YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture 326: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXXXVI) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CXII)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/lecture-325-history-divine-service-altars-cxxxv-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-cxi) we dealt with the Assyrian campaign against Jerusalem and with the location of the Assyrian camp and the channel of the upper pool. In this *shiur* we will deal with the words of Ravshakeh as they are brought in II *Melakhim* 18:17.

The Assyrian delegation calls out to the king, and three officials go out to them: Elyakim the son of Chilkiyahu who was over the house, Shevna the scribe and Yoach the son of Assaf the scribe.

We mentioned Shevna in previous *shiurim*, when he himself filled the position of "over the house." In a harsh prophecy (*Yeshayahu* 22:20), Yeshayahu severely rebukes Shevna for digging a magnificent tomb for himself, and he prophesies that he will be ousted from his position and replaced by Elyakim the son of Chilkiyahu his servant. And indeed, Chizkiyahu replaces Shevna with Elyakim, thereby fulfilling Yeshayahu's prophecy.

However, it is still not clear whether we are dealing here with Shevna who had been over the house, but was removed from his position and is now the scribe, or we are dealing here with an entirely different person. The scribe was a high official whose role it was to formulate the king's commands and to write the diplomatic letters to the neighboring kings.

Yoach the son of Asaf the secretary, according to Targum Yonatan, was in charge of recording the main events that occurred in the king's book of chronicles.

It would appear that Chizkiyahu sent senior officials in his government, those parallel in rank to the representatives in the Assyrian delegation. This was the accepted practice in international relations.

Ravshakeh, who was the delegation's spokesman owing to his proficiency in Hebrew, appears to have better understood the proper attitude of the Assyrian army to the Jews, despite the fact that the other members of the delegation were his seniors. He says as follows:

And Rav-shakeh said unto them: Say you now to Chizkiyahu: Thus says the great king, the king of Ashur: What confidence is this in which you trust? Say you that a mere word of the lips is counsel and strength for the war? Now on whom do you trust, that you have rebelled against me? Now, behold, you trust upon the staff of this broken reed, even upon Egypt; whereon if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it; so is Pharaoh king of Egypt unto all that trust on him. 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* 19-22)

It is reasonable to assume that Ravshakeh's speech was meant as psychological warfare aimed at breaking the spirit of the fighters and undermining the confidence of the people of Jerusalem, on the various military, political and religious fronts.

### "You shall henceforth return no more that way"

The central theme that Ravshakeh mocks is Chizkiyahu's exaggerated confidence vis-a-vis Assyria - the world's superpower - which was based primarily on the military security that was to be provided by the king of Egypt. Let us recall that in the military alliance that Chizkiyahu entered into against Ashur, Egypt was in great measure the main partner, the superpower upon which Chizkiyahu relied in order to advance the course of the alliance against Ashur.

It is very interesting that, ironically, the words of Ravshakeh here are very much in accord with Yeshayahu's critique of Chizkiyahu regarding his very entry into an alliance with Egypt:

That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at My mouth; to take refuge in the stronghold of Pharaoh, and to take shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the stronghold of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your confusion. For his princes are at Tzoan, and his ambassadors are come to Chanes. They shall all be ashamed of a people that cannot profit them, that are not a help nor profit, but a shame, and also a reproach… Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel: because you despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and stay thereon; therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking comes suddenly at an instant. (*Yeshayahu* 30:2-13)

And in the next chapter:

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many, and in horsemen, because they are exceeding mighty; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!… Now the Egyptians are men, and not God, and their horses flesh, and not spirit; so when the Lord shall stretch out His hand, both he that helps shall stumble, and he that is helped shall fall, and they all shall perish together. (*Yeshayahu* 31:1-3)

Later, the prophet promises that it is God who will actually protect and save Jerusalem. From the prophetic perspective, relying on Egypt is a substitute for relying on God.

One who enters into an alliance with another power in order to advance military objectives largely denies and greatly reduces his reliance on God.

When the prophet says in his words: "And rely on horses," the horse symbolizes military power. But with his words he hints to an explicit prohibition in the Torah: "Only he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord has said unto you: You shall henceforth return no more that way" (*Devarim* 17:16). It is clear that the Torah forbids the king and the monarchy to seek protection from Egypt, by way of horses and chariots. Already in the prophetic critique of King Shelomo for his multiplying horses, gold and silver, and wives, the prophet notes:

And Shelomo gathered together chariots and horsemen; and he had a thousand and four hundred chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen, that he bestowed in the chariot cities, and with the king at Jerusalem…And the horses which Shelomo had were brought out of Egypt; also out of Keveh, the king's merchants buying them of the men of Keveh at a price. And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for a hundred and fifty; and so for all the kings of the Chittites, and for the kings of Aram, did they bring them out by their means. (I *Melakhim* 10:26-29)

The identification of the horse as a symbol of military power in general and the explicit connection between the horses and their source in Egypt signifies that the multiplicity of horses did in fact reflect reliance on Egypt, the source of that strength.

The Torah states:

And the Lord shall bring you back into Egypt in ships, by the way whereof I said unto you: You shall see it no more again; and there you shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwoman, and no man shall buy you. (*Devarim* 28:68)

Returning to Egypt means renewed subjugation to Egypt. In a deep sense, the request for Egypt's protection and the reliance on their horses which was their military might was essentially a rejection of the Torah's most fundamental commandment: "I am the Lord your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2). Egypt is the house of bondage, and returning to it and placing trust in it constitutes renewed subjugation.

*Chazal* too address this issue. According to the *Mekhilta* (*Mekhilta Beshalach*, *massekhta* 1, 2), our forefathers went down to and returned from Egypt three times:[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The first time in the days of Chizkiyahu, seeking Egypt's protection, as it is explicitly stated in Yeshayahu's prophecy in chapters 30-31.

2. The second time following the destruction of the First Temple, when they went to settle in Egypt because of their fear of the Babylonians (*Yirmeyahu* 4:43).

3. The third time was the exile in Alexandria which lived under the protection of the Hellenistic and Roman rulers, from the time of Alexander the Great until the days of the Roman emperors Trajan and Hadrian.

*Chazal* saw this as a punishment for their willing subjugation to Egypt. The *Yerushalmi* (*Sanhedrin* 10:8) says as follows:

You may not return [to Egypt], but you may return for trade, business, and to conquer the land of Israel.

The Ramban, in his commentary to *Shemot*, in the wake of *Chazal*, explains that we are dealing here with a negative commandment for all generations:

"For whereas you have seen the Egyptians today, ye shall see them again no more forever" (*Shemot* 14:13). According to our Rabbis, this is a negative commandment for all generations. If so, Scripture means: Fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, by which He will deliver you from their hand today, and return not to their work. For the Egypt that you have seen today, the Holy One, blessed be He, commands you that you shall not see it again of your own free will ever again. This is a *mitzva* from the mouth of Moshe to Israel, which wasn't mentioned earlier. And similarly: "And he shall not cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you: You shall henceforth return no more that way" (*Devarim* 17:16), which is truly a commandment, and not a promise. (Ramban, *Shemot* 14:13)

### A mockery of Israel's trust in Egypt – A staff of Broken reed

Ravshakeh criticizes Chizkiyahu for relying on Egypt, which he likens to a staff of reed that easily breaks, and therefore should not be relied upon. Yechezkel as well used this metaphor of a staff of broken reed:

And all the inhabitants of Egypt shall know that I am the Lord, because they have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel. When they take hold of you with the hand, you break, and rend all their shoulders; and when they lean upon you, you break, and make all their loins to be at a stand. (*Yechezkel* 29:6-7)

With all the irony in the fact that the senior representative of the Assyrian king is criticizing Chizkiyahu's emissaries for the trust that he has placed in Egypt, his argument is realistic. It is of no use to rely on Egypt; in the end Egypt will not save you.

The position of the prophet *Yeshayahu* is also that Chizkiyahu should not put his trust in Egypt, but his argument is not a realistic one, but rather one of principle, that this alliance is essentially a rejection of the clear and binding connection to God, who brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and took them as His people. Relying once again on Egypt is actually a return to the bondage in Egypt prior to Israel's exodus from that country.

### A mockery of the removal of the altars and *Bamot*

Since there is no reason to rely on the alliance with Egypt, which will prove to be a staff of broken reed, logic dictates that Israel should rely on God. But Chizkiyahu removed all of the altars and *bamot* in the kingdom at which the people would worship God, and he instructed the people of Yehuda and Jerusalem that they must worship God only at the altar in the house of God in Jerusalem.

Here Ravshakeh turns to the entire people, and not just to King Chizkiyahu, with the aim of creating division and tension between the people and the king. As part of his psychological warfare, he relates to that which is mentioned in the book of *Melakhim*:

He removed the *bamot*, 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 Nechushtan. (II *Melakhim* 18:4)

Chizkiyahu did something that none of his predecessors did, not even the righteous among them who worshipped God (e.g., Asa; I *Melakhim* 15:13), that is to say, he removed the *bamot* and altars throughout his kingdom.

It should be remembered that already from the time of King Shelomo, from the very beginning of the First Temple period, the people worshipped at *bamot*, and from their perspective, this was their way of serving God. In light of the fact that even righteous kings did not remove the *bamot*, it is reasonable to assume that the people were very bitter about Chizkiyahu's removal of them. Ravshakeh was apparently aware of the people's mood, and therefore he taunts Chizkiyahu knowing quite well that with this point he relates to the people's frustration.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Rav Yoel Bin-Nun in his article, "*Derekh Eretz Pelishtim Mul Derekh ha-Midbar ve-Yam Suf*," *Megadim* 3, p. 21, relates to our issue and we follow here in his footsteps. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)