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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture 336: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(CXLVI) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CXXII)**

Biblical criticism has addressed several fundamental issues in the context of its examination of the events that occurred during the time of Yoshiyahu. We wish to discuss here some of the arguments raised by Julius Wellhausen that relate in detail to II *Melakhim* 22-23 and to the relationship between those chapters and the book of *Devarim.*

These issues were afterwards dealt with by Martin Noth, and later by Menachem Soloveitchik and Zalman Rubashov in their book, *Toledot Bikoret ha-Mikra*. In this *shiur* we will bring Prof. Yehoshua Grintz's response to the claims made by the aforementioned scholars:[[1]](#footnote-1)

'We learn from Yoshiyahu's actions that the book of the covenant commanded to remove the *bamot* and the altars that were common in Yehuda and Jerusalem, to concentrate the service at "the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem" (II *Melakhim* 23:9), and to keep the Passover to God. These are the three fundamental practices that were introduced in the days of Yoshiyahu "that he might confirm the words of the law which were written in the book that Chilkiya the priest found in the house of the Lord" (II *Melakhim* 23:24). In which parts of the Torah do you find all these things? The ancient book of the covenant explicitly states that "in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you" (*Shemot* 20:21), and the stories related in the sources repeatedly attest to the fact that the people were accustomed to offer their sacrifices even outside Jerusalem. "And he built altars… and he erected pillars," and this was not reckoned to them as a sin. In contrast, when Moses came to read before the people "the statutes and the ordinances, which you shall observe to do" (*Devarim* 12:1), he emphasizes: 'But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put His name there, even to His habitation shall you seek, and there you shall come" (*Devarim* 12:5, 11, 14). And it is explicitly stated: 'And you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their altars, and burn their Asherim with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place" (*Devarim* 12:3). Yoshiyahu observed these commandments word for word (II *Melakhim* 23:4-15). Here we also find at great length and in great detail the law "to keep the Passover to God," something that is not found either in *Bemidbar* (*Bemidbar* 28:15-25) or in *Shemot* (*Shemot* 12:14-20). In this book we also find a terrifying rebuke, in which it is stated that God made a "covenant with us." This covenant is referred to also in *Yirmeyahu* 34:13-14, and in II *Melakhim* 14. From all this De Vette concluded that the book of *Devarim* is the book of the covenant referred to in II *Melakhim*, and that it became widely known in Israel in the eighteenth year of Yoshiyahu's reign.'

Thus far we have cited from *Toledot Bikoret ha-Mikra*. What this means is: Until the days of Yoshiyahu the people would offer sacrifices at *bamot* that were dedicated to the God of Israel, and nobody raised an objection. This continued until Yoshiyahu came and objected. Until the days of Yoshiyahu everyone would eat their Paschal offerings in their own houses, until Yoshiyahu came and celebrated Passover in Jerusalem. Until the days of Yoshiyahu the Temple in Jerusalem was a temple alongside other temples, until Yoshiyahu came and made it the only temple, concentrating all of the service there. But Yoshiyahu did all of these things under the influence of the book that was found, and since these three things are in fact novelties of the book of *Devarim* in relation to the first four books of the Torah, it turns out that the book that was found was the book of *Devarim*, and it was written at that time, and it was written for that purpose. Had it been known earlier, all the people would certainly have acted in accordance with it, and not wait until it was found by Chilkiya. Biblical criticism argues that also the other things listed in II *Melakhim* 22-23 as things that were eradicated by Yoshiyahu, can be understood based on the commandments that are mentioned in the book of *Devarim* – Ashera, Molekh, sodomites, pillars and diviners. But all agree that the removal of the *bamot*, the concentration of the service in Jerusalem and the celebration of Passover are the critical elements in identifying the book.

Prof. Grintz argues that this position has no basis. First of all, the removal of the *bamot* that were dedicated to the service of the God of Israel is not mentioned in II *Melakhim* 22-23. Yoshiyahu was involved in the eradication of idol worship as is spelled out in the verses:

Verse 4 deals with the vessels in the Sanctuary that were made for Baal and the Ashera and all the host of heaven. Verse 5 deals with idolatrous priests, that is to say, with castrated priests, and with those that offered to Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the constellations [*mazalot*, the only instance of this word in Scripture], and to all the host of heaven. Verse 7 speaks of the Ashera in the house of God and of the houses of the sodomites that were in the house of God, "where the women wove coverings for the Ashera." Verse 10 speaks of Tofet, where people would pass their children through fire to the Molekh. Verse 11 deals with the horses "that the kings of Yehuda had given to the sun" and with "the chariots of the sun" – like the horses and chariots of Helios that go out to wake Aurora. Verse 12 deals with the altars on the roof that were made by Achaz and with the altars of Menashe in the Temple courtyards. We need not discuss Menashe; this is well-known from II *Melakhim* 21 and from the mouth of Yirmeyahu. But even that which is stated concerning Achaz leaves little doubt about what is being referred to. The nature of the service on the roof is clarified by a contemporary of Yoshiyahu, the prophet Tzefanya: "And I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the idolatrous priests with the priests; and them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops" (*Tzefanya* 1:4-5); and by the words of Yirmeyahu in several places ("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* 19:13); "With the houses, upon whose roofs they have offered to Baal, and poured out drink-offerings to other gods, to provoke Me" (*Yirmeyahu* 32:29). Verses 13-14 speak of the *bamot* that Shelomo built on the outskirts of Jerusalem for Ashtoret, Chemosh and Milkom, and of pillars and Asherim, which require no explanation. In verse 15 we come to Bet-El, to the altar "which Yerov'am the son of Nevat, who made Israel to sin, had made." And in verse 19 we hear of "all of the houses of the *bamot* that were in the cities of Shomeron, which the kings of Israel had made to provoke," that is to say, to provoke the God of Israel… So too the author's words about the nature of these *bamot* and also (or perhaps even more so) the grave actions of Yoshiyahu: "And he slew all the priests of the *bamot* that were there, upon the altar" (v. 20) – leave no room for doubt, that Yoshiyahu related to them as idol worship. The *bama* at Bet-El, the *bama* of the calf, the *bama* of Shomeron "to provoke" – were all *bamot* dedicated to idolatry.

The word *katru*, "made offerings" (v. 8) implies disdain and is used in connection with idol worship (thus in *Yirmeyahu* 11:12-13; 18:15; and *Hoshea* 7:13, 11). In *Melakhim* it says of Menashe: "For he built again the *bamot* which Chizkiyahu his father had destroyed" (II *Melakhim* 21:3). The *bamot* that Yoshiyahu defiled were the *bamot* that Menashe rebuilt. Therefore II *Melakhim* 23:4-20 is dealing with the purification of the land from idol worship.

In the continuation Prof. Grintz relates to Biblical criticism's claim that the foundation of Yoshiyahu's actions is the book of *Devarim*:

The assumption or the conclusion that states that the book of *Devarim* is the book that with its novelties guided Yoshiyahu's actions, and from here that this book was written in the days of Yoshiyahu, dictates that we say that the book of *Devarim* is familiar with the idol worship that existed in the period of Yoshiyahu, which is its own period. If it comes to warn against it, it must remember it. But as it turns out its memory is weak and it does not remember it. It remembers neither the *bamot* that were dedicated to the God of Israel that Israel built since the days of Shemuel (or since the days of the Judges), nor the *bamot* that Israel built for idols since the days of Achav, and even in the days of the Judges (like that of Yoash, the father of Gidon). That is to say, it is not familiar with any *bamot* built by Israel. It is not familiar even with the idolatry mentioned in the story of Yoshiyahu's purification of the Temple. The prohibition against pillars is mentioned in the book of *Devarim*, both regarding pillars for idol worship (*Devarim* 7:5; 12:3), and regarding pillars for the worship of the God of Israel (*Devarim* 16:22; that which was viewed favorably in the days of the Patriarchs). But the latter type of pillar is not mentioned in our chapter, and the pillars that are mentioned – those dedicated to idol worship – were already forbidden in the book of *Shemot* (*Shemot* 23:24; 34:13) and in the book of *Vayikra* (*Vayikra* 26:1). And Chizkiyahu had already broken them earlier (II *Melakhim* 18:4). The same applies to the Ashera. The prohibition found in *Devarim* ("You shall not plant an Ashera of any kind of tree beside the altar of the Lord" [*Devarim* 16:21] is found already in the book of *Shemot* ("And you shall cut down their Asherim" [*Shemot* 34:13]. And there are two additional points: The verb "cut down" used in *Melakhim* is found in *Shemot*, but not in *Devarim*; and an Ashera for idol worship was already destroyed by Gidon. Sodomites are mentioned in the book of *Devarim* (*Devarim* 23:18), but they were already put away by Asa (I *Melakhim* 15:12), and they themselves do not appear in our chapter.

Prof. Grintz refers also to the matter of the concentration of the service in the Temple:

Yoshiyahu did not remove the *bamot* because they were *bamot*, but there was a king before Yoshiyahu who removed the *bamot* – Chizkiyahu. "He removed the *bamot*" (II *Melakhim* 18:4), reports the Biblical historian, and this is confirmed by the story regarding Ravshakeh, as is mentioned in the book of *Melakhim*: "Is not that He, whose *bamot* 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). And once again, from what is related about Menashe: "For he built again the *bamot* which Chizkiyahu his father had destroyed" (II *Melakhim* 21:3). This is the third source that speaks of this, and three such testimonies establish the matter. In *Melakhim* 18:4, together with the *bamot*, mention is made of pillars, the Ashera – this Ashera is a tree, not an image, as it is "cut down" – and the brazen serpent, but all of these things are not actual idol worship, but only something akin to idol worship, and after the long generations of Azarya and Yotam, there is no reason to assume that there existed *bamot* dedicated to idolatry…

In any event, what is important for our purposes is that the concentration of the service of God in the Temple in Jerusalem was already fulfilled in the days of Chizkiyahu (Chizkiyahu's reforms took place at the beginning of his reign) and the people went up to Jerusalem on the three pilgrimage festivals.

Finally, Prof. Grinz refers to the Paschal offering:

If the people went up to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage festivals, they also went up on Passover and there they offered their Paschal offerings. They did this not only in the days of Chizkiyahu, but as long as they went up to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage festivals. Chizkiyahu ruled only over Yehuda (and after Sancheriv's arrival, over a very constricted Yehuda). If the author of II *Divrei ha-Yamim* says that people came from the north, it limits their number when it further relates: "But they laughed them [the emissaries] to scorn" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 30:10). Shelomo ruled over a great expanse, but what is reported about Shelomo is the great celebration on Sukkot, and not on Passover (I *Melakhim* 8). During the period of Biblical history there were only two great celebrations of Passover, in which all of Israel participated: The first time in the days of Yehoshua (*Yehoshua* 8:10), and the second time in the days of Yoshiyahu, when once again a king in Jerusalem ruled over the entire western portion of the land of Israel (at least, and perhaps even more), and all "the children of Israel that were present" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 35:17) could come, and they came. So too the Passover celebration in the days of Yehoshua was in the camp, and not in people's houses.

In summary, we have presented here in brief, based on II *Melakhim*,chapters 23-24, which deal with the days of Yoshiyahu, the argument put forward by the school of Biblical criticisms, according to which, based on the book of the covenant that was found in the house of God, Yoshiyahu commanded that the *bamot* and altars that were dedicated to the service of the God of Israel be removed from Yehuda and from Jerusalem, that the service be concentrated at the altar of God in Jerusalem, and that a Passover to God be celebrated in Jerusalem.

Prof. Grintz has demonstrated from the verses themselves that there is no basis for any of these arguments. In the next *shiur* we will continue our examination of the reign of Yoshiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Yehoshua Grintz, *Iyyunim be-Sefer Melakhim*, vol. II, pp. 351-373. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)