YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Lecture 351: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(161) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (137)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lecture-350-history-divine-service-altars-160-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-136), we discussed the background to Yirmeyahu's prophecy in the days of Yehoyakim in chapter 35. We examined the time of the prophecy, who were the Rechavites and who was Yonadav the son of Rechav. In this *shiur* we will consider the details of the prophecy itself and its meaning.

The prophet is commanded to go to the house of the Rechavites, to speak to them, to bring them to one of the chambers in the house of God, and to give them there wine to drink. He takes them and brings them to the house of God to the chamber of the sons of Chanan the son of Yigdalyahu, the man of God. That is to say, we are dealing with the chamber of one of the prophets that was in close proximity to the chamber of the princes. It is reasonable to assume that over and beyond his trust in the sons of Chanan the son of Yigdalyahu, Yirmeyahu wanted the princes to see and hear what was happening, so that they might receive instruction. This chamber was above the chamber of Ma'asiyahu the son of Shalum, the keeper of the door. According to the plain understanding, this keeper of the door stood at the entranceway and was in charge of safety and order in the Temple. It may have been important to Yirmeyahu that he too hear the prophecy.

Yirmeyahu gives the sons of the Rechavites goblets full of wine and tells them to drink.

**Drinking Wine in the Temple Courtyard**

The Torah explicitly forbids priests to drink wine when they come to the Temple:

And the Lord spoke to Aharon, saying: Drink no wine nor strong drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, that you die not; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. And that you may put difference between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moshe. (*Vayikra* 10:8-11)

What is explicitly prohibited is for the priests to drink wine. *Chazal* learned from here that the prohibition relates to the priestly service. But from here they learned that it applies as well to all the preparatory work performed by the priests. *Chazal* also learned from here that the priests are forbidden to issue rulings while intoxicated.

According to the plain meaning of the verses, ordinary Israelites are not forbidden to enter the Temple when intoxicated. The Rambam, however, understands (presumably based on logical deduction) that there is a general prohibition, applying even to ordinary Israelites, to enter the Temple when drunk, as part of the obligation to revere the Temple. He writes as follows:

Similarly, it is forbidden for any person, whether a priest or an Israelite, to enter the entire Temple area, from the Courtyard of Israelites and onward when he is intoxicated from wine, drunk [from other beverages], with unkempt long hair or with torn garments. Although there is no explicit warning [against this in the Torah], it is not a sign of honor or reverence to the great and holy house to enter it unkempt. If, however, an Israelite lets his hair grow until it is formed into a weave and it was not unkempt, he is permitted to enter the Courtyard of the Israelites. (*Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash* 1:17)

The Rambam offers examples of situations in which there is no reverence for the Temple, and therefore such conduct is forbidden to all members of Israel, owing to the obligation to show honor and reverence to the great and holy house of God. This gives rise to a serious difficulty with the words of Yirmeyahu, who tells the sons of the Rechavites to drink wine in the Temple.

And furthermore, let us consider the relationship between the Divine command given to the prophet: "And give them wine to drink" (*Yirmeyahu* 35:2), and the manner in which the prophet executes the command, by setting goblets filled with wine before the sons of the Rechavites and telling them to drink. Is this an absolute prophetic command? Does their refusal to drink constitute a violation of God's command?

The Radak explains the prohibition to drink wine instituted by the forefather of the Rechavites, Yonadav the son of Rechav:

For [wine] confuses the mind of anyone who goes astray with it, as it is written: "[Wine is a mocker, strong drink is riotous;] and whosoever goes astray with it is not wise" (*Mishlei* 20:1)… The reason for the exile of the ten tribes was their excessive drinking of wine, as it is written: "Woe to the crown of pride of the drunkards of Efrayim" (*Yeshayahu* 28:1)… And the first person to drink wine [Noach], even though he was righteous and perfect (*Bereishit* 6:9), became drunk from it and then was disgraced by it (*Bereishit* 9:21). (Radak, *Yirmeyahu* 35:7)

Another aspect of the meaning of the Rechavites' abstention from drinking wine is the similarity of this behavior to the conduct of Nazirites. Of course, there is no full correspondence here to Naziriteship. No mention is made in the words of Yonadav the son of Rechav about a prohibition to contract ritual impurity through contact with a corpse or about a prohibition to cut one's hair. On the other hand, we find in the Bible a connection between Nazirites and prophets. We find Nazarites who, through their devotion to a life of sanctity, also merited prophecy, as in the case of the prophet Shemuel who was also a Nazir.[[1]](#footnote-1) What is common to both groups is that the prophets teach the people about the path of God and how they must conduct themselves, while the Nazarites who actually practice holiness with their bodies and their deeds serve as personal examples for the people through their special behavior. In addition, it is possible that the Nazirites were close to the prophets who taught the people of Israel Torah and rebuked them for not fully obeying its commandments.

**The Meaning of the Commands Received by the Sons of the House of the Rechavim from their Forefather Yonadav the Son of Rechav**

In their negative response to the words of Yirmeyahu, the sons of the Rechavites say: "We will drink no wine; for Yonadav the son of Rechav our father commanded us, saying: You shall drink no wine, neither you, nor your sons, forever; neither shall you build houses, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyards, nor have any; but all your days you shall dwell in tents, that you may live many days in the land wherein you sojourn" (*Yirmeyahu* 35:6-7). In addition to the prohibition to drink wine, they are also forbidden to build houses, and they must remain in tents all of their days, and not plant vineyards or even sow seeds unless the land belongs to them. Thus, they are forbidden even to buy a planted vineyard or to receive it as a gift.

Ostensibly the purpose of all these commands is spelled out in the words of the descendants of Yonadav the son of Rechav who cite their forefather's instructions: "That you may live many days in the land wherein you sojourn." This is similar to what the Torah promises the people of Israel when they carefully observe the Torah and its commandments in the land of Israel: "That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth" (*Devarim* 11:21).

The Radak explains the reason for the prohibition against settling in one place as follows:

Because houses, fields, and vineyards keep a person in his place, even when there is famine or war, and he will die prematurely because of worry. If he does not have these things in his place, then as long as he fares well in that place he will remain there, but when he fares poorly he will go elsewhere where he will fare better. Therefore he commanded them that they should live in tents and move from place to place as they see fit, instead of a house, a field and a vineyard, and thus they will live long lives. So too we see that the Patriarchs moved from place to place in their tents because of famine. (Radak, *Yirmeyahu* 35:7)

The Radak cites as an example the Patriarchs who lived a nomadic life, moving from place to place in their tents. He explains that living permanently in a particular place does not always allow a person to fare well in that place, whereas one who moves from place to place seeks what is best for him at that particular time and moves there.

It is quite clear that agricultural work in the field and vineyard poses many dangers. Farm work can easily enslave a person to the land itself to the point that in extreme conditions he becomes the land's slave. Enslavement to materialism, property, title, control of the place are real dangers to those who work the land. In contrast, a shepherd is not enslaved to any particular land; he can freely move from place to place. He must be careful not to graze his animals on land belonging to another person, but he can and should be constantly on the move. In addition, tending his flock brings the shepherd to greater sensitivity, attention and caring for each of his animals, to an assumption of responsibility for their lives, their health, their food and their functioning. It is not by chance that there is a clear connection between shepherdship and leadership ("a generation must have one leader, but not two"). We find that many leaders of Israel were shepherds: Avraham, Yaakov, Moshe, David and others. It is not stated explicitly that the descendants of Yonadav the son of Rechav were shepherds, but this is certainly a reasonable possibility.

In addition, there is a fundamental difference between a farmer who is tied to his land and a herdsman: A farmer is liable (especially in places where the yield depends not on rain but on spring water) to develop a sense of lordship, control and permanence in his place. The area that he farms becomes his property. The herdsman and others who live a nomadic life in tents move from place to place and are not fixed in a particular place. Their lives directly depend on God.[[2]](#footnote-2) What stands out in them is the element of temporariness, which is the very opposite of permanence.

There may also be another reason. The verse in *Divrei ha-Yamim* states: "And the families of scribes that dwelt at Yabetz: the Tiratites, the Shimatites, the Sukatites. These are the Kenites that came of Hamat, the father of the house of Rechav" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 2:55).[[3]](#footnote-3) It is possible that the house of Rechav gave rise to families of scribes who were learned in Torah and saw themselves destined for Torah study. Permanent field work makes it difficult for a person to devote his life to the study of Torah. It is possible that their nomadic living helped them teach and disseminate Torah in every place where they arrived.

If we accept this as a reasonable interpretation, we can understand the affinity between the Rechavites and the prophets (as we earlier explained the relationship between Nazirites and prophets in the context of the Rechavites' abstention from wine).

In his article,[[4]](#footnote-4) Shmuel Abramski sharpens some points about the Rechavites that will enhance our understanding of this family. He first notes that in some biblical passages, living in tents indicates herdsmen. For example: "And Adah bore Yaval; he was the father of such as dwell in tents and have cattle" (*Bereishit* 4:20). In the days of Asa, Scripture writes: "They smote also the tents of cattle, and carried away sheep in abundance and camels, and returned to Jerusalem" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 14:14). It is clear that in certain cases, a tent alludes to simplicity and modesty, as opposed to a house. In addition, we are not dealing only with raising sheep or cattle, but also with a certain connection to a settled area.

The Rechavites appear to have been a restricted group following a lifestyle in accordance with the instructions left by an early forefather. Yonadav the son of Rechav is their "father" not only in the biological sense, but also in the sense of teacher and leader. Yonadav is perceived also as a law-giver, whose instructions were understood as commands. The Rechavites did not come to preach a way of life for the entire people. They were a group that was united by family connections in its lifestyle. There is no connection between the ideology of desert life found in the words of the prophets Hoshea, Amos and Yirmeyahu and the Rechavites. The prophets did not command distancing from agriculture, the yields of which served as a sign of abundance and healthy life in the future. Rather, they regarded the desert as a symbol of refinement and purity.

The Rechavites claim that they did all that their forefather Yonadav had commanded them to do. They lived in tents during all these periods, but with the arrival of the Chaldean and the Aramaean armies in Jerusalem when Nevuchadnetzer the king of Babylon came to the land of Israel, they were in mortal danger and they were forced to abandon their tents and live within the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

**The Lesson that the Kingdom of Yehuda Should Learn from the Rechavites**

This entire prophetic deed performed by the prophet Yirmeyahu with the Rechavites in the Temple courtyard was meant to strength the prophecies themselves and to bring the people to repent. The Rechavites provide an example of a family the head of which had cast upon his descendants a series of prohibitions and they have already obeyed these prohibitions for more than two hundred and fifty years, generation after generation. Even when the prophet Yirmeyahu invites them to a chamber in the Temple and offers them goblets full of wine, they refuse to drink because their forefather had instructed them not to do so.

The prophet Yirmeyahu appeals to the people of Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and asks them to receive instruction from them, for unlike the family of Rechavites who heeded their forefather's testament and strictly observed it across the generations, God sent them His servants the prophets, including the prophet Yirmeyahu himself, but they do not listen to Him. The prophets implore them to mend their ways and desist from idol worship, and tell them that if they will do this, they will be able to remain in the land that God had given to their forefathers.

It is interesting to note that the key word in the chapter is the root *shin-mem-ayin*, to hear, obey. Standing one against the other are the Rechavites, who heeded their forefather's instructions and observed his commands for generations, and the people of Yehuda and Jerusalem, who are unwilling to listen to all the prophets who turn to them, asking them to repent and to desist from idolatry.

On his part Yirmeyahu is forced toward the end of Yehoyakim's reign to painfully inform the people of Yehuda and Jerusalem that: "Behold, I will bring upon Yehuda and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the evil that I have pronounced against them; because I have spoken to them, but they have not heard, and I have called to them, but they have not answered" (*Yirmeyahu* 35:17).

The warning of destruction and exile remains in full force despite the fact that the people had been given many opportunities to repent and thus prevent the destruction. In contrast, the prophet Yirmeyahu prophesies about the Rechavites that their heeding the commands given by their forefather, observing all of his commandment and doing everything that he had instructed them to do will bring about that: "There shall not be cut off to Yonadav the son of Rechav a man to stand before Me forever" (*Yirmeyahu* 35:19). The Rechavites will merit to serve God, to stand before Him and to minister to Him through the observance of His commandments and the continued observance of their forefather's testament.

The Mishna in tractate *Ta'anit* mentions the sons of the house of Rechavites among the families who regularly brought wood to the Temple for the sacrificial service: "Nine times in the year was observed the wood-festival of the priests and the people… On the seventh of the same month, the family of the Rechavites" (*Ta'anit* 4:5). This testimony relates apparently to the end of the Second Temple period, and it teaches us that the descendants of Yonadav the son of Rechav strictly maintained their connection to the Temple by bringing wood that was used to feed the fire that burned on the altar.

Yirmeyahu stands the family of the Rechavites in correspondence to the entire people of Israel as an example of devotion, rather than as a role model. They continued to maintain their lifestyle for many generations as an example for the entire people of Israel across the generations.

In conclusion, the Rechavites did not try to disseminate their teachings to the entire people. Yehonadav's commands were internalized by his family as a distinct sect that lived at the edge of society in accordance with their own rules, but without rebelling against society at large. Because of their special lifestyle, they secluded themselves but did not rebel.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the next *shiur* we will conclude our examination of the reign of Yehoyakim as it is reflected in the prophecies of Yirmeyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In a prophecy of Amos, the two parallel each other: "And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites" (*Amos* 2:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is clear that dependence on rain is likely to bring even a farmer to a sense of dependence on God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We discussed the basic meaning of this verse in the previous *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shmuel Abramski, "*Beit ha-Rechavim*, *Geniologiya ve-Tzivyon Chevrati*," *Eretz Israel* 8, *Sefer Sukenik*, pp. 255-264. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shmuel Abramski concludes with an interesting remark that the sons of the house of the Rechavites can be seen as a prototype for the sects that arose in the Jewish people at the end of the Second Temple period, owing to their withdrawal from society and the disciplined life to which they subjected themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)