YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture 335: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(CXLV) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CXXI)**

As was mentioned at the end of the previous *shiur*, according to the account in the book of *Melakhim*, the removal of idolatry from the house of God, from all parts of Jerusalem and from the altar in Bet-El, followed the discovery of the book of the Law and the making of a new covenant. Let us cite the entire passage:

And the king commanded Chilkiya the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the Temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the Ashera, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them to Bet-El. And he put down the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Yehuda had ordained to offer in the high places in the cities of Yehuda, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that offered to Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the constellations, and to all the host of heaven. And he brought out the Ashera from the house of the Lord, without Jerusalem, to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the common people. And he broke down the houses of the sodomites, that were in the house of the Lord, where the women wove coverings for the Ashera. 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 Beer-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. Nevertheless the priests of the high places came not up to the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, but they did eat unleavened bread among their brethren. And he defiled Tofet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molekh. And he took away the horses that the kings of Yehuda had given to the sun, at the entrance of the house of the Lord, by the chamber of Netan-Melekh the officer, which was in the precincts; and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire. 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. And the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Shelomo the king of Israel had built for Ashtoret the detestation of the Tzidonians, and for Chemosh the detestation of Moav, and for Milkom the abomination of the children of Amon, did the king defile. And he broke in pieces the pillars, and cut down the Asherim, and filled their places with the bones of men. Moreover the altar that was at Bet-El, and the high place which Yerov'am the son of Nevat, who made Israel to sin, had made, even that altar and the high place he broke down; and he burned the high place and stamped it small to powder, and burned the Ashera. And as Yoshiyahu turned himself, he spied the sepulchers that were there in the mount; and he sent, and took the bones out of the sepulchers, and burned them upon the altar, and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord which the man of God proclaimed, who proclaimed these things. Then he said: What monument is that which I see? And the men of the city told him: It is the sepulcher of the man of God, who came from Yehuda, and proclaimed these things that you have done against the altar of Bet-El. And he said: Let him be; let no man move his bones. So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet that came out of Shomeron. And all the houses also of the high places that were in the cities of Shomeron, which the kings of Israel had made to provoke [the Lord], Yoshiyahu took away, and did to them according to all the acts that he had done in Bet-El. And he slew all the priests of the high places that were there, upon the altars, and burned men's bones upon them; and he returned to Jerusalem. (II *Melakhim* 23:4-20)

The first thing that had to be done was to remove from the Temple all the idolatry and impurity that remained there from the days of Menashe and Amon. According to this explicit description, we can understand the extent and the nature of the idol worship that took place in the house of God during the days of Menashe and Amon. Yoshiyahu finds the vessels that had been made for Baal and for the Ashera and for the entire host of heaven (their construction is described in II *Melakhim* 21:3).

Worship of Baal, as it had appeared in the kingdom of Israel in the days of Achav, appeared for the first time in the kingdom of Yehuda and in the house of God in the days of King Menashe. Worship of the host of heaven was unique to Ashur and Bavel, the prohibition of which is mentioned explicitly in *Devarim*:

And lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, even all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them, and serve them, which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. (*Devarim* 4:19)

Menashe was also the first king to serve the entire host of heaven.

The *kedeshim* were men who dedicated themselves to idols who were worshipped by way of homosexual acts. The *kedeshot* were women who engaged in their trade in close proximity to their ritual sites and dedicated the payment that they received to their idols. The *batei hakedeshim* were essentially brothels; Scripture notes that they were located in the house of God, that is, in the area of the courtyards of the house of God on Mount Moriya (what would later be called the Temple Mount). Apparently, in these houses, women would weave coverings for the Ashera. Thus it turns out that in the confines of the house of God there were brothels which hosted prostitution and also activities that directly served the worship of idols. Yoshiyahu removed all this from the house of God to the Kidron brook.

In addition to the purification of the house of God itself of all the idolatry that had become attached to it, the king brought all of the priests from the cities of Yehuda and defiled the *bamot* at which sacrifices had been offered, from Geva to Beer-Sheva. The meaning of this defiling from Geva, the northern border of the kingdom of Yehuda, to Beer-Sheva, the southern border of the kingdom, was turning these idolatrous ritual sites into sites of impurity. Thousands of such *bamot* had been constructed. It may be assumed that the defiling of all of these *bamot* was an enormous undertaking that required a wide and comprehensive mechanism to move systematically throughout the kingdom of Yehuda.

### "The High places [*BAMOT*] of the Gates"

In addition, it turns out that there were *bamot* in close proximity to the gates of the city of Jerusalem which were named after Yehoshua, the governor of the city, who was apparently in charge of running the city. The Radak notes that this *bama* may have been especially large, and therefore it is mentioned separately. Owing to their actions, the priests who had served at the *bamot* were forbidden to offer sacrifices at God's altar. That is to say, Yehoshiya prohibited those priests whom he had brought to Jerusalem to return to the Temple service and offer sacrifices on the altar. They were, however, permitted to eat of the meal-offerings that were baked as unleavened bread, but they were forbidden to take an active role in the service. Rashi, ad loc., cites the words of *Chazal* in the Mishna in *Menachot,* according to which he penalized them and made them "like those that had a blemish; they are entitled to share and eat [of the holy things], but they are not permitted to offer sacrifices" (*Menachot* 13:10).

### The defiling of Tofet

As part of the removal of the idol worship from Jerusalem, the king defiled the Tofet in the valley of the son of Hinom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molekh.

What is the meaning of the word "Tofet"?[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The Gemara in *Eruvin* 19a understands the word in the sense of *pitui,* enticement, for anyone who is enticed will fall there.

2. Rashi and the Radak connect the word to the noise that the children would make when they were burned in fire. According to this, the name Tofet is derived from *tof*, drum, and it alludes to the drums that the priests would beat in order to drown out the cries of the burning children.

3. There are those who connect the word to an apparatus that would hold the sacrifice over the fire. This seems to be its meaning in *Yeshayahu* (30:33): "For a hearth [*tofteh*]is ordered of old; yea, for the king it is prepared, deep and large; the pile thereof is fire and much wood."

4. Others explain that the word bears the meaning of spitting.

The word *tofet* is mentioned again by the prophet Yirmeyahu in a very severe prophecy of doom, apparently from the days of Yehoyakim. The prophet is commanded to go out to the valley of the son of Hinom with a potter's earthen bottle and break the bottle, while explaining:

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. (*Yirmeyahu* 19:11-13)

In addition, the prophet says:

Therefore, behold, the days come, says the Lord, that it shall no more be called Tofet, nor the valley of the son of Hinom, but the valley of slaughter; for they shall bury in Tofet, for lack of room. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:32)

In other words, though in actuality the place was called Tofet and the valley of the son of Hinom, and in the future it will be called the valley of slaughter, it is reasonable to assume that as a result of the fact that the service of the Molekh, which included the killing of children and burning them in fire, was conducted in the valley of the son of Hinom, in the eyes of these worshippers, the site was holy.

The prophet announces that people will be buried in the Tofet because there will be no other place to bury them. That is to say, so many people will die that there will be no alternative to burying them in the place where the idolatrous service was being conducted, in the Tofet, in the valley of the son of Hinom. The site of their worship will become a burial site, a place of impurity. According to Rashi, the words of the prophet should be understood as follows: Just as you killed the children when you offered them in the Tofet to the Molekh, so I will kill the inhabitants of Jerusalem to the point that the city will be filled with corpses, and the entire city will be filled with graves like the Tofet. In those very houses on the roofs of which they offered sacrifices to the host of heaven, and so too in the houses of the kings of Yehuda, they will bury the corpses, for want of anywhere else to bury them.

In chapter 7 the prophet Yirmeyahu delivers another prophecy, apparently also in the days of King Yehoyakim, that parallels his prophecy in chapter 19:

And they have built the high places of Tofet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded not, neither came it into My mind. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:31)

The correspondence between the *bamot* of Tofet here in chapter 7 and the *bamot* of Baal in chapter 19 allows us to understand that Tofet was the name of a god that was called by three names: Tofet, Baal and Molekh. And the place itself, the valley of the son of Hinom, was called Tofet after the god.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We have discussed here the word Tofet mentioned by Yirmeyahu in the days of King Yehoyakim in order to complete our explanation of the term Tofet which King Yoshiyahu defiled in the wake of the days of Menashe and Amon. It is reasonable to assume that the worship of Molekh in the Tofet which began in the days of King Achaz in the valley of the son of Hinom was eradicated by King Chizkiyahu. This is not stated explicitly. In II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:14 it says:

And they arose and took away the altars that were in Jerusalem, and all the altars for incense took they away, and cast them into the brook Kidron.

On the face of it, the verse is not referring to the worship of Molekh, for if so, it should have referred to Molekh explicitly. After Chizkiyahu, King Menashe renews the worship of the Molekh in the valley of the son of Hinom and King Yoshiyahu defiles it, as we have seen above, and as is stated explicitly in the verses. Later King Yehoyakim will renew this worship in the valley of the son of Hinom, and the prophet Yirmeyahu will prophesy about the destruction of Jerusalem with the breaking of an earthen potter's bottle in the valley of the son of Hinom.

### The meaning of "The high places [*bamot*] of the gates"

We wish to relate here to the concept "*bamot* of the gates".[[3]](#footnote-3)

Judges are called "elohim" because God is with them in judgment, as is stated in *Tehilim*:

God stands in the congregation of God; in the midst of the judges [*elohim*]He judges. (*Tehilim* 82:1)

In other words, God stands in the congregation of His believers in the midst of the judges and the judgment. Therefore the name *Elohim* was understood as alluding to the attribute of Justice which reveals itself even on earth among those judges who are so worthy.

In the passages dealing with a Hebrew slave and with bailees the word *elohim* is understood as referring to human judges:

1. "Then his master shall bring him to the judges [*ha-elohim*]" (*Shemot* 21:6).
2. "Then the master of the house shall come near to the judges [*ha-elohim*]" (*Shemot* 22:7).
3. "The cause of both parties shall come before the judges [*ha-elohim*]; he whom the judges [*elohim*] shall condemn shall pay double to his neighbor" (*Shemot* 22:8).
4. "You shall not revile Elohim, nor curse a ruler of your people" (*Shemot* 22:27), which is explained by *Chazal* and by Rashi in their wake as both a prohibition to curse God and a prohibition to curse a judge.

In light of all this, what is the meaning of the prohibition: "He that sacrifices to *ha-Elohim*, save to the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed" (*Shemot* 22:19)? Is this aimed at the offering of sacrifices to idols, or does it perhaps come to prevent offering sacrifices in a place of judgment even if they are being offered to the God of Israel? When one offers sacrifices at the gates of judgment, there looms the danger of slipping into idol worship or serving the Ashera or setting up a pillar, and therefore Scripture emphasizes: "save to the Lord only." This point is expanded upon and sharpened in the book of *Devarim*:

Judges and officers shall you make you in all your gates, which the Lord your God gives you, tribe by tribe; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment… You shall not plant yourself an Ashera of any kind of tree beside the altar of the Lord your God, which you shall make yourself. Neither shall you set yourself up a pillar, which the Lord your God hates. (*Devarim* 16:18-22)

Scripture forbids an Ashera of any kind of tree and even a pillar to God at the gates of the city and of judgment. We are dealing with legitimate altars alongside the judges at the gates, but it is forbidden to plant there an Ashera, to set up a pillar or to offer a blemished sacrifice on the altar of God erected at the gates of judgment.

Offering sacrifices to God at the gates of judgment was possible before the Temple was established as God's permanent sanctuary, during the time that *bamot* were permitted.

### The Archaeological findings - Khirbet Keiyafa

In the northern part of the Ella Valley, a site was excavated in Khirbet Keiyafa. It might be the biblical city of Sha'arayim. Two identical impressive gates were uncovered, together with pillar stones to the left of the entranceway to the city gate. One of the pillars was stored away. An ostracon with proto-Canaanite writing, the contents of which is connected to judgment, was found close to the stored-away pillar.

A pillar is sacred to those who set it up. Its removal from its place and deliberate concealment in a secondary wall requires examination. Is it possible that already in the tenth century B.C.E. a halakhic debate was conducted in Yehuda as to the permissibility of setting up a pillar at the site of judgment at the city gates? There is no biblical testimony during the First Temple period regarding a royal initiative against *bamot* prior to the days of Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu.

Other pillars were found at the site in their original location.

It is interesting that according to the verse King Yoshiyahu 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." In fact the pillar at Khirbet Keiyafa is also found to the left of the city gate, but it is dated to about 350 years before Yoshiyahu. Findings in other places confirm the meaning of the findings at Khirbet Keiyafa.

### Tel Sheva

In Tel Sheva a similar gate was discovered with a small ritual site. The cult room was found empty. Dressed altar stones were found hidden away in a nearby storehouse that was built in the days of Chizkiyahu. They were built with dressed stones in contradiction to the Torah's command: "You shall not build it of hewn stones" (*Shemot* 20:22). Attractive horns were fashioned for the altar, similar to the horns of an ox. The horns were preserved thanks to the careful manner in which they were stored away.

### Tel Lakhish

In Tel Lakhish a *bama* was found at the gate with an internal sanctuary containing two horned altars, the horns of which were deliberately damaged. This testifies to the destruction of the *bamot* of the gates in the days of Chizkiyahu, before Sancheriv's campaign, in contrast to the dismantling and storing away of the altar at Tel Sheva.

This difference might point to debates in the kingdom of Yehuda regarding *bamot* of the gates, between orders of destruction which arrived apparently from Jerusalem, and the popular desire to store away those altars that were built for the sake of God, albeit in violation of a prohibition, and not to relate to them as idolatrous shrines.

A stone was found that served as a latrine in the sanctuary of the *bama* of the gate. This attests to deliberate defiling of the place, that the people at Tel Sheva of that time were unable to accept.

### Tel Arad

In Tel Arad an altar was found that was not built of hewn stones. It was built of red clay bricks, and its dimensions are almost identical to the dimensions of the burnt-offering altar in the *Mishkan*: "Five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be four-square; and the height thereof shall be three cubits" (*Shemot* 27:1).

There is a step at the bottom of the altar along its front, paralleling the foundation of the altar described in the book of *Vayikra.*

The builders of the altar were careful not to hew the stones of the altar in accordance with the command in *Shemot* 20:22. Apparently they thought that it was permissible to offer sacrifices in a Temple that is far away from Jerusalem.

The entire altar is hidden away in the last floor in that place. In that temple, there is also a sanctuary with two small altars made of hewn stones and two pillars. The entire sanctuary is hidden away under a wall that was built in the days of Yoshiyahu.

The finds in Khirbet Keiyafa from the days of David in the tenth century B.C.E., in Tel Sheva and in Tel Lakhish from the days of Chizkiyahu at the end of the eighth century B.C.E, and from Tel Arad from the days of Yoshiyahu, prove that *bamot* of the gates were a general phenomenon in Yehuda throughout the period of the monarchy, apparently accompanied by a heated debate concerning the limits of what was permitted and what was forbidden in the worship of God according to the laws of the Torah.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to deal with the reign of Yoshiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The various understandings of the word "*Tofet*" are taken form the commentary of Meir Medan, Aharon Mirsky and Yehuda Kil in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to II *Melakhim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This was suggested by Menachem Bula in his commentary to chapter 7 in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to the book of *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. What follows is based on Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, *Mikraot Mishphatim*, pp. 382-389. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)