YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #303: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (LXXXIX)**

In this *shiur* we wish to deal with the reigns of the kings Yotam and Achaz.

**The Kingdom of Yotam**

The book of *Melakhim* offers a very brief account of Yotam's reign:

And he did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord; he did according to all that his father Uziyahu had done. Only the *bamot* were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and offered in the *bamot*. He built the upper gate of the house of the Lord. (II *Melakhim* 14:34-35)

In *Divrei ha-Yamim*, Scripture emphasizes that, in contrast to his father Uziyahu, he did not enter the Temple of the Lord, "and the people did yet corruptly" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 27:2).

The Radak (ad loc.) explains the matter as follows:

"Only he entered not into the Temple of the Lord" – That is to say, in this matter he did not do as his father Uziyahu who entered the Temple of the Lord to burn incense. Or this means: Only he entered not into the Temple of the Lord – since his father Uziyahu sinned because of this, he did not want to go in there to pray and offer his sacrifices, and so he would offer sacrifices on *bamot*. This is what is written afterwards: "And the people did yet corruptly," as it is explained in *Melakhim*: "The people still sacrificed and offered in the *bamot*." (Radak, II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 27:2)

In other words, the Radak connects the fact that Yotam did not enter God's Temple to the fact that he offered sacrifices at *bamot.* According to the Radak, Yotam did not enter the Temple at all, even to offer sacrifices, and therefore he brought his offerings at *bamot*, which ties him to the corruption of the people.

According to this understanding, we must examine the significance of the fact that he built the upper gate of the house of the Lord (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 27:3), if he refrained entirely from entering the Temple even to offer sacrifices.

Scripture describes Yotam's construction projects both in Jerusalem and in the Judean mountains. Over and beyond his battle against and victory over the Ammonites, it says: "So Yotam became mighty, because he ordered his ways before the Lord his God" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 27:6). Without a doubt, this verse come to praise Yotam. This strengthening might be connected to his fortification of the country and his war against Ammon, but it might also be connected to his drawing closer to God.

The Sages in tractate *Sukkah* praise Yotam as follows:

Chizkiyahu stated in the name of Rabbi Yirmeya who said in the name of Rabban Shimon bar Yochai: I am able to exempt the whole world from judgment from the day that I was born until now, and were Eliezer, my son, to be with me [we could exempt it] from the day of the creation of the world to the present time, and were Yotam the son of Uziyahu with us, [we could exempt it] from the creation of the world to its final end. (*Sukka* 45b)

Rashi explains:

He was more righteous and humble than the rest of the kings, and he merited honoring his father. About him it is stated: "A son honors his father" (*Malakhi* 1:6). For all the days that his father was a leper, and he judged the people of the land… he did not take for himself the royal crown during his lifetime. So too the judgments that he would issue, he would report them in the name of his father. (Rashi, *Kiddushin* 48b)

Scripture strongly emphasizes how Yotam honored his father Uziyahu when the latter was a leper. We will not deal here with a precise accounting of the years of his reign which undoubtedly began already in the days of his father Uziyahu, and with a reckoning of that account with the chronology derived from external sources. It is clear from the description in *Divrei ha-Yamim,* as lacking in details as it is, that we are dealing with a king who was unique in his righteousness and lack of faults.

The commentary to *Divrei ha-Yamim* that is attributed to Rashi, in the name of Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Moshe, lists all the kings of Yehuda and their sins, and compares them to Yotam who did not sin at all:

… David – only with Uriya the Chitti; Shelomo – his wives led his heart astray; and Rechavam abandoned God's Torah; Aviya followed in all the sins of his father; Asa removed silver and gold from the treasuries of the house of the Lord and put the prophet into prison; Yehoshafat joined himself to a wicked man; Yehoram killed his brother; Achazyahu, his mother Atalya was his counsellor to do evil; Yoash killed Zekharya the son of Yehoyada the priest; Amatzya bowed down to the gods of Seir; Uziyahu entered the Temple to burn incense; Achaz walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and also made pillars for the Ba'alim; Chizkiyahu was arrogant, and there was wrath against him through sickness, and about three things [the Sages] did not agree with him; Menashe did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord and spilled innocent blood; Tzidkiyahu did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not submit to Yirmeyahu the prophet. But no fault was found with Yotam. So I was told by Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Moshe.

It is interesting that before describing the death of Yotam, the book of *Melakhim* notes:

In those days the Lord began to send against Yehuda Retzin the king of Aram, and Pekach the son of Remalya. (II *Melakhim* 15:37)

At the end of the days of Yotam mention is made of the beginning of the war waged by Aram and the kingdom of Israel against the kingdom of Yehuda, which will find strong and practical expression in the days of Achaz.

It is important to emphasize that during this period,[[1]](#footnote-1) from the time of the death of Uziyahu until the beginning of the days of Achaz, there is no mention of any prophetic revelation, not in the book of *Melakhim*, not in the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim* and not in the book of *Yeshaya.* It would appear that following his prophecies of rebuke and calamity in the days of Uziyahu, the prophet went silent and God did not reveal Himself to him.

It is possible that Yotam's righteousness and his ordering of his ways before God pushed off the calamity to the next generation, he being a righteous man between two kings who sinned – Uziyahu, with his arrogance and his entering the Temple in order to burn incense, and Achaz, with his evil deeds that will be spelled out in the continuation.

From here we will move on to the days of Achaz, who was sandwiched between two righteous men, Yotam and Chizkiyahu.

**The Reign of Achaz**

Achaz's reign is described in the books of *Melakhim* and *Divrei ha-Yamim*, and also in the book of *Yeshaya*, chapters 7, 8, 9, and 14. We will try to use the various sources to reconstruct Achaz's kingdom, especially regarding the king's service of God, his attitude toward the prophet and toward God, and his actions in Jerusalem and in the kingdom of Yehuda in general. It is clearly necessary to divide our remarks between the various spheres of action, the political reality, the general spiritual reality and the service of God, on the assumption that a close connection exists between them.

Let us begin with a description of the political reality:

Then Retzin king of Aram and Pekach son of Remalyahu king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to war; and they besieged Achaz, but could not overcome him. At that time Retzin king of Aram recovered Elat to Aram, and drove the Jews from Elat; and the Edomites came to Elat, and dwelt there, unto this day. (II *Melakhim* 16:5-6)

On the one hand, a threat arises in the north with Pekach the king of Israel together with Retzin the king of Aram laying siege around Jerusalem. On the other hand, Elat is captured in the south by Aram. In order to understand the various threats against Achaz, let us examine the other sources and then consider the manner in which Achaz contended with Retzin and Pekach who were besieging Jerusalem:

The Pelishtim also had invaded the cities of the lowland, and of the south of Yehuda, and had taken Bet-Shemesh, and Ayalon, and Gederot, and Sokho with the towns thereof, and Timna with the towns thereof, Gimzo also and the towns thereof; and they dwelt there. For the Lord brought Yehuda low because of Achaz king of Israel; for he had cast away restraint in Yehuda, and acted treacherously against the Lord. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:18-19)

Scripture adds that beyond Israel and Aram to the north and the Edomites to the south, there is also a confrontation in the west with the Pelishtim who have invaded the lowland and the south into Yehuda. In addition Scripture draws a direct connection between these developments and the spiritual reality, "for he had cast away restraint in Yehuda." The reference is to wild and unrestrained behavior. So too there was treachery concerning the covenant between God and Israel.

The prophet Yeshayahu describes this reality as follows:

Therefore the Lord does set upon high the adversaries of Retzin against him, and spur his enemies; the Arameans on the east, and the Pelishtim on the west; and they devour Israel with open mouth. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still. Yet the people turn not to Him that smites them, neither do they seek the Lord of hosts. (*Yeshaya* 9:10-12)

First, the prophet describes the feeling that the enemies are devouring Israel from all sides, Aram from the east and the Pelishtim from the west. God strikes at Achaz from all directions through different enemies. The people do not return to God or seek Him out. The first point that we wish to emphasize is that the political reality with which King Achaz must deal is extremely difficult, the kingdom of Yehuda being surrounded by enemies who are trying to harm it from all directions.

It is clear that God is sending these enemies to fight against Achaz the king of Yehuda and to punish him for the sad spiritual reality in his realm. The king and the people do not repent, nor are they interested in seeking God and changing their behavior in response to hearing the words of the prophet.

The military reality is, on the one hand, the result of the harsh spiritual reality. But on the other hand, it brings the king to deny the words of the prophet and to refuse to heed them, to cut himself off from prophecy and walking in the ways of God, and to spiritual subjugation to the kingdom of Ashur, which included closing the Temple. For the first time in the kingdom of Yehuda, idols are officially brought into the Temple and it is closed. For the first time in the kingdom of Yehuda there is official worship of the Molekh.

In this *shiur*, after examining the days of Yotam, we presented the essence of the military reality in the days of Achaz, as it is described in the words of the prophets. In the next *shiur* we will discuss Achaz's relationship with the prophet, and the latter's unsuccessful attempt to lead him back to God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This was also noted by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun and Rav Benny Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu ke-Tzipporim Afot,* p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)