YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

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**Lecture 345: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(CLV) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CXXXI)**

In our [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lecture-344-history-divine-service-altars-cxlxiv-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-cxxx), we explained the spiritual significance of the fact that when the prophet Yirmeyahu delivers his prophecy of doom relating to the destruction of Jerusalem, he directs the people of the kingdom of Yehuda to Shilo.

We also showed how in his prophecy in chapter 7, which was apparently delivered at the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim, the prophet explains the direct connection between the people of Yehuda's mending their ways and the possibility of fulfillment of the covenant.

In this *shiur* we wish to show how Yirmeyahu's outlook is anchored in the prophetic perspective throughout the generations.

### Shemuel

Let us begin with the prophecy of the prophet Shemuel following Shaul's sin relating to Amalek:

And Shemuel said: Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in hearkening to the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and terafim. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king. (I *Shemuel* 15:22-23)

The prophet sets one against the other – burnt-offerings and sacrifices, on the one hand, and hearkening to the voice of God, on the other. He explains that obeying God's commands is more important than offering God a sacrifice – "to obey is better than sacrifice." In order to understand the deeper meaning of this idea, let us consider the structure of the Temple.

The altar – the place where the sacrifices are offered – is located in the Temple courtyard. Several times in the Torah, when God reveals Himself to Moshe, it is stated that the voice of God was heard from between the two *keruvim* in the Holy of Holies. As we find, for example in *Parashat Naso*: "And when Moshe went into the tent of meeting that He might speak with him, then he heard the voice speaking to him from above the *kaporet* that was upon the ark of the testimony, from between the two *keruvim*; and He spoke to him" (*Bemidbar* 7:89). Listening to the voice of God takes place in the innermost chamber of the Temple, in the most sanctified area, in which is found, as it were, the royal throne of the King of kings.

These two elements, listening to the voice of God and offering sacrifices to Him, are two different but worthy expressions of the service of God. Listening to the voice of God is more internal and offering sacrifices is more external.

In addition, the sacrificial service is part of man's worship of God, from the bottom up, whereas listening to the voice of God relates to the revelation of God's will that comes down from above. In this respect as well, obeying the word of God enjoys superiority over offering Him sacrifices.

### Yeshayahu

The next prophecy that relates to the issue at hand is found at the beginning of the book of *Yeshayahu.*

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sedom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Amora. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me? says the Lord; I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required this at your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more vain oblations; it is an offering of abomination to Me; new moon and sabbath, the holding of convocations – I cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed seasons My soul hates; they are a burden to Me; I am weary to bear them. And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide Mine eyes from you; yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes, cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (*Yeshayahu* 1:10-17)

The prophet expresses his disgust with the deep contradiction between bloodshed, on the one hand, and the bringing of sacrifices to the Temple, on the other. In the reality that the people's hands are full of blood, the very coming to the Temple involves a trampling of God's court. Bringing incense and meal-offerings is an abomination. God hates Israel's months and appointed times, and he refuses to hear their prayer.

The obvious demand is for Israel to cleanse themselves, to remove the evil, to demand justice, and to judge the fatherless and the widow. It is reasonable to assume that this prophecy was delivered in the days of Chizkiyahu and that it parallels in time the prophecy of the prophet Mikha in chapter 3, which we will see below.

The prophet describes the corruption of the government in Jerusalem:

How is the faithful city become a harlot! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver is become dross, your wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves; everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards; they judge not the fatherless, neither does the cause of the widow come to them.

Therefore says the Lord, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will ease Me of Mine adversaries, and avenge Me of Mine enemies; And I will turn My hand upon you, and purge away your dross as with lye, and will take away all your alloy; And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning; afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness. But the destruction of the transgressors and the sinners shall be together, and they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed. For they shall be ashamed of the terebinths which you have desired, and you shall be confounded for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be as a terebinth whose leaf fades, and as a garden that has no water. And the strong shall be as tow, and his work as a spark; and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them. (*Yeshayahu* 1:21-31)

Jerusalem, which was known as a city of justice turned into a place of harlotry. The city is filled with murderers; the princes are rebellious, thieves, and lovers of bribes and pursuers of rewards. Orphans and widows are not treated appropriately. The prophet foresees that the repair of these sins will involve the return of justice and judgment to the city.

### Mikha

So too the prophet Mikha refers to our issue. The first prophecy that relates to it is his first prophecy of doom relating to both Jerusalem and the house of God. An explicit date is given for this prophecy. In *Yirmeyahu* 26:18 and on, Mikha's prophecy is cited, and it is from the time of Chizkiyahu. It says as follows:

Hear this, I pray you, you heads of the house of Yaakov, and rulers of the house of Israel, that abhor justice, and pervert all equity; **t**hat build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money; yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say: Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us? Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest. (*Mikha* 3:9-12)

The prophet relates here to the various branches of the regime and claims that they are all corrupt. The leaders of the people detest judgment, the heads take bribes, the priests teach in exchange for payment, and the prophets divine for money.

But in addition to all of these evils, they rely on God and put their trust in Him and do not believe that evil will come upon them.

Here, once again, on the one hand, all the branches of government pervert justice, leadership and teaching, and on the other hand, they are all confident that God is with them. The text does not indicate the source of this confidence. Is it the very existence of the house of God among them, or is it the fact that there are true prophets among them (this possibility is less reasonable)? But alongside the corruption stands the spiritual perception that there is no direct linkage between their corruption and their confidence that nothing will happen and that the kingdom will continue to exist in security.

The prophet says that the reality described above is the cause of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. During the reign of Chizkiyahu a prophet comes for the first time and announces the destruction of the Temple. He explains that the city and the Temple will be destroyed not for religious reasons, such as idolatry and the like, but for one central reason, namely, the perversion of governmental justice, the direct result of which will be the expected destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.

Mikha's second prophecy is in chapter 6:

Hear you now what the Lord says: Arise, contend you before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, O you mountains, the Lord's controversy, and you enduring rocks, the foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with His people, and He will plead with Israel. O My people, what have I done to you? And wherein have I wearied you? Testify against Me. For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moshe, Aharon, and Miryam. O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moav devised, and what Bil'am the son of Be'or answered him; from Shitim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord. Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (*Mikha* 6:1-8)

The prophet gives a brief historical overview in which he describes the exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moshe, Aharon, and Miryam. He relates to Bil'am's response to Balak's request, and he sets one against the other: offering sacrifices in great quantities – "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams" – and doing justice, loving mercy and humbly walking with God.

It is important to emphasize that the prophets do not oppose the offering of sacrifices per se; the question is whether sacrifices can serve as a substitute for justice or whether they must accompany justice. The prophet emphasizes that if they are a substitute, the doing of justice is far more preferable.

### Amos

So too the prophet Amos in chapter 5 contrasts places of worship (Bet-El, Gilgal, and Be'er Sheva) to the seeking of God, the doing of justice, the seeking of good, the hating of evil, and the execution of justice at the city gate. Later in the chapter, addressing those who yearn for the day of God, he says:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though you offer Me burnt-offerings and your meal-offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts. Take you away from Me the noise of your songs; and let Me not hear the melody of your psalteries. But let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. Did you bring to Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? (*Amos* 5:21-25)

The prophet emphasizes the relationship between justice and righteousness as a mighty stream and sacrifices and offerings that were not brought in the wilderness for forty years.

### Hoshea

The prophet Hoshea, a contemporary of Yeshayahu, Mikha and Amos, also prophesied during this period and addressed the issue under discussion:

Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, and He will heal us, He has smitten, and He will bind us up. After two days will He revive us, on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His presence. And let us know, eagerly strive to know the Lord, His going forth is sure as the morning; and He shall come to us as the rain, as the latter rain that waters the earth. O Ephrayim, what shall I do to you? O Yehuda, what shall I do to you? For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the dew that early passes away. Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of My mouth; and your judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings. But they like men have transgressed the covenant; there have they dealt treacherously against Me. Gilead is a city of them that work iniquity, it is covered with footprints of blood. And as troops of robbers wait for a man, so does the company of priests; they murder in the way toward Shekhem; yea, they commit enormity. In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; there harlotry is found in Ephrayim, Israel is defiled. Also, O Yehuda, there is a harvest appointed for you! When I would turn the captivity of My people. (*Hoshea* 6:1-11)

God offers Israel an opportunity to return to Him in complete repentance, but the people continue to betray God and to shed blood; they are consumed with lechery, and even the priests participate in such behavior. The people return to sin.

In this context, the prophet explicitly states: "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings." Rather than mercy and knowledge of God, there are sacrifices and offerings, but God desires mercy and not sacrifices.

### ZeKharya

Even in the days of the return to Zion, the prophet Zekharya relates to our issue:

And the word of the Lord came unto Zekharya, saying: Thus has the Lord of hosts spoken, saying: Execute true judgment, and show mercy and compassion every man to his brother; and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart. But they refused to attend, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears that they might not hear. (*Zekharya* 7:8-11)

And similarly in the next chapter:

So again do I purpose in these days to do good unto Jerusalem and to the house of Yehuda; fear you not. These are the things that you shall do: Speak you every man the truth with his neighbor; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates; and let none of you devise evil in your hearts against his neighbor; and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord. (*Zekharya* 8:15-17)

In both prophesies the prophet responds to the question that was raised in connection with the fast observed in the fifth month that righteousness involves judgment with true justice, doing kindness and acts of mercy, and not thinking about doing evil do one's brothers.

In the continuation, the prophet reiterates the importance of speaking the truth, issuing judgments of peace, not thinking evil about one's fellow and not swearing falsely.

In this brief overview we have seen the consistent position of the prophets from the days of Shemuel, throughout the First Temple period, and until the days of the return to Zion. All the prophets complain – each in his own time and in his own style – about the fact that the sacrifices – which are very important in their own right – serve as a substitute for repairing interpersonal relations. From their perspective, improving interpersonal relations is much more important than offering sacrifices.

In a certain sense it is much easier to offer sacrifices. This is an act that does not require internal work, but merely to arrive at the Temple and make one's offering.

The prophet demands the repair and improvement of one's character. The offering of sacrifices as a matter of rote does not involve such improvement.

In the next *shiur* we will complete the picture and return to the second part of Yirmeyahu's prophecy in chapter 7.

(Translated by David Strauss)