YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

**Lecture #305: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XCI)**

In the previous *shiur* we considered the difficult political and military situation in the days of Achaz, and we began to examine the position of the prophet Yeshaya regarding Achaz's submission to Ashur. In the end, the prophet heralded that Ashur would gain control over the entire region and over the kingdom of Yehuda in particular.

In this *shiur* we will continue to examine Yeshaya's position, and we will begin to investigate the spiritual reality that was the underlying cause of the political and military reality and the harsh consequences of the Assyrian rule on Achaz's spiritual outlook:

And the Lord said to me, Take for yourself a great tablet, and write upon it in common script: The spoil speeds, the prey hastes; and I will take to Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriya the priest, and Zekharyahu the son of Yeverekhyahu. And I went to the prophetess; and she conceived, and bore a son. Then said the Lord to me, Call his name Maher-shalal-chash-baz. For before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father, and My mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Shomeron shall be carried away before the king of Ashur. And the Lord spoke to me yet again, saying, Forasmuch as this people has refused the waters of Shiloach that go softly, and rejoices with Retzin and Remalyahu's son; now therefore, behold, the Lord brings up upon them the waters of the River, mighty and many, even the king of Ashur and all his glory; and he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks; and he shall sweep through Yehuda overflowing as he passes through and he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel. (*Yeshaya* 8:1-8)

The prophet is told that his third son will be named Maher-shalal-chash-baz. He is instructed to take a great tablet and in the presence of the witnesses Uriya the priest and Zekharyahu the son of Yeverekhyahu inscribe that name on the tablet. Uriya the priest was the High Priest in the days of Achaz (II *Melakhim* 16:10-11).

What that name means is that the kingdom of Damascus and the spoil of the Shomeron will quickly fall before the king of Ashur. In the continuation, the prophet Yeshayahu turns to the party that supports rebelling against Ashur and entreats its members to slow down the course of action that they have adopted like the waters of the Shiloach that flow softly.

This party is criticized because the people have placed their trust in Retzin and the son of Remalyahu, rather than go ahead softly like the waters of the Shiloach and have faith in their inner strengths. The waters of the Shiloach that flow softly might refer in practical terms to the ancient channel that drew water from the Gichon spring toward the Shiloach pool, and that apparently had openings that allowed it to be used to irrigate the cultivated plots on the eastern slope of the City of David in the direction of the Kidron Stream.

The prophet announces that the king of Ashur will eventually inundate the entire land to its entire breadth. He sees all the preparations for recruiting an army, but he declares that this is all in vain, because it is God's will that Ashur is on the way of taking control over the entire expanse. God encourages the prophet to remain firm in his position and in his outlook that opposes the two radical approaches: rebelling against Ashur, on the one hand, and surrendering to Ashur, on the other.

Thus far, we have seen the political and military background in the days of Achaz. In the end, as already mentioned, Achaz chooses to detach himself from the prophet and subjugate himself totally to Ashur.

We saw the prophet's position on this matter, he declaring that this submission will not save the kingdom of Yehuda, but rather it will allow the kingdom of Ashur to gain control over the two kingdoms, Yehuda and Israel. What brought Achaz to submit to Ashur?

On the one hand, Achaz was surrounded by enemies from the north, the east, the south and the west – the kingdom of Israel, Aram, Edom, and the Pelishtim. On the other hand, it is possible that Achaz well understood that his grandfather Uziyahu had received a prophecy concerning God's departure from the Temple (*Yeshaya* 6), and therefore the combination of these two things brought him to absolute despair from Divine intervention, and maybe even to the feeling that God had abandoned the land. In such a situation, from a pragmatic perspective, the practical solution was to rely on the strongest party in the region, namely, the kingdom of Ashur, and to submit totally to it in order to save his kingdom. As we saw in the words of the prophet, this idea did not help and in the end Ashur took control of the entire region, including the kingdoms of Israel and Yehuda.

We wish now to examine the spiritual situation that brought King Achaz to despair and to submission to Ashur, and also brought him to total submission on the spiritual plane as well. The spiritual reality in the kingdom of Yehuda that is brought as the background and cause of the wars with Aram and the kingdom of Israel is described as follows:

But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, yea, and made his son to pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel. And he sacrificed and offered in the high places, and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. 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. (II *Melakhim* 16:3-5)

And in the parallel passage in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

But he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made also molten images for the Baalim. Moreover he offered in the valley of Ben Hinom, and burnt his children in the fire, according to the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel. And he sacrificed and offered in the high places, and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Wherefore the Lord his God delivered him into the hand of the king of Aram; and they smote him, and carried away of his a great multitude of captives, and brought them to Damascus. And he was also delivered into the hand of the king of Israel, who smote him with a great slaughter. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:2-5)

Following in the path of the kings of Israel refers apparently to the practice of idolatry.

The prophet Mikha who prophesied during the days of Achaz says:

For the statutes of Omri are kept, and all the works of the house of Achav, and you walk in their counsels; that I may make you an astonishment, and the inhabitants thereof a hissing; and you shall bear the reproach of My people. (*Mikha* 6:16)

The reference is to wooden idols plates with precious metals, as are mentioned in *Yeshaya* (30:22): "And you shall defile your graven images overlaid with silver, and your molten images covered with gold; you shall put them far away as one unclean; you shall say to it, Get you hence."

Achaz renewed the worship of the Ba'al of Atalya which Yehoyada the Priest had uprooted in his day from the kingdom of Yehuda. In continuation of the same matter, the verse states: "And he sacrificed and offered in the high places, and on the hills, and under every leafy tree" (II *Melakhim* 16:4; II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:4). The common formulation regarding many of the kings of the kingdom of Yehuda is: "Only the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and offered in the high places" (II *Melakhim* 12:4; II *Melakhim* 14:4; II *Melakhim* 15:4; II *Melakhim* 15:35). With Achaz, this practice is for the first time attributed to the king himself: - "And he sacrificed and he offered." In addition, the verse formulates his worship in wording that is very close to the wording relating to the idolatry of the nations which Israel is commanded to destroy. Thus for example in *Devarim*:

You shall surely destroy all the places, wherein the nations that you are to dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every leafy tree. (*Devarim* 12:2)

This is also the formulation used by Hoshea:

They sacrifice upon the tops of the mountains, and offer upon the hills, under oaks and poplars and terebinths, because the shadow thereof is good. (*Hoshea* 4:13)

Regarding the worship of the Molekh, the formulation in *Melakhim* is: "And he made his son to pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel" (II *Melakhim* 16:3). Whereas in *Divrei ha-Yamim* it says: "Moreover he offered in the valley of Ben Hinom, and burnt his children in the fire, according to the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:3).

### Worship of the Molekh

We will begin in this *shiur* to explain the verses themselves and we will continue in the next *shiur* to explain the matter of the Molekh.

First, it should be emphasized that we find the service of the Molekh at the end of the kingdom of Yehuda during the reigns of three kings: Achaz, Menashe and Yehoyakim. Achaz was the first king to introduce the service of the Molekh in Jerusalem. It is possible, however, that this question depends on the source of this service itself.

The Ramban and the Ibn Ezra (*Vayikra* 18:21) disagree about the source of the worship of the Molekh. According to the Ibn Ezra, perhaps it is Molekh the detestation of the children of Amon which is mentioned among the *bamot* that Shelomo built on the mountain that is before Jerusalem, regarding which the verse emphasizes: "And so did he for all his foreign wives, who offered and sacrificed to their gods" (I *Melakhim* 11:7-8). According to this opinion, the first to introduce idol worship on the mountain before Jerusalem was King Shelomo. In any event, from Shelomo until Achaz there is no explicit mention in connection with any of the kings of Yehuda of any worship of Molekh the detestation of the children of Amon.

The Ramban in contrast proposes that "Adramelekh and Anamelekh the gods of Sefarvayim" are the Molekh, as is stated explicitly: "And the Sefarvites burnt their children in the fire to Adramelekh and Anamelech, the gods of Sefarvayim" (II *Melakhim* 17:31).

According to the Ramban's proposal, there is room to suggest that the worship of the Molekh appeared for the first time in Yehuda, and precisely during this period during the time of the Assyrian empire in the wake of the conquest of Sefarvayim by that empire. On the other hand, the term Molekh is not mentioned here.

*Divrei ha-Yamim* spells out the place where this is happening – in the valley of Ben Hinom, the south-western border of Jerusalem at the end of the First Temple period. The valley of Ben Hinom is a deep wadi in which it is without a doubt possible to light pyres at night in which to burn children. There are many places along the length of the wadi in which it would have been possible to watch this service.

The term "pass in fire" can be understood as passing the children between two pyres. This is the opinion of Rashi: "They lit two large pyres one opposite the other and made the child to pass on foot between the two pyres" (Rashi, *Vayikra* 18:21). So we find in *Yirmeyahu* (32:35):

And they built the high places of Baal, which are in the valley of Ben Hinom, to set apart their sons and their daughters to Molekh; which I commanded them not, neither came it into My mind, that they should do this abomination; to cause Yehuda to sin.

The second understanding is passing the children through the fire itself. So in *Divrei ha-Yamim:* "And he burnt his children." So, once again, by the prophet Yirmeyahu: "And they have built the high places of Tofet, which is in the valley of Ben Hinom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded not, neither came it into My mind" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:31). And similarly the Ramban explains that we are dealing with actual burning – they would burn the children in fire.[[1]](#footnote-1) King Achaz even tried to burn his own son Chizkiyahu. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* (63b) says: "The father of Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda wished to do likewise to him [i.e., burn him in fire], but that his mother anointed him [with the blood of the] salamander." Rashi ad loc. explains that anointing a person with the blood of a salamander makes him fire-proof.

We can try to imagine the national and spiritual significance of the fact that King Achaz took his son and tried to burn him for the Molekh; what was the king's personal example for the people in his attitude toward this rite, to his dynasty and to the general spiritual reality in Jerusalem.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to explain the worship of the Molekh and we will relate to actions that King Achaz took in connection with the Temple and the worship of God in the wake of his absolute submission to the king of Ashur.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. So writes Josephus Flavius in his *Antiquities* IX, 243: "He imitated the kings of Israel, and reared altars in Jerusalem, and offered sacrifices upon them to idols; to which also he offered his own son as a burnt-offering, according to the practices of the Canaanites."  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)