against the wishes of Atalyahu; whereas now Yehoash stands behind the conspiracy against his son Zekharya.

Beyond the terrible desecration of God's name in the very killing of a prophet, the fact that this murder takes place in the courtyard of the house of God and in the same place where Yehoyada saved Yehoash and made him king only intensifies the ingratitude: "Thus Yoash the king remembered not the kindness which Yehoyada his father had done to him, but slew his son" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:22) – life and death in the courtyard of the house of God.

The story is completed with a description of Yehoash's death in the wake of the Aramaean army's going up against Yehuda and Jerusalem:

And when they were departed from him – for they left him in great diseases – his own servants conspired against him for the blood of the sons of Yehoyada the priest, and slew him on his bed, and he died… (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:25)

Note is then made of the names of those who conspired against Yehoash: Zavad the son of Shimeat the Amonitess and Yehozavad the son of Shimrit the Moavitess. Thus conspiracy is mentioned three times, closing the circle from the conspiracy at the time of Yehoash's being crowned as king, to the conspiracy regarding the killing of Zekharya, to the conspiracy concerning the killing of Yehoash himself.

In the *Mekhilta*, *Chazal* comment about the death of Yehoash at the hands of representatives of Amon and Moav: "Let those ingrates come and punish Yoash the ingrate" (*Mekhilta Beshalach*, *masekhta de-Amalek* 1).

Thus far we have addressed the plain meaning of the verses which highlights the terrible ingratitude displayed by Yehoash toward the son of the person who had rescued him from the hands of Atalyahu. Beyond the ingratitude toward Yehoyada the priest and his son, the very act of killing a prophet at the order of the king is exceedingly severe and it expresses Yehoash's perception of himself as an all-powerful ruler who controls everything taking place in the house of God as well as God's word to the people of Israel.

In the end, there is no doubt that the second half of the reign of Yehoash after the death of Yehoyada the priest was the total opposite of the first half in those two main dimensions that were renewed by Yehoyada the priest: the renewal of the properly-run kingdom of the house of David and the renewal of the service of God. Regarding the kingdom, the king acts like a god who controls all arms of the regime. Regarding the house of God, once again idols are worshipped in the kingdom, and in many senses the house of God is forsaken. The results of these actions are exceedingly severe. The king of Aram rises up against Yehuda and Jerusalem, while the king of Yehuda forsakes God, and the people are left to bear all the difficult results of God's forsaking the kingdom of Yehuda and Jerusalem, including the death of King Yehoash.

### Yehoash according to *Chazal*

*Chazal* add a significant dimension to the events that occurred during the days of Yehoash. One of the understandings regarding the background of the killing of Zekharya the son of Yehoyada the priest is brought in *Midrash Shir ha-Shirim*: "Yoash came to bring an image into the sanctuary. Zekharya stood up at the entrance to the sanctuary and said to him: You will not bring it in unless you kill me. He stood up and killed him" (ed. Greenhut 3:2). The Midrash describes King Yehoash's desire to bring an image into the sanctuary, not only to worship idols in general, but in order to introduce an alien cult into the Temple itself. Zekharya's opposition according to the *Midrash* is what brought to his killing. This Midrash clearly expresses our understanding of Yehoash's conduct as an all-powerful king who wants to bring an image into the sanctuary and act as the ruler even in the house of God itself.

One of the strongest expressions of the severity of the killing of a priest and a prophet in the house of God is the description found in *Petichta* 23 to *Midrash Eikha Rabba*, which states as follows:

"But it brings iniquity to remembrance, that they may be taken" (*Yechezkel* 21:28). This is the iniquity of Zekharya. This is what is written: "And the spirit of God clothed Zekharya the son of Yehoyada the priest; and he stood above the people" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:20). Was he above the people, that it should say "above the people"? Rather, he saw himself as above all the people, the son-in-law of the king, and High Priest, and prophet, and judge, and began to speak with arrogance. This is what is written: "And he said to them, Thus says God, Why transgress you the commandments of the Lord, that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, He has also forsaken you. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:20-21). They didn't conduct themselves with his blood as with the blood of the gazelle or the hart, as it is written: "He shall pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust" (*Vayikra* 17:13). But here: "For her blood is in the midst of her" (*Yechezkel* 24:7). And all this, why? "That it might cause fury to come up, that vengeance might be taken" (*Yechezkel* 24:8)…

"I have set her blood upon the bare rock, that it should not be covered" (*Yechezkel* 24:8). Israel committed seven transgressions on that day. They killed a priest and a prophet and a judge, and shed innocent blood, and desecrated the name of God, and defiled the Temple courtyard, and it was Shabbat and Yom Kippur.

And when Nevuzardan came, the blood began to bubble. He said to them: What is the nature of this blood? They said to him: It is the blood of bulls and goats and sheep that we would slaughter. He immediately sent, and they brought the blood of sacrifices, and it was not similar to it. He said to them: If you tell me, it will be well, Bu if not I will comb the flesh of these people with iron combs. They said to him: What can we tell you? He was a prophet who would rebuke us. We rose up against him and killed him, and it has been several years, but his blood has not rested. He said to them: I will appease him. They brought before him [members of] the Great Sanhedrin and the Lesser Sanhedrin and killed them until their blood reached the blood of Zekharya to fulfill what is stated: "They break all bounds, and blood touches blood" (*Hoshea* 4:2). But the blood was still bubbling. He brought young men and virgin girls and killed them, but it did not rest. He brought school children and killed them, but it did not rest. He brought eighty thousand young priests and killed them, until their blood reached the blood of Zekharya, but the blood was still bubbling. He said: Zekharya, Zekharya, all of the good among them I killed. Would it please you that I destroy them all? When he said this, it immediately rested. At that time, he thought to repent, saying: If so for killing one person, that man who killed all these people, all the more so! He fled, sent farewell gifts to his house, and converted. (*Midrash Eikha Rabba*, *petichta* 23)

Let us note several points in this Midrash.

In contrast to what is stated explicitly in the Torah that one must cover the blood after slaughtering a gazelle or a hart, when Zekharya was killed, his blood was left uncovered, as the prophet Yechezkel describes in his rebuke of Jerusalem:

For her blood is in the midst of her; she set it upon the bare rock; she poured it not upon the ground, to cover it with dust; that it might cause fury to come up, that vengeance might be taken, I have set her blood upon the bare rock, that it should not be covered. (*Yechezkel* 24:7-8)

The prophet explains that the blood was not covered, so that fury would come up and vengeance would be taken. In the wake of this, the enemy came to Jerusalem and because of this uncovered blood shed the blood of many victims until it rested. According to the Midrash, Zekharya was killed in the priestly courtyard, and on that day Israel committed seven transgressions: They killed a priest, a prophet and a judge, they shed innocent blood, they desecrated the name of God, they defiled the Temple courtyard, and this killing took place on a day that was Shabbat and Yom Kippur.

According to *Chazal's* calculations,[[4]](#footnote-4) over two hundred and fifty years passed from the time of Zekharya's killing until the destruction of the Temple, during which time Zekharya's blood bubbled, and would not rest. This continued until Nevuzardan, the commander of the army of Nevuchadnetzar king of Bavel, came to Jerusalem, entered the Temple, and saw the bubbling blood. At that point he was told that it was the blood of a prophet and priest who rebuked the people of Israel, but they did not accept his rebuke. Nothing helped to stop the blood from bubbling – not the blood of the Great Sanhedrin or of the Lesser Sanhedrin, not the blood of young men and virgin girls, not the blood of school children, and not the blood of young priests. Only when Nevuzaradan asked Zekharya whether he was prepared that all of Israel be killed did the blood rest.

It says in the book of *Eikha*: "See, O Lord, and consider, to whom You have done thus! Shall the women eat their fruit, the children that are dandled in the hands? Shall the priest and the prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord?" (*Eikha* 20:20). This verse is expounded as referring to the murder of Zekharya – priest and prophet – in the Temple itself. The Midrash describes the far-reaching effect of the killing of a priest and prophet in the Temple to the point that his blood continued to bubble up for two hundred and fifty years. This comes to express the abject cruelty of the deed and the direct connection between it and the eventual destruction of the house of God.

With this we conclude our study of the period of King Yehoash. In the next *shiur* we will discuss the reign of his son, Amatzya.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. As may be inferred from an earlier verse: "And they offered burnt-offerings in the house of the Lord continually all the days of Yehoyada" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 24:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Scripture does not identify these prophets. *Chazal* understand that the reference is to the prophets Elisha and Yona. And so explains the Gra in his strictures to *Seder Olam Rabba* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Rambam in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (II, 45) lists Zekharya the son of Yehoyada, and similarly Azaryahu the son of Oded in the days of Asa, and Yechziel the son of Zekharyahu, the son of Benaya, the son of Yeiel, the son of Matanya the Levite in the days of Yehoshafat as prophets of a secondary level. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Kohelet Rabba* 10:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)