YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #308: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXVIII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XCIV)**

As was mentioned in the previous *shiur*, King Achaz rejects the words of the prophet and decides to totally submit himself to the king of Ashur. In this *shiur* we will examine the spiritual ramifications of Achaz's political-military submission to Ashur upon the worship of God and the Temple service.

In II Kings 16, it is stated:

And King Achaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglat-Pileser king of Ashur and saw the altar that was at Damascus; and King Achaz sent to Uriya the priest the fashion of the altar, and the pattern of it, according to all the workmanship thereof. And Uriya the priest built an altar; according to all that King Achaz had sent from Damascus, so did Uriya the priest make it against the coming of King Achaz from Damascus. And when the king was come from Damascus, the king saw the altar; and the king drew near unto the altar, and offered thereon. And he offered his burnt-offering and his meal-offering, and poured his drink-offering, and dashed the blood of his peace-offerings against the altar. And the copper altar, which was before the Lord, he brought from the forefront of the house, from between his altar and the house of the Lord, and put it on the north side of his altar. And King Achaz commanded Uriya the priest, saying: Upon the great altar offer the morning burnt-offering, and the evening meal-offering, and the king's burnt-offering, and his meal-offering, with the burnt-offering of all the people of the land, and their meal-offering, and their drink-offerings; and dash against it all the blood of the burnt-offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice; but the copper altar shall be for me to look to. Thus did Uriya the priest, according to all that King Achaz commanded. And King Achaz cut off the borders of the bases, and removed the laver from off them; and took down the sea from off the copper oxen that were under it, and put it upon a pavement of stone. (II *Melakhim* 16:1017)

And in II *Divrei ha-Yamim*, Scripture adds the following:

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. And Tilgat-Pilneser king of Ashur came unto him, and distressed him, but strengthened him not. For Achaz stripped the house of the Lord, and the house of the king and the princes, and gave thereof unto the king of Ashur; but it helped him not. And in the time of his distress did he act even more treacherously against the Lord, this same King Achaz. For he sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him; and he said: Because the gods of the kings of Aram helped them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel. And Achaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the Lord; and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem. And in every city of Yehuda he made high places to offer unto other gods, and provoked the Lord, the God of his fathers. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:19-25)

Following King Achaz's total submission to the king of Ashur, the siege of Aram and Israel on the kingdom of Yehuda and Jerusalem was removed. On the one hand, we have here a loss of independence and sovereignty, while on the other hand, Jerusalem remains intact, and the kingdom of Yehuda as a whole is spared political and economic ruin.

King Achaz decides of his own initiative to go to Damascus, and there he sees the Assyrian altar. Despite the fact that Assyrian authorities respected the religions of the nations whom they conquered and offered the peoples religious freedom, Achaz chooses absolute submission – military, political and even religious – to Ashur.

In one of the inscriptions of Tiglat Pileser, we find the name of "Ochazi the king of Yaud" in a list of kings who paid him tribute. It is reasonable to assume from here that Achaz's original name was Yehoachaz. It is possible that Scripture severed the name of God from the name of the king who cut out the name of God from Jerusalem and the Temple.[[1]](#footnote-1)

### Significant changes in the Temple

A. A new altar to the gods of Ashur in place of the copper altar. Achaz sends Uriya the priest the image and pattern of the altar in Damascus so that he build an identical altar in the house of God in Jerusalem by the time that he returns to the city. It is quite evident from the verses that with this step Achaz wished to find favor in the eyes of the king of Ashur. When he arrives in Jerusalem, the king himself offers sacrifices on the Assyrian altar built by Uriya the priest in the Temple courtyard. In this way he dedicates the altar and offers upon it his burnt-offering and his meal-offering and his drink-offering, and sprinkles the blood of the peace-offering upon it. Scripture describes the location of the new altar: adjacent to the original copper altar and north of it.

Achaz commands Uriya the priest that the regular service of the daily-offerings should be conducted at the new Assyrian altar, alongside of which stood the copper altar which would henceforth only be looked at. With this action, Achaz likens himself to Yerovam ben Nevat, who also ascended the altar to offer his sacrifice. The king's ascent of the altar in an impressive, official ceremony, during the course of which the new altar is dedicated for service, involves also a deviation from the king's authority and his usurping the role of the priest, as is noted in the verses in *Diverei ha-Yamim*.

It was common among the Gentile idol worshippers to show homage to the gods of the nations that they conquered. So it would seem was the case with the Pelishtim after they took the ark captive at the battle at Even ha-Ezer, and brought it to Ashdod to the house of Dagon and set it next to Dagon (I *Shemuel* 5:2). And so it was the case with king Amatzya, who following his victory over the Edomites, brought to Jerusalem the gods of the people of Se'ir and erected them for himself as gods (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 25:14).

Achaz here wishes to honor the gods of Ashur who saved him and whom Achaz, at his own initiative, chose to serve and worship. Achaz is the first king to erect an alternative to the existing altar, and to introduce into the Temple itself a new service to a foreign king, idol worship in the Temple courtyard.

B. Cutting off the borders of the bases, and removing the laver from them, and taking down the sea from off the copper oxen, and putting it upon the floor. A change is made in the Temple vessels, all of which are found in the Temple courtyard (continuing the change in the altar that was built to the gods of Ashur, which was also erected in the Temple courtyard), beginning with the cutting off of the borders of the bases, continuing with the removal of the laver from them, and concluding with the removal of the sea from off the oxen.

What is the significance of these actions? Rivka Raviv[[2]](#footnote-2) notes the meaning of the copper vessels. The copper vessels constitute a significant change from the structure of the *Mishkan* to the structure of the house of God in the days of Shelomo. As opposed to the single laver that served in the *Mishkan* for washing and for purification, Shelomo added a sea that rested on twelve oxen. Also, ten lavers were added that rested on bases. The verse in *Divrei ha-Yamim* offers a precise definition of their respective roles:

He made also ten lavers, and put five on the right hand, and five on the left, to wash in them; such things as belonged to the burnt-offering they washed in them; but the sea was for the priests to wash in. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 4:6)

The lavers were used to rinse the sacrifices, while the sea was used for washing the priests.

At the end of the books of *Melakhim* and *Yirmeyahu* Scripture, in the framework of a description of the destruction of the Temple and exiling of its vessels, expands at relative length about the part of the copper vessels which were taken along with the pillars, and the bases, and the sea, and the pots, and the shovels, and the snuffers, and the pans. Some of the copper vessels are connected to the account of the Chariot in the book of *Yechezkel.* Thus we find in *Shemot Rabba*:

"That they take for Me an offering" (*Shemot* 25:2). Rabbi Berakhya opened: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power… for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Yours" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:11). You find that everything that the Holy One, blessed is He, created above, He created below. Above, habitation and thick darkness, as it is stated: "And see from your holy and glorious habitation" (*Yeshayahu* 63:15); "And Moshe drew near unto the thick darkness [where God was]" (*Shemot* 20:17); and it is written: "Can He judge through the thick darkness" (*Iyov* 22:13). Below: "Then spoke Shelomo: The Lord has said that He would dwell in the thick darkness" (I *Melakhim* 8:12); and it is written: "I have surely built You a house of habitation" (I *Melakhim* 8:12-13). Above: "Above him stood the *seraphim*" (*Yeshayahu* 6:2); below: "Acacia wood, standing up" (*Shemot* 26:15)…. (*Shemot Rabba* 33:4)

Targum Yonatan as well alludes to the connection between the bases and the Chariot. He translates the verse: "was like the work of a chariot wheel" (I *Melakhim* 7:33), as: "like the work of the precious Chariot." Rashi, and in his wake, the Radak, and the Ralbag, and the Abravanel, all connect the pattern of the bases to the work of the Chariot in *Yechezkel*. The Radak writes as follows:

The holy Chariot seen in the vision of Yechezkel, as in *Targum Yonatan*: the precious Chariot. Shelomo saw in his wisdom what Yechezkel saw in his prophecy. (Radak, I *Melakhim* 7:33)

It was on the bases that they placed the copper lavers. According to the Ralbag, there are allusions to the Chariot in the account of the sea as well. The twelve oxen upon which the sea rested were divided into equal groups between the four cardinal directions, and they are somewhat connected to the Chariot in the book of *Yechezkel* which mentions a calf and an ox.

It is very possible that the creation of the copper vessels in the Temple following the pattern of the Chariot was aimed at extending the resting of the *Shekhina* to the Temple courtyard, and in that way allowing those who came to the Temple to see the face of God. There is here sort of a spreading of the resting of the *Shekhina* and the sanctity from the Temple itself to the area outside of it. This objective finds clearest expression in the Temple envisioned by Yechezkel. According to this understanding, separating the sea from the oxen and the bases from the lavers means restricting the resting of the *Shekhina* in the Temple, removing it from the entire outer section of the copper vessels in the courtyard.

Achaz, out of his desire to worship the gods of Ashur by building an altar to the gods of Damascus in the Temple courtyard, wishes to restrict to the extent possible any sign of the presence of the *Shekhina*. It is for this reason that he cuts off pieces from all of these vessels.

The verse in *Melakhim* continues: "And the covered place for the sabbath that they had built in the house, and the king's entry without, turned he unto the house of the Lord, because of the king of Ashur" (II *Melakhim* 16:18). "The covered place for the sabbath" was sort of an awning "made for shade so that one may sit under it in the Temple courtyard on Shabbat"; so understands Rashi. The turning of the king's entry without is explained by Rashi as follows: "He turned that secluded area because of the king of Ashur, so that he not covet those vessels, and he also turned the entry, lest he need to hide and quietly escape."

Thus far the account of the changes as they are described in the book of *Melakhim.* The report in *Divrei ha-Yamim* adds a number of important details: "For Achaz stripped the house of the Lord, and the house of the king and the princes, and gave thereof unto the king of Ashur; but it helped him not." The *Metzudat David* explains (ad loc.): "For he stripped – Even though Achaz stripped the treasures found in the house of God and gave a portion to the king of Ashur, even so it did not help him."

### Closing the house of God

It is possible that in the continuation, Scripture itself explains the matter: "And Achaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the Lord; and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 28:24). It is reasonable to assume that the vessels of the house of God were gathered in order to hand them over to the king of Ashur. R. Z. Yaavetz explained that Achaz gathered the vessels in order to store them away and hide them from the king of Ashur. The verse here adds that King Achaz shut the doors of the house of God and prevented the people from entering it.

The significance of this closure appears in the account of the beginning of Chizkiyahu's endeavors in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

For our fathers have acted treacherously, and done that which was evil in the sight of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs. Also they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense nor offered burnt-offerings in the holy place unto the God of Israel. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:6-7)

It is clear that with the closing of the doors of the porch, it became impossible to enter the building itself. Therefore, Scripture emphasizes that the daily service, which included lighting candles, burning incense, and offering the daily sacrifices, was cancelled.

### Idol worship throughout the kingdom of Yehuda

When King Yoshiyahu uproots the idol worship that had become established throughout the land, Scripture states:

And the altars that were on the roof of the upper chamber of Achaz, which the kings of Yehuda had made, and the altars which Menashe had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord, did the king break down, and beat them down from thence, and cast the dust of them into the brook Kidron. (II *Melakhim* 23:12)

In every city in Yehuda there are *bamot* to foreign gods and extensive idol worship.

As a summary of our topic, we will quote Josephus Flavius:

He seemed more desirous to honor any other gods than his own paternal and true God, whose anger was the cause of his defeat; nay, he proceeded to such a degree of despite and contempt [of God's worship], that he shut up the temple entirely, and forbade them to bring in the appointed sacrifices, and took away the gifts that had been given to it. (*Antiquity of the Jews* IX, 257)

In the next *shiur* we will complete our examination of the reign of Achaz.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This is suggested by Rav Yoel Bin Nun and Rav Binyamin Lau in their book, *Yeshayahu ke-Tziporim Afot*, p. 141, note 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In her article: "*Ma'aseh Merkava be-Chatzer Shelomo ha-Melekh*," *Shema'atin* 159-160, pp. 73-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)