YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

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**Lecture 346: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(CLVI) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CXXXII)**

Let us continue our examination of *Yirmeyahu* chapter 7.

After Yirmeyahu comes to the Temple and delivers his harsh message to all the people of Yehuda who had come to the Temple to bow down before God, he apparently wants to pray to God that He cancel the evil decree that had been issued against them.

God reveals Himself to Yirmeyahu and asks that he not pray for the people of Yehuda, because He will not listen to his prayer, and He directs the prophet to consider that all of the people participate in the idol worship. God tells him that His anger and rage will destroy everything, man and beast, trees of the field and fruit of the earth. There will be total destruction and absolute annihilation; there will be no remnant of man, flora or fauna. It is very reasonable to assume that Yirmeyahu is directing his words also to the false prophets who support the people and encourage them to continue coming to the Temple to bow down, to pray and to offer sacrifices, despite all of their evil actions.

Let us now return to the second part of Yirmiyahu's prophecy in chapter 7:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt-offerings to your sacrifices, and eat you flesh. For I spoke not to your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices; but this thing I commanded them, saying: Hearken to My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people; and walk you in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in their own counsels, even in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward, even since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt to this day; and though I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, sending them daily betimes and often, yet they hearkened not to Me, nor inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff; they did worse than their fathers. And you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not hearken to you; you shall also call to them, but they will not answer you. Therefore you shall say to them: This is the nation that has not hearkened to the voice of the Lord their God, nor received correction; faithfulness is perished, and is cut off from their mouth. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:21-28)

The prophet points out that as opposed to the world of sacrifices that God did not command on the day of the exodus from Egypt, God's primary command to the people is that they hearken to His voice (this verb repeats itself five times in these verses). But the people of Israel did not comply; on the contrary, they stiffened their necks and did much evil.

The prophet describes the overall reality, from the time of the exodus from Egypt until his day, in which God sent His servants the prophets but the people did not listen to them or heed their words. God commands the prophet to deliver his message, and He tells him that the people will not listen to him either. That is to say, even though it is clear to the prophet that his message will not be heeded, he is commanded to deliver it. God is unwilling to put up with this generation any further.

The Radak explains that the word "*Tofet*" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:32) is derived from the word *'tupim*," drums, because while they would burn a child in their service of Molekh, they would play the drums, so that the child's father not hear the child's cries, have mercy upon him, and change his mind. The prophet Yeshayahu calls the place "*Tofteh*:" "For Tofteh is ordered of old; yea, for the king it is prepared, deep and large; the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, does kindle it" (*Yeshayahu* 30:33).

Later in the chapter (*Yirmeyahu* 7:32), Yirmeyahu says that the valley of Ben Hinom will be called the valley of slaughter because of the killings committed by those fathers who burn their sons and daughters before Molekh, and those killers will themselves be killed measure for measure in an upcoming war. There will be so many people killed that it will become necessary to bury the dead at the sites of their worship, in Tofet.

One of the most severe punishments mentioned in the rebuke in *Parashat Ki-Tavo* is not to be brought to a Jewish grave: "And your carcasses shall be food to all fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the earth, and there shall be none to frighten them away" (*Devarim* 28:26). Here too, at the end of the First Temple period in the valley of Ben Hinom, those very people who burned their children will not be brought to burial, but rather their carcasses will be food for fowls of the air and beasts of the earth.

Here too there is punishment measure for measure – you who burned your sons and daughters in fire and did not allow them regular burial, you yourselves will not merit regular burial, but rather your carcasses will be devoured by animals. The prophet foretells the destruction of the land that will cause to cease from the cities of Yehuda and from the streets of Jerusalem the sounds of mirth and gladness, the voices of brides and bridegrooms.

At that time, says the Lord, they shall bring out the bones of the kings of Yehuda, and the bones of his princes, and the bones of the priests, and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, out of their graves; and they shall spread them before the sun, and the moon, and all the host of heaven, whom they have loved, and whom they have served, and after whom they have walked, and whom they have sought, and whom they have worshipped; they shall not be gathered, nor be buried, they shall be for dung upon the face of the earth. And death shall be chosen rather than life by all the residue that remain of this evil family, that remain in all the places whither I have driven them, says the Lord of hosts.

Moreover you shall say to them: Thus says the Lord: do men fall, and not rise up again? Does one turn away, and not return? Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast deceit, they refuse to return. I attended and listened, but they spoke not aright; no man repents him of his wickedness, saying: What have I done? Every one turns away in his course, as a horse that rushes headlong in the battle. Yea, the stork in the heaven knows her appointed times; and the turtle and the swallow and the crane observe the time of their coming; but My people know not the ordinance of the Lord. How do you say: We are wise, and the Law of the Lord is with us? Lo, certainly in vain has wrought the vain pen of the scribes. The wise men are ashamed, they are dismayed and taken; lo, they have rejected the word of the Lord; and what wisdom is in them? 

Therefore will I give their wives to others, and their fields to them that shall possess them; for from the least even to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain, from the prophet even to the priest every one deals falsely. And they have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people lightly, saying: Peace, peace, when there is no peace. They shall be put to shame because they have committed abomination; yea, they are not at all ashamed, neither know they how to blush; therefore shall they fall among them that fall, in the time of their visitation they shall stumble, says the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 8:1-12)

The prophet continues to deliver a prophecy concerning the end of days which comes to add to the calamity. In addition to the fact that there will be no place to bury the dead, and they will be forced to bury them in the valley of Ben Hinnom, they will remove the bones of the kings of Yehuda, the bones of his officers, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem from their graves. There will be some who will not be buried at all. But even from among those who will merit being brought to burial, the enemies will remove their bones from their graves. Assyrian and Chaldean sources speak of the practice to remove the bones of their enemies from their graves. This cruel practice may have had various motives:

1. The hope of finding treasures in the tombs.

2. Expressing gratitude to their gods, the sun, the moon, and the stars, for their victory.

3. The desire to take revenge against the defeated people and humiliate their dead.[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to the prophet's description it turns out that the place will be full of bones. On the one hand, the list includes all the branches of leadership and government - the kings of Yehuda, the officers, the priests and the prophets. On the other hand, it includes also the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The assumption is that everyone was guilty of idol worship.

The prophet points out that in general when a person falls he then picks himself up, and when a person veers from the correct path, he tries to return to it. He wonders why this nation sins, holds fast to deception, and does not let go. After all, Yirmeyahu prophesied to the people about the destruction and about exile, and tried very hard to stir up in them thoughts of repentance. He doesn’t understand why the people refuse to return to God; surely if they repent and show their regret for their actions, the calamity can still be averted.

The prophet listens and tries to hear whether the people wish to repent, but in fact there is nobody willing to repent. They continue to proceed down their evil path, they rush ahead like horses in battle, without looking to their sides, and there is no way to stop their racing forward, even for a short while.

It is very possible that the people responded to the prophet's argument that there are wise men among them who know the Torah and God's law, and they indeed interpret and explain it. But the pen writes the lies of these scribes, that is to say, the judges dictate to their secretaries legal rulings that are lies, or they themselves write up these false rulings. They pervert justice and interpret the Torah inappropriately, while claiming before the prophets that they know the Torah. When calamity will strike, those wise men will be caught in their lies, and it will become clear to all that they deceived their people, and they will stand ashamed before the people of Yehuda. Their power will be broken, and it will become clear that their actions were the very opposite of the Torah. They despise the Torah and lack all wisdom. The deceit of these wise men is somewhat reminiscent of the prophecy of the prophet Mikha in the days of Yechizkiyahu, in which the prophet first informs the people about the destruction of the city and of the Temple, because of the glaring lack of righteousness among the leaders of that generation: "The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money" (*Mikha* 3:11).

Now, in the generation of the destruction itself, there is deception on the part of the Torah sages which the prophet sharply condemns: Because all of them, each and every one of them, from prophet to priest, all speak lies, God will give their wives and fields to others. This prophecy repeats almost precisely a similar prophecy appearing in *Yirmeyahu* 6:12-15, where the prophet states: 'And their houses shall be turned to others, their fields and their wives together; for I will stretch out My hand upon the inhabitants of the land, says the Lord" (*Yirmeyahu* 6:12). The enemies will take the fields for themselves, and they will relate to their wives as if they were fields, and do with them whatever they want. The Torah in the rebuke in *Parashat Ki-Tavo* states: "You shall betroth a wife, and another man shall lie with her" (*Devarim* 28:30). God will sent out His hand over the inhabitants of the land and strike at them.

The false prophets and the priests cooperated with each other. The prophets delivered false prophecies and the priests appeased the people with them. They tried to calm the people in a false manner with words of consolation that there would be peace, but in fact there was no peace.

This phenomenon of false prophets that deceived the people was widespread. It is mentioned by the prophet Yirmeyahu in other places as well, and also by Yechezkel. In *Yirmeyahu* 14:13, the prophet states: "Then said I: 'Ah, Lord God! behold, the prophets say to them: You shall not see the sword, neither shall you have famine; but I will give you assured peace in this place." And so too in chapter 23: "They say continually to them that despise Me: The Lord has said: You shall have peace'; and to everyone that walks in the stubbornness of his own heart they say: No evil shall come upon you" (*Yirmeyahu* 23:17). Yechezkel in chapter 13 says: "Because, even because they have led My people astray, saying: Peace, and there is no peace; and when it builds up a slight wall, behold, they daub it with whited plaster" )13:10). And in the continuation: "The prophets of Israel that prophesy concerning Jerusalem, and that see visions of peace for her, and there is no peace, says the Lord God" (*Yechezkel* 13:16). Even though they did reprehensible things of which they should have been ashamed, they were not ashamed. In contrast to the healthy and natural situation in which a person sins and then feels guilt and is ashamed before God and man, they felt no shame on account of the abominations that they practiced, and for this reason they would all be killed in war.

In the next *shiur,* we will continue to examine the prophecies of Yirmeyahu in the days of King Yehoyakim.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. So suggests Menachem Bula in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to the book of *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)