YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #302: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXXVIII)**

In this *shiur* we will complete our study of the reign of Uziyahu. We will examine the meaning of the king's entry into the Sanctuary in order to burn incense and the great earthquake that followed in its wake. Let us first return to the end of his reign as described in the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim*.

Like with his father and his grandfather, with Uziyahu as well there is a split between two periods of his life. In the first period, Uziyahu establishes and strengthens his kingdom from all perspectives – settlement, military and governmental; in the second period, with his increased strength, he grows also in arrogance. His political and military power leads to haughtiness, to the point of comparing his kingdom to the kingdom of God. This brings him to enter the Sanctuary and burn incense there as a king who assumes control over the Divine service that had distinguished the priesthood.

So too with his father Amatzya, we find that he began his reign with a good period, but after his victory over the people of Seir he started a second period during which time he practiced idolatry.

So too regarding his grandfather Yehoash, we find a division into two periods: the first period, until the death of Yehoyada the High Priest, the period during which he restored and repaired the Temple; and a second period, following the death of Yehoyada, during which time Yehoash practiced idolatry, turned himself into a god, and killed Zekharyahu the son of Yehoyada the High Priest in the house of God.

With all three kings, we see that their power of office brought them to arrogance and haughtiness that derailed them from the righteous path, whether to idolatry at one level or another, or to taking control of the priesthood and the Temple. At the same time, with all the similarity between the three kings regarding the two periods of their respective reigns and regarding the factors that led them astray, it becomes clear that Uziyahu's entry into the Sanctuary in order to burn incense is an event of dramatic significance in its own right, and possibly for the period that followed as well. It is true that Uziyahu received his punishment and the people remained faithful to him after he became afflicted with leprosy and did not seek to crown his son Yotam as king during his lifetime. But his action left a significant mark that found explicit expression in the words of several prophets:

The book of Amos opens:

The words of Amos, who was among the herdmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uziya king of Yehuda, and in the days of Yerovam the son of Yoash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. (Amos 1:1)

And in the book of *Yechezkel* we read:

For in My jealousy and in the fire of My wrath have I spoken: Surely in that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel. (*Yechezkel* 38:19)

Even in the days of the return to Zion, the prophet Zekharya describes the future vision of the gathering of all the nations to Jerusalem for war:

And you shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach unto Azel; you shall flee, like as you fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uziya king of Yehuda; and the Lord my God shall come, and all the holy ones with You. (*Zekharya* 14:5)

In addition, the prophet Yeshayahu at the beginning of chapter 6 **describes** an exceedingly lofty vision that takes place in the year of King Uziya's death.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We would like to examine the significance of all these actions in order to understand what happened during the year of King Uziyahu's death.

**The Earthquake and its Significance**

The Midrash in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* says as follows:

"And the leprosy broke forth on his forehead" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 26:19).At that time the Sanctuary split this way and that way twelve mils by twelve mils, and the priests quickly exited, and he too quickly exited. (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 9)

In other words, *Chazal* explicitly connect two events that the text does not describe together. The one – Uziyahu's entry into the Sanctuary to burn incense on the incense altar and the outbreak of leprosy on his forehead – and the second – the great earthquake in the course of which the Temple split; this earthquake is mentioned in the books of *Amos*, *Zekharya* and *Yeshayahu* (6:1).

It should first be noted that there is a similarity between the act of Uziyahu and the action of Yerovam, who in his arrogance offered sacrifices on the altar to the calf in Bet-El:

And, behold, there came a man of God out of Yehuda by the word of the Lord to Bet-El; and Yerovam was standing by the altar to offer. And he cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said: O altar, altar, thus says the Lord: Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Yoshiyahu by name; and upon you shall he sacrifice the priests of the high places that offer upon you, and men's bones shall they burn upon you. And he gave a sign the same day saying: This is the sign which the Lord has spoken: Behold, the altar shall be rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out. And it came to pass, when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar in Bet-El, that Yerovam put forth his hand from the altar, saying: Lay hold on him. And his hand, which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to him. (I *Melakhim* 13:1-4)

Yerovam issued an order to seize the prophet and therefore his hand dried up. Uziyahu entered the Sanctuary not to be uplifted, but in order to give expression thereby to his power and greatness. The verse describes the appearance of leprosy as follows: "Then Uziyahu was wroth; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense; and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy broke forth in his forehead before the priests in the house of the Lord, beside the altar of incense" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 26:19). Scripture connects the appearance of Uziyahu's leprosy to his anger with the priests.

Afterwards, the king's removal from the Temple by the priests is itself an expression of the priests' decision regarding his leprosy and his removal from the house of God because of his impurity. In addition,[[2]](#footnote-2) there is a complete parallel between the prophecies of Amos to kingdom of Israel in the days of the wealth and greatness of Yerovam the son of Yoash – two years before the earthquake – and the prophecies of Yeshayahu in the days of the glory and wealth of Uziyahu until the year of his affliction with leprosy and death.

It is interesting to see Josephus Flavius' account of Uziyahu's reign in general and his entry into the Sanctuary to burn incense in particular:

When Yerovam the king had passed his life in great happiness, and had ruled forty years, he died, and was buried in Samaria, and his son Zekharya took the kingdom. After the same manner did Uziya, the son of Amatzya, begin to reign over the two tribes in Jerusalem, in the fourteenth year of the reign of Yerovam. He was born of Yekholya, his mother, who was a citizen of Jerusalem. He was a good man, and by nature righteous and magnanimous, and very laborious in taking care of the affairs of his kingdom. He made an expedition also against the Pelishtim, and overcame them in battle, and took the cities of Gat and Yavneh, and broke down their walls; after which expedition he assaulted those Arabs that adjoined to Egypt. He also built a city upon the Red Sea, and put a garrison into it. He, after this, overthrew the Ammonites, and appointed that they should pay tribute. He also overcame all the countries as far as the bounds of Egypt, and then began to take care of Jerusalem itself for the rest of his life; for he rebuilt and repaired all those parts of the wall which had either fallen down by length of time, or by the carelessness of the kings, his predecessors, as well as all that part which had been thrown down by the king of Israel, when he took his father Amatzya prisoner, and entered with him into the city. Moreover, he built a great many towers, of one hundred and fifty cubits high, and built walled towns in desert places, and put garrisons into them, and dug many channels for conveyance of water. He had also many beasts for labor, and an immense number of cattle; for his country was fit for pasturage. He was also given to husbandry, and took care to cultivate the ground, and planted it with all sorts of plants, and sowed it with all sorts of seeds. He had also about him an army composed of chosen men, in number three hundred and seventy thousand, who were governed by general officers and captains of thousands, who were men of valor, and of unconquerable strength, in number two thousand. He also divided his whole army into bands, and armed them, giving every one a sword, with brazen bucklers and breastplates, with bows and slings; and besides these, he made for them many engines of war for besieging of cities, such as cast stones and darts, with grapplers, and other instruments of that sort.

While Uziya was in this state, and making preparation [for the future], he was corrupted in his mind by pride, and became insolent, and this on account of that abundance which he had of things that will soon perish, and despised that power which is of eternal duration (which consisted in piety towards God, and in the observation of the laws); so he fell by occasion of the good success of his affairs, and was carried headlong into those sins of his father, which the splendor of that prosperity he enjoyed, and the glorious actions he had done, led him into, while he was not able to govern himself well about them. Accordingly, when a remarkable day was come, and a general festival was to be celebrated, he put on the holy garment, and went into the Temple to offer incense to God upon the golden altar, which he was prohibited to do by Azarya the High Priest, who had fourscore priests with him, and who told him that it was not lawful for him to offer sacrifice, and that none besides the posterity of Aharon were permitted so to do. And when they cried out that he must go out of the Temple, and not transgress against God, he was wroth at them, and threatened to kill them, unless they would hold their peace. In the mean time a great earthquake shook the ground and a rent was made in the Temple, and the bright rays of the sun shone through it, and fell upon the king's face, insomuch that the leprosy seized upon him immediately. And before the city, at a place called Ein Rogel, half the mountain broke off from the rest on the west, and rolled itself four furlongs, and stood still at the east mountain, till the roads, as well as the king's gardens, were spoiled by the obstruction. Now, as soon as the priests saw that the king's face was infected with the leprosy, they told him of the calamity he was under, and commanded that he should go out of the city as a polluted person. Hereupon he was so confounded at the sad distemper, and sensible that he was not at liberty to contradict, that he did as he was commanded, and underwent this miserable and terrible punishment for an intention beyond what befitted a man to have, and for that impiety against God which was implied therein. So he abode out of the city for some time, and lived a private life, while his son Yotam took the government; after which he died with grief and anxiety at what had happened to him, when he had lived sixty-eight years, and reigned of them fifty-two; and was buried by himself in his own gardens. (*Antiquities of the Jews*, IX, 3, 216-227)

Josephus adds several significant details that do not appear in the Biblical text. The entry into the Sanctuary to burn incense takes place on an important holiday. He threatens Azaryahu the High Priest and eighty priests with the death penalty if they object. He, too, draws a direct connection between Uziyahu's entry into the Sanctuary to burn incense and the great earthquake and the split in the Temple. His account faithfully reflects the spirit of the biblical text, the story being so significant that the exact memory of the events is preserved until the end of the Second Temple period.

In the end, Uziyahu's reign ends with a massive earthquake that, in addition to the direct damage that it causes, also heralds the arrival of the Assyrian king and hints at the imminent reality of the destruction of the Temple. This was all caused by the king's attempt to take control of the priesthood, thereby blurring the required separation between the kingdom and the priesthood.

In the next shiur we will deal with the reign of Yotam, the son of Uziyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. There might also be an allusion to the earthquake in *Yeshayahu* 9:18; and it is, of course, possible thast the events described in *Yeshayahu* 24 took place in the wake of the earthquake. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This was also suggested by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun and Rav Benny Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu*, pp. 87-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)