YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #307: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXVII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XCIII)**

In this *shiur* we will complete our study of the worship of Molekh.

### The spiritual meaning of the worship of Molekh

The Torah mentions the prohibition of worshipping Molekhin the middle of the passage dealing with forbidden sexual relations. It states as follows: "And you shall not give any of your seed to pass them to Molekh, neither shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord" (*Vayikra* 18:21).

### Why is the prohibition of the service of Molekh mentioned in the framework of forbidden sexual relations?

1. One answer to this question offered by *Midrash ha-Beiur* is that the Canaanites passed through the fire their sons and their daughters who were born to them through incestuous relationships, in order that they should live long lives.
2. The *Abravanel* in his commentary to *Vayikra* writes as follows:

"You shall not give any of your seed to pass them to Molekh" is mentioned here even though this is not a prohibition connected to forbidden sexual relations for two reasons. First, because the worship of Molekh was a phenomenon of the Land of Canaan like incest, about which it is mentioned that the Canaanites were deeply involved in it. Therefore, its prohibition is mentioned together with the forbidden sexual relations, they being unique and common in that land. Second, its worship was like fornication and the vain emission of semen, as with intercourse with an animal and sodomy. Therefore the Torah mentions with it the word "seed," "You shall not give of your seed to pass them to Molekh." For since they gave of their sons and their daughters to be burned in fire, it was as if they emitted their seed in vain, as they fathered them for no purpose and destroyed their seed with their own hands. Therefore this is mentioned here. (Abravanel, *Vayikra* 18:21).

According to the Abravanel, incest and Molekh were two sins particularly common among the Canaanites. What is more, burning children is similar to the willful destruction of semen, and therefore it is appropriate to be included in the Torah passage dealing with forbidden sexual relations.

1. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch as well relates to our question in his commentary to *Vayikra*:

The position which this prohibition is given among the list of sexual laws is certainly not less significant. The list of sins which immediately precedes it deals with sexual sins, in which children, human seed, can come into existence and, as we thought we could believe, the last of that list, in the word *lezara* indicated that high moral purpose of human sexual life. On that follows then the Molekh prohibition with the underlying thought: Just as your children are not to be the product of blind physical urge, just as they are to be begotten morally, so, in their life you are not to let them belong to a blind physical force casting their fate for them. Just as they have been acquired under the protection and guidance of God's Torah, so they are to belong, in all the purposes of their lives, an in all the good fortune of their lives, to this protection and direction of God, which aims at the moral development of the happiness of man. I am the Lord, says God, regarding your children. It is to Me, the God of compassion and benevolence, who consummates the future of mankind in moral fulfillment of life, to Me do your children belong, educate them, each one of them, to Me, leave each one of them to Me, train each one of them in My ways, and leave it to Me to lead each one of them in its own way, happily to the goal of life. "And you shall not give any of your seed to pass them to Molekh, neither shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord." (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, *Vayikra* 18:21)

It is clear that according to all of these explanations, we are not dealing with incestuous sexual relations in the classic sense of the term.

### The *Akeida* and the worship of Molekh

The Torah relates to the severity of the prohibition of offering children to Molekh and establishes that its violation is punishable by *karet* (excision). This sin is severe to the point that Yirmeyahu refers to it as one of the major reasons for the destruction of Jerusalem. In certain senses, this service involves aspects of idolatry, incestuous relations and murder – the three main reasons for the destruction of the city and the Temple:

Idolatry – The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 64a) brings a dispute as to whether the worship of Molekh is true idol worship or a kind of sorcery.

Incest–The prohibition is included among the laws of forbidden sexual relations, and it is possible to explain this, based on the Abravanel, that the burning of a child retroactively profanes the father's relations with the child's mother.

Murder – *Chazal* and the *Rishonim* disagree about whether the worshippers of Molekh actually burned their children in fire, or whether they merely passed them between two pyres. The Ramban in his commentary to the Torah brings strong proofs that the children were actually burned in fire.

What, then, is the difference between burning children to *Molekh* and God's command to Avraham at the time of the *Akeida* to offer his son Yitzchak as a burnt-offering? It seems that there are several important differences.

First of all, we must take into account the conclusion of the *Akeida* story, which is clear: God does not want human sacrifices, and the Torah does not permit such offerings in any way or for any purpose.

Second, in the *Akeida* story there was a Divine command, whereas those who worshipped Molekh performed the service on their own.

Third, there is a fundamental difference between the actions with respect to the underlying conception. The idolatrous offering is based on the understanding that the deity is cruel and in order to appease it one must pay the dearest price of all – one's children.

The Torah's idea of a sacrifice is altogether different, and it involves drawing close to God, whether to atone for some sin or to offer praise and thanksgiving. According to the Torah, a sacrifice elevates the world to its source, connecting the physical to the spiritual, and therefore its goal is entirely different than that of an idolatrous offering: love, rather than fear; cleaving, rather than dread; unmediated intimacy, rather than alienation.

In this context, *Chazal* offer an interesting exposition on *Yirmeyahu* 19:5:

It is written: "Which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind" (*Yirmeyahu* 19:5). "Which I commanded not" – this is the son of Mesha the king of Moav, as it is stated: "Then he took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall" (II *Melakhim* 3:27). "Nor spoke it" – this is Yiftach. "Neither came it into My mind" – this is Yitzchak the son of Avraham. (*Ta'anit* 4a)

Rashi explains (ad loc.):

Lest you say: Surely the Holy One, blessed is He, commanded Yiftach and Mesha and Avraham – I never commanded Mesha to burn his son in fire… "Neither came it into My mind" – this is Yitzchak the son of Avraham, that is to say, even though I commanded it, **it never entered My mind that he would slaughter his son, but it was only to test him…** (Rashi, *Ta'anit* 4a)

*Chazal* emphasize the fact that even from the outset God never intended for Avraham to slaughter Yitzchak (and therefore we must search for the reasons for the categorical formulation of the original command, as we did earlier).

### The essence of the service itself

1. The Abravanel writes as follows:

The idea of the service was directed to the sun that rules over fire. Since the sun is like a king (*melekh*) among the stars, and the largest of them, they called it Molekh because of its rule, and they also called it Baal, since it is the master. And since the sun rules through fire and it is its tool of action, those who worshipped it would pass their sons and daughters, who were born through its power, through fire, as if to say: It is all from you and from your hand have we given to you. (Abravanel, *Vayikra* 20:1)

1. The Rambam writes in his *Guide for the Perplexed*:

Now it is known that it is the nature of men in general to be most afraid and most wary of losing their property and their children. Therefore the worshippers of fire spread about the opinion in that time that the children of everyone who would not make his son or daughter to pass through the fire would die. And there is no doubt that because of this absurd belief everybody hastened to perform this action because of the strong pity and apprehension felt with regard to children and because of the trifling character of the action and its ease, for it simply consisted in making them pass through fire. (Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III, 37)

1. Rabbi Hirsch relates to the meaning of this worship in his commentary to the twofold mention of Molekh in *Vayikra*:

Of necessity we come to the conclusion that here we have to deal with not just merely a defection from God to idolatry, but with such a criminal aberration which brings idolatrous ideas into the very sphere of worshipping God, and thereby it profanes God and defiles His Temple…

If we ask for the meaning of the word Molekh, the form tells us that it does not convey the idea of a person as king, but is an abstract conception, like *kodesh*, holiness, *godel*, greatness, so it does not designate the king, the ruler, but reigning, ruling, governing. We think we find in it the conception of a highest power which governs the world, we think we find in it the heathen idea of irrevocable fate, which "rules" the world, on which even the gods have no power to change, to whose decisions they themselves cannot but submit. This would then offer an explanation to the otherwise striking fact of "part of one's seed, and not all of one's seed"…. So one gives over one part of one's children to this "ruling fate," by passing it between the flames and abandoning it to the blind haphazard "chance" of destruction or protection, so as to be able to keep the rest safe to oneself.

How much this Molekh illusion of the way the powers of chance or luck can insinuate itself even within the sphere of supposed consciousness of, and honoring of, God and His power, is evidenced by instances of such belief among ourselves in these days. But such belief either removes the one sole world-directing power from God freely governing the world in love and righteousness, or reduces Him Himself to the heathen conception of the passionate, jealous, blind power of the gods. But the one as much as the other is against the pure Jewish conception of God, and the pure Jewish conviction that it is not by destructive acts, but solely by living on a high moral level, and by acting in free-willed obedience to God, that we can ensure His favor towards us and our children. (Rabbi Hirsch, *Vayikra* 18:21)

If, as we worked out on ch. 18:21, paying tribute to Molekh is not renouncing God for idolatry, but the erroneous idea that there is a force of fate, inimical to man, which is to be feared and placated, a force which is side by side with God, or even within the conception of God, then we can understand the severe rigorousness of this pronouncement.

One who worships idols turns his back on God and His sanctuary, he goes to ruin, but the purity of God's sanctuary and the truth of the name of God, i.e., the conception of God which is to be held and acknowledged in the minds of men, remain unsoiled. But he who pays tribute to Molekh claims, with his belief in fatalism, to still remain on the basis of the Jewish Sanctuary and the Jewish conception of God, and that is why he defiles the Temple and profanes His holy name.

The Sanctuary of God expresses placing the whole of oneself with one's whole fate and all one's actions under God alone and under His Torah, and makes one's happiness and well-being exclusively and solely dependent on faithful carrying out of this Torah. But the Molekh illusion conceded the power of Molekh a place at the side of God and His law, and makes its influence to be feared as something that is beyond the power of God Himself and His laws to annul. (Rabbi Hirsch, *Vayikra* 20:3)

The Abravanel relates to the connection between Molekh and the sun; since the sun rules through fire, the people would pass their children though fire. The Rambam mentions the idolatrous idea, according to which if a person offers one of his children as a sacrifice to his deity, the latter will bless him with wealth and the rest of his children with good health.

Rabbi Hirsch understands Molekh as a supreme force that rules in the world. When a child would be passed between the pyres of fire, it would be abandoned there and left to fate as controlled by Molekh. The Temple expresses the fact that man is subordinate exclusively to God and His Torah, and that man's well-being depends exclusively on his observance of the Torah's commandments.

### Yirmeyahu's prophecy in the valley of Ben Hinom

To complete our study of the worship of Molekh, let us examine the prophecy in which God appears to Yirmeyahu in chapter 19:

Thus said the Lord: Go, and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the elders of the people, and of the elders of the priests; and go forth to the valley of Ben Hinom, which is by the entry of the gate Charsit, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell you; and say: Hear you the word of the Lord, O kings of Yehuda, and inhabitants of Jerusalem; thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, which whosoever hears, his ears shall tingle; because they have forsaken Me, and have estranged this place, and have offered in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, nor the kings of Yehuda; and have filled this place with the blood of innocents; and have built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons in the fire for burnt-offerings to Baal; which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind.

Therefore, behold, the days come, says the Lord, that this place shall no more be called Tofet, nor the valley of Ben Hinom, but the valley of slaughter; and I will make void the counsel of Yehuda and Jerusalem in this place; and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of them that seek their life; and their carcasses will I give to be food for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and I will make this city an astonishment, and a hissing; every one that passes thereby shall be astonished and hiss because of all the plagues thereof; and I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend, in the siege and in the straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their life, shall straiten them. Then shall you break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with you, and shall say to them: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again; and they shall bury in Tofet, for want of room to bury. Thus will I do to this place, says the Lord, and to the inhabitants thereof, even making this city as Tofet; and the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Yehuda, which are defiled, shall be as the place of Tofet, even all the houses upon whose roofs they have offered to all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink-offerings to other gods.

Then came Yirmeyahu from Tofet, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy; and he stood in the court of the Lord's house, and said to all the people: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring upon this city and upon all her towns all the evil that I have pronounced against it; because they have made their neck stiff, that they might not hear My words. Now Pashchur the son of Imer the priest, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Yirmeyahu prophesying these things. Then Pashchur smote Yirmeyahu the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper gate of Binyamin, which was in the house of the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 19:1-20:2)

This prophesy was apparently received during the days of King Yehoyakim. The prophet is commanded to buy a potter's bottle and go out to the valley of Ben Hinom, at the Charsit gate. He relates to the idol worship at that place. Mention is made of the *bamot* to Baal which were used for the burning of children. The place will be called the valley of slaughter. The prophet is commanded to break the bottle, and the meaning is that God will break the potter's vessels. When an earthenware bottle is broken it cannot be repaired. What this means is that it will no longer be possible to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem.

This is an exceedingly harsh prophecy of destruction and it is not by chance that it is delivered in the valley of Ben Hinom in direct connection to the burning of children in that place.

In the continuation, the prophet goes up from the valley of Ben Hinom to the courtyard of the house of God, and he repeats what he had said about the destruction of the city. Pashchur the son of Imer, upon hearing the words of the prophet, strikes the prophet for what he had said.

Symbolically, the move from the valley of Ben Hinom to the Temple from the perspective of the prophet is a shift from one extreme to the other. *Chazal* identified the Garden of Eden with Mount Moriya and Gehinom with the valley of Ben Hinom. There is here a transition from Gehinom which is located on the border of Jerusalem to the Garden of Eden in which stands the Temple which is located in the heart of the city. The prophet himself is torn all his life between these two extremes, between the word of God that burns within him, between the Temple and the Garden of Eden, and Gehinom in which people burn their children to Molekh.

The names of the wadis that surround Jerusalem are interesting: the Kidron stream, the valley of Ben Hinom (and according to some verses, Gehinom), and the valley of Refa'im. The heart of the city is the Temple/ the Garden of Eden, and the surrounding areas are connected to Gehinom. The name of the wadi is expounded in direct connection to the burning of the children that took place there. The Midrash states as follows:

Because the voice of the chld would shriek (*nohem*)under the fire. Another explanation: Because those standing around would shriek and say: May [the sacrifice] be pleasing to you, may it be sweet to you, may it well agree with you. Therefore it was called Ben Hinom. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Yirmeyahu* 277)

The Gemara in *Eiruvin* identifies the opening to Gehinom in the valley of Ben Hinom:

There are two palm-trees in the valley of Ben Hinom and between them smoke rises… and this is the gate of Gehinom. (*Eiruvin* 19a)

The wadi is also called the valley of Tofet, as is stated in *Yirmeyahu* 7:32; II *Melakhim* 23:10; and in *Yeshayahu* 30:33: Tofteh. The Radak explains the word "Tofet" as follows:

Tofet, in the sense of *tupim*, drums, for they would beat drums there so that [the child's] father not hear the voice of the child and have pity on him. (II *Melakhim* 23:10)

The wadi is also called the valley of slaughter in *Yirmeyahu* 7:31-32 and in *Yirmeyahu* 19:6.

### Burning and Burial

To complete the picture, I wish to discuss the difference between burning and burial. Rabbi Y. Tikochinsky, in his book *Gesher ha-Chayyim*, deals with this issue:

In order to get some inkling of the reason for the *mitzvah* of burying a corpse in the ground and of the comparison to the sprouting of wheat, we must consider the difference between decay and burning. The decay of plant or animal matter produces manure, whereas burning leaves only ash. There is a great difference between manure and ash.

Decay results in manure that does not destroy the elements of the plant or animal. They all remain fundamentally unchanged, only separated, and each one aspires to return to its place of origin. Therefore they restore life even to themselves. While decay is making manure in the soil, if wheat is placed in the ground, not only does each element return to life, but it restores life to itself more than it ever had before (and it is precisely decay which does this).

Burning in contrast to decay produces ash, destroying and fundamentally changing the elements. Most of them turn into vapors, and it is as if they rise to heaven and are no longer in this world. All of the elements, the oxygen, the water, the nitrogen, and the carbon, not a trace of them is left in the world, and of all the elements, only the ashy parts are left, and this is only a small percentage. The ashes comprise about twenty percent of the original plant, and they cannot regenerate the plant. All that they can do is slightly help cause other plants to grow. (*Gesher ha-Chayyim* II, ch. 17, p. 117)

According to Rabbi Tikochinsky, burial is like "planting," in that the elements of the body mix with the soil and give life to it and to themselves. The burning of a body prevents this possibility of continuity.

This connects with the description of the place's future, at which time the people of the city will fall before their enemies and their carcasses will be food for the birds in heaven and the beasts on earth (*Yirmeyahu* 19:7), thus fulfilling the harsh prophecy of rebuke mentioned in the Torah (*Devarim* 28:26 and elsewhere).

Therefore, when Yirmeyahu foretells that carcasses will lie in this valley and serve as food for birds and beasts, there is here an aspect of measure for measure. Just as you did not allow for your own continuity, when you killed your children and burned them in fire, so too you will not be buried, and you will have no continuity.

In the last two *shiurim*, we expanded on the matter of the worship of Molekh for two reasons:

First, because Achaz was the first king to introduce this worship in Jerusalem on the border of the city in the valley of Ben Hinom. Yechizkiyahu removes it, but this worship is restored in the days of Menashe (and it is once again removed in the days of Yoshiyahu, but it comes back in the days of Yehoyakim).

Second, according to Yirmeyahu's prophecy in chapter 19, in the days of King Yehoyakim, this sin – which includes aspects of the three most severe sins in the Torah – is a major reason for the destruction of the city, and there is no longer any possibility of repair. Now that we have described the severity of this offense, we can well understand why God gave Achaz and the kingdom of Yehuda into the hands of Retzin the king of Aram.

(Translated by David Strauss)