YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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Lecture 312: THe History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXii) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (XCviii)

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After having examined in the two previous *shiurim* the beginning of Chizkiyahu's reign, his dragging the bones of his father Achaz on a rope bier, and especially his actions in the realm of the Divine service – the eradication of Achaz's idolatry, the re-opening and rededication of the house of God, and the celebration of Pesach together with the kingdom of Israel – and also his crushing of the bronze serpent and hiding away of the Book of Remedies, we emphasized that the general tendency after the days of Achaz, during which time the name of God was in great measure forgotten in the kingdom of Yehuda, was to fully restore the people's connection to God, while intensifying the miraculous and revealing God's presence in all his actions. In addition, Scripture emphasizes that: "He removed the high places" (II *Melakhim* 18:4).

### Removing the *bamot*

Over the course of many of this year's *shiurim* we saw that when Scripture relates to the kings of Yehuda as a whole, and even to the righteous among them, about whom it is stated that they did what was right in the eyes of God, it says: "But the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrifices and offered in the high places" (for example, with regard to Amatzya, II *Melakhim* 14:3). It may therefore be argued that in general from the time that the house of God was first built, sacrifices continued to be offered at *bamot.* These *bamot* are *bamot* dedicated to the service of the God of Israel. As we have demonstrated, it may be suggested that the sacrificial service that was performed at the *bamot* attests to the people's desire to continue serving God. The people were not prepared to give up their offering of sacrifices, because of their closeness to God and their impact on the people's livelihoods, but owing to the great distance that would have to be crossed in order to offer their sacrifices in the house of God in Jerusalem, and because of their frequent desire to offer sacrifices, they did not go to Jerusalem for this purpose, but rather they offered their sacrifices to God on altars built in their places of residence, despite the explicit prohibition against offering sacrifices outside the house of God in Jerusalem.

The truth is that all of the kings until Chizkiyahu, even the righteous among them, did not stop the sacrificial service that was conducted at *bamot*. They saw how widespread the phenomenon was in all sectors of the population and in all places, and as it would appear, they did not find the strength to oppose the people and remove the *bamot*.

Chizkiyahu is the first king who dared to remove the *bamot*, a policy which necessitated a wide-scale operation that required passing through all inhabited areas and the nearby mountains. It is clear that the practical significance of this step was that anyone who was henceforth interested in offering a sacrifice had to bring it to the house of God in Jerusalem, and nowhere else. The significance of removing all the *bamot* was the concentration of all worship to God in the house of God in Jerusalem. There is only one place that Chizkiyahu did not remove, namely, the *bamot* that Shelomo built for idolatry on the mountain to the right of Har ha-Mashchit. This place has been identified above Kefar ha-Shiloach, in a place which today is called Beit Avraham, and which is located south of the peak of the Mount of Olives.

The removal of these *bamot* was carried out by King Yoshiyahu (as is stated in II *Melakhim* 23:13), and an explanation is needed as to why Chizkiyahu failed to remove them, whereas Yoshiyahu did so. Is it possible that the place was not very active, and therefore Chizkiyahu ignored it, whereas Yoshiyahu wanted in any case to remove such a place?

In any event, there is a clear distinction between worshiping God at the *bamot*, on the one hand, and idolatry in all of its forms, on the other, in which the service is directed not to the God of Israel, but to some other god. It is interesting to see that among the other arguments and criticisms of Ravshake who was sent by Sancheriv the king of Ashur from Lachish to Jerusalem, he turns to the people and says: "But if you say unto me: We trust in the Lord our God; is not that He, whose high places and whose altars Chizkiyahu has taken away, and has said to Yehuda and to Jerusalem: You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem?" (II *Melakhim* 18:22). Over and beyond Ravshake's testimony to Chizkiyahu's removal of the *bamot*, he mocks the people and alludes to the fact that in accordance with his idolatrous outlook, increasing the number of places of worship enhances the dignity of a god and the faith in him. Now that Chizkiyahu has removed the *bamot* and the altars, and has left only the house of God in Jerusalem, in whom should the people place their trust?

The Radak (ad loc.) comments:

When Chizkiyahu removed and shattered the altars, he did this only for his honor and pleasure, so that all might come to Jerusalem. For the altars in all the places were dedicated to God and Chizkiyahu removed and shattered them. How can you think that God will help him and how can you trust Him? (Radak, II *Melakhim* 18:22)

Ravshake's words constitute an attempt to incite the people against Chizkiyahu, and to sow hatred between the people and their king. It is reasonable to assume that Ravshake was well aware of the criticism levelled by parts of the nation against Chizkiyahu for his removal of the *bamot*, and thus he tried to create and deepen the rift between the people and Chizkiyahu concerning this issue.

Yehuda Kil in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Melakhim* adduces support from here to the view of *Chazal* (*Sanhedrin* 60a) that Ravshake was an apostate Israelite, who "conceded that the Holy One, blessed is He, is God, but his desires were directed at idols" (Rashi, II *Melakhim* 18:22) and the rituals of their cults.

### The removal of the *bamot* and the archaeological finds

There are archaeological finds that can be dated to the period of Chizkiyahu and connected to his project of removing the *bamot*.[[1]](#footnote-1) No idols were found in Tel Sheva or in Tel Arad. On the other hand, altars dedicated to the service of God, which were forbidden during this period by Torah law, were found hidden away, and in two stages, the first stage in the days of Chizkiyahu and the second stage in the days of Yoshiyahu.

It is interesting to note that the altars were not destroyed but rather hidden away. It is very possible that regarding this matter a clear distinction was made between idolatry and a place dedicated to the worship of God. Regarding idolatry it is quite clear that it was eradicated and its places of worship were destroyed. As for the *bamot*, since the service was directed to God, and so, on the one hand, they did not want to destroy them, but on the other hand, they could not leave them, they chose to hide them away. This is similar to what happened to the altar at Mount Eival. That place appears to have been abandoned when they moved to Shilo, and the site was forsaken in a deliberate manner, covered and hidden away.

### Tel Sheva

In Tel Sheva an altar was found made of smooth dressed stones. The smooth corners are reminiscent of the horns of a bull. The altar was made in absolute contrast to what is stated in *Shemot*: "And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones; for if you lift up your tool upon it, you have profaned it" (*Shemot* 20:32). As for the corners, according to the Halakha, they must be square, and not pointed like the horns of a bull. The altar was found dismantled and integrated into the structure; whoever hid away the stones of the altar treated them with sanctity and care so that they should not break. The stones were placed in the walls of a storehouse and plastered over so that they not be found.

Regarding Yoshiyahu, it is stated in *Melakhim*:

And he brought all the priests out of the cities of Yehuda, and defiled the high places where the priests had made offerings, from Geva to Be'er Sheva; and he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Yehoshua the governor of the city, which were on a man's left hand as he entered the gate of the city. (II *Melakhim* 23:8)

It is explicitly stated here that Yoshiyahu broke the *bama* of the gate that was at the entrance of the city to the left. The text refers to the city of Be'er Sheva, but apparently Tel Sheva should not be identified with Be'er Sheva.

### Tel Arad

The citadel in Tel Arad, built in the days of Uziyahu, has a wall from the time of Yoshiyahu. Inside the citadel there is a *bama* temple built on an east-west axis. At the western end, there is a wall with two pillars and two incense altars, one large and one small, in front of each pillar. There is a courtyard with an altar at its northern end, five by five by three cubits, similar to the measurements of the altar described in the Torah. It was found whole and hidden away in the floor. It was preserved because it was hidden away. A wall from the days of Yoshiyahu passes over it. Huge slabs of stone were laid over the structure and the wall was built on top of them. The fact that it was hidden away indicates that it was a structure dedicated to the service of God.

At first it was thought that all the finds were from the days of Yoshiyahu. In recent years, a consensus has developed that the altar was hidden away in two stages. The altar was first hidden away in the days of Chizkiyahu and then hidden away a second time in the days of Yoshiyahu. Why was the temple built? The tel is located on the border with the Edomites. It is possible that we are dealing here with a border temple whose purpose was to protect the people and the soldiers on the southern border of the country from Edom.

Thus far a concise summary of the words of Rav Yoel Bin-Nun.

Regarding the altar found in Be'er Sheva, its estimated height is 1.57 meters, and its length and width is 1.60 meters. A large altar was found also in Tel Dan (the excavator of Tel Dan, Avraham Biran, estimated its height at 3 meters). The altar in Dan was used for idolatrous rites (the idol of Mikha in *Shofetim* 18 and the golden calf of Yerovam in I *Melakhim* 12:30). Yitzchak Meitlis[[2]](#footnote-2) believes that the altar in Be'er Sheva was used for idol worship, similar to the altar at Tel Dan. In contrast, the altar at Arad is fundamentally different from them. It is built of bricks that were not baked and stones that were not dressed, but covered with plaster. It is 2.40 meters long, 2.20 meters wide, and 1.5 meters high. Its measurements are close to the dimensions of whole-burnt-offering altar in the *Mishkan.* In Arad the altar was dedicated to the service of the God of Israel, whereas in Tel Sheva the altar was dedicated to idolatry. Also in Tel Sheva there were found figurines of Egyptian goddesses and of the Apis bull that was sacred in Egypt, which is not the case in Dan. One of the stones of the altar in Be'er Sheva is engraved with the figure of a snake, which connects with Chizkiyahu who crushed the bronze serpent in the framework of his eradication of idolatry, "for unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it" (II *Melakhim* 18:4). Meitlis argues that in Be'er Sheva the stones of the altar were found in different places, and therefore the process of cancelling the altar in Tel Sheva was fundamentally different from what happened in Tel Arad, where the temple was buried whole in its place.

It, therefore, seems that in Be'er Sheva the altar was nullified, and it is possible that some of its stones were shattered as befits a altar that was dedicated to idolatry, and as was the conventional practice at that time. Some of the stones that were not destroyed were integrated by way of secondary use across the site. The prophet Amos mentions this ritual: "They that swear by the sin of Shomeron, and say: As your God, O Dan, lives; and: 'As the way of Be'er Sheva lives'; even they shall fall, and never rise up again" (*Amos* 8:14). And similarly: "But seek not Bet-El, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Be'er Sheva; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bet-El shall come to nought" (*Amos* 8:5). The implication is that in the days of Amos the Be'er Sheva area was an idolatrous ritual site, paralleling Dan. This is an important point, over and beyond the question of identifying the Biblical Be'er Sheva, which according to some opinions is not in Tel Sheva, but in the area of modern day Be'er Sheva. It is possible that Tel Sheva should be identified with Sheva, one of the cities of Shimon (*Yehoshua* 19:2).

In any event, two possibilities have been raised here:

The first possibility raised by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun is that both in Arad and in Tel Sheva, we are dealing with Chizkiyahu's cancellation and removal of the *bamot* (and possibly another cancellation by Yoshiyahu).

The second possibility raised by Yitzchak Meitlis is that, according to the archaeological finds themselves, because of the differences between Tel Arad and Tel Sheva, both in the structure of the altar (in Be'er Sheva, the altar was made of stone, whereas in Arad it was made of bricks), and in the nature of the hiding (in Arad a clear case of hiding away, which is not the case in Tel Sheva), the argument is that in Tel Arad we are dealing with the removal and cancellation of an altar as part of Chizkiyahu's removal of the *bamot*, whereas in Be'er Sheva we are dealing with the eradication of idolatry.

It should also be recalled that the verse in II *Melakhim* 18:14 attributes o Chizkiyahu both the removal of the *bamot* and the eradication of idolatry: "He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Ashera; and he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moshe had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called Nehushtan." The verse includes here the removal of *bamot*, the breaking of pillars, the cutting down of the Ashera, and the breaking in pieces of the brazen serpent. Therefore, in actual practice, Chizkiyahu eradicates all the idolatry, and so too he removes the *bamot* dedicated to the service of God. Therefore this account accords with both of the possibilities presented above.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### Tel Lachish

During the year 5777, new excavations were conducted at Tel Lachish and a gate temple from the 8th century BCE was uncovered. The size of the gate indicates that Lachish was a central city, the second most important in the kingdom of Yehuda. The gate has been preserved up to a height of 4 meters, it is a gate with six cells, three on each side, 24.5 meters in size.

In the middle was the city's main street. The gate was used in the 8th century BCE. Jars imprinted with the seals of the king of Hebron were found; these are probably connected to the military and administrative preparations of the kingdom of Yehuda for the war against Sancheriv, king of Ashur. In the continuation of the structure there was a gate temple whose walls were plastered with white plaster. Stairs went up to a large room in which was found a bench upon which meal-offerings were placed. In a corner of the room an opening was uncovered that led to the Holy of Holies in which were found two four-cornered altars and tens of earthenware vessels – lamps, plates, and stands.

The corners of the altar were deliberately damaged. The excavator Saar Ganor attributes the damaged altars to the religious reforms attributed to King Chizkiyahu, in the framework of which the sacrificial service was concentrated in Jerusalem and the *bamot* outside that city were cancelled.

In order to intensify the cancellation of the service conducted in the gate temple, in addition to damaging the corners of the altar, a toilet was set up in the Holy of Holies, in order to defile the place once and for all. In a corner of the room stands a stone that is shaped like a chair with a hole in its center. Stones of this type are identified in archaeological research as toilets. Scripture testifies to the abolition of places of worship through the introduction of toilets in connection with Yehu's destruction of the cult of the Ba'al in Shomeron: "And they broke down the pillar of Ba'al, and broke down the house of Ba'al, and made it an outhouse, unto this day" (II *Melakhim* 10:27).

This is the first time that archaeological discoveries have been found to confirm this phenomenon. Laboratory tests conducted at the site where the toilet was set up indicate that it was never used. From this it may be concluded that the toilet was set up in a symbolic manner. After it was set up, the Holy of Holies was sealed up until the place was destroyed.

It turns out that based on the recent excavations we have fascinating testimony - both from the damage to the altars and from the setting up of a stone toilet - to the sealing up of the structure and the service conducted inside. The archaeological findings in Tel Lachish include impressive remnants of the Assyrian siege of the city as it is described in the book of *Melakhim.*

Chizkiyahu's removal of the *bamot* finds expression in three different sites in the kingdom of Yehuda: Tel Sheva, Arad and Lachish.

It is certainly exciting to connect the findings of the various sites to the biblical texts that attest to the removal of the *bamot* in the days of Chizkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. What we have stated here regarding Be'er Sheva and Arad is based on a *shiur* delivered by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yitzchak Meitlis, "*Chai Derekh Be'er Sheva* – *le-Mashma'ato shel ha-Mizbe'ach be-Tel Sheva*," *Al Atar* 15 (Adar 5769), pp. 21-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zev Herzog, in his article, "*Ha-im Yesh Eidut le-Vitul Mekhuvan shel ha-Pulchan be-Chafirot Arad ve-Tel Be'er Sheva*," *Eretz Israel: Mechkarim bi-Yedi'at ha-Aretz ve-Atikoteha*, 29 (5769), pp. 125-135, discusses the findings and maintains that they can be attributed to the religious reforms of Chizkiyahu, but there is no absolute archaelogical proof. He also argues that the primary findings accord with the days of Chizkiyahu, and not the days of Yoshiyahu. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)