YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 354: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(164) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (140)**

In this *shiur*, we will begin our study of the kingdom of Tzidkiyahu, the last king of Jerusalem before the destruction of Jerusalem. We will first cite what is written about him in the books of II *Melakhim* and II *Divrei ha-Yamim*, and afterwards we will examine the various prophesies which were delivered to him and about him by the prophet Yirmeyahu.

In II *Melakhim* 24we find a short account of his reign:

Tzidkiyahu was twenty one years old when he began to reign; and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Chamutal the daughter of Yirmeyahu of Livna. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that Yehoyakim had done. For through the anger of the Lord did it come to pass in Jerusalem and Yehuda, until He had cast them out from His presence. And Tzidkiyahu rebelled against the king of Babylon. (II *Melakhim* 24:18-20)

In II *Melakhim* 25, an account is given of the crucial stages in the destruction: the siege, the breaching of the city, and the burning of the house of God and the house of the king. The chapter ends with a description of the exile to Babylonia, the leaving of Gedalya the son of Achikam the son of Shafan in Yehuda, his assassination at the hands of Yishmael the son of Netanya, and the king of Babylonia's attitude toward Yehoyakhin.

**The End of Yehoyakhin**

And it came to pass in the thirty-seventh year of the captivity of Yehoyakhin king of Yehuda, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, that Evil-Merodakh king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, did lift up the head of Yehoyakhin king of Yehuda out of prison. And he spoke kindly to him, and set his throne above the throne of the kings that were with him in Babylon. And he changed his prison garments, and did eat bread before him continually all the days of his life. And for his allowance, there was a continual allowance given him of the king, every day a portion, all the days of his life. (II *Melakhim* 28:27-30)

Thirty-seven years after Yehoyakhin's exile, and twenty-seven years after the destruction of the Temple, on the twenty-seventh of Adar, Evil-Merodakh, king of Babylon, the son of Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylon, decides to change his father's policy and releases Yehoyakhim from prison, invites him to the king's palace and raises him above the rest of the kings who were subjugated to Babylon.

What is the significance of this dramatic change in Yehoyakhin's status, from a prisoner in a Babylonian jail to one who is close to the king and seated on a throne above all the other ministers? It seems that Scripture wishes to allude to the approaching redemption. In order to understand this, let us consider the genealogy of Yehoyakhin and his family and descendants.

Scripture in I *Divrei ha-Yamim* lists the descendants of David and the kings of the house of David from Shelomo on. The account of the kings of the house of David ends as follows: "And the sons of Yehoyakim: Yekhonya his son, Tzidkiyahu his son" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 3:16), and Scripture continues with an account of the sons of Yekhonya: "And the sons of Yekhonya –Asir Shealtiel his son" (v. 17). Afterwards the verse lists the sons of Shealtiel: "And Malkiram, and Pedaya, and Shenatzar, Yekamya, Hoshama, and Nedavya. And the sons of Pedaya: Zerubavel and Shimi" (vv. 18-19).

Zerubavel the son of Pedaya the son of Shealtiel was a governor in Yehuda on behalf of the kingdom of Persia in the early days of the return to Zion. In other books he is called Zerubavel the son of Shealtiel after his grandfather.

Zerubavel the son of Shealtiel was a major repair of the kingdom of his great-grandfather Yekhonya. We saw in the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lecture-353-history-divine-service-altars-163-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-139)Yirmeyahu's harsh prophecy concerning Yehoyakhin: "As I live, says the Lord, though Konyahu the son of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda were the seal upon My right hand, yet would I pluck you from there" (*Yirmeyahu* 22:24). What this verse means is that even if Yekhonya were a seal on God's right hand, He would rip it from His hand and not use it. In other words, God, as it were, was prepared to give up the symbols of His kingdom, so that He not have to be disgraced by this seal. Put differently, Yirmeyahu did not accept the kingship of Yehoyakhin.

On the other hand, in the early days of the return to Zion the prophet Chagai prophesies to Zerubavel the son of Shealtiel the governor of Yehuda of the seed of Yehoyakhin: "In that day, says the Lord of hosts, will I take you, O Zerubavel, My servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and will make you as a seal; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts" (*Chagai* 2:23). Menachen Bula explains[[1]](#footnote-1) that Zerubavel the son of Shealtiel, great grandson of Yehoyakhin, stood at the head of those who returned from among the exiles in the land of Yehuda, and he is the one who is called in the book of *Chagai* governor of Yehuda. From here we see that he was appointed by the Persian king to rule in the land of Yehuda in his name. The prophets Chagai and Tzefanya encourage him to rebuild the Temple, and indeed this is what he does.

The prophet Chagai prophesies about him that he will in the future renew the dynasty of the house of David. It turns out that Chagai's prophecy is the very opposite of Yirmeyahu's prophecy concerning King Yehoyakhin which stated: "Thus says the Lord: Write you this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days; for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Yehuda" (*Yirmeyahu* 22:30). The prophet proclaims that no man of his seed will succeed to sit on the throne of David and rule over Yehuda. While it is true that Zerubavel was not a king in the formal sense of the word, he was a great leader at the beginning of the period of the return to Zion, he built the Second Temple, and he ruled the province of Yehuda in the name of the Persian king.

*Chazal* resolved this contradiction in various ways. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* 37b states that exile atones for everything.

The Midrash in *Vayikra Rabba* states:

Rabbi Acha and Rabbi Avin bar Binyamin said in the name of Rabbi Abba: Great is the power of repentance, for it cancels a decree and cancels an oath. (*Vayikra Rabba* 10, 5)

And in *Masekhta de-Amalek* it says:

Three things were given on condition: The land of Israel, the Temple, and the kingdom of the house of David… The kingdom of the house of David, as it is stated: "If your children keep My covenant and My testimony that I shall teach them, their children also forever shall sit upon your throne" (*Tehilim* 132:12). (*Masekhta de-Amalek* 4)

When the king of Babylonia appointed Tzidkiyahu as king of the land of Yehuda, one of the most important issues that he faced was how to deal with the exceedingly difficult reality of the exile that was so great in quantity and elevated in quality. Nevuchadnetzar could have put an end to the kingdom of Yehuda, but he did not do so. It is possible that he thought that the kingdom of Yehuda could serve as a good base from which Babylonia could contend with its enemies to the south.

Across the generations Eretz Israel was viewed by its neighbors as an important place with respect to dealing with enemies on the other side of the country – the northern powers Aram, Ashur, Babylonia and Persia and the southern power Egypt. Eretz Israel was viewed as a springboard, and with the aid of an army stationed there it would be possible to advance toward the enemy. Therefore, here too from the perspective of Nevuchadnetzar it would be convenient for the king of Babylonia that the kingdom of Yehuda remain weak and not rebel again against Babylonia, as the prophet Yechezkel put it: "that his might be a lowly kingdom, that it might not lift itself up" (*Yechezkel* 17:14); but at the same time the Babylonian army be able to camp in the kingdom of Yehuda as a forward position toward the southwest and in the direction of Egypt.

**The Difference Between the Inhabitants of the Kingdom of Yehuda and the Exiles in Babylonia**

The prophet Yirmeyahu relates to this issue in chapter 24 in his prophecy concerning the good figs and the bad figs:

The Lord showed me, and behold two baskets of figs set before the Temple of the Lord; after that Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylon had carried away captive Yekhonya the son of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, and the princes of Yehuda, with the craftsmen and smiths, from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Babylon. One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first-ripe; and the other basket had very bad figs, which could not be eaten, they were so bad. Then said the Lord to me: What do you see, Yirmeyahu? And I said: Figs; the good figs, very good; and the bad, very bad, that cannot be eaten, they are so bad. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so will I regard the captives of Yehuda, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans, for good. And I will set My eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; and I will build them, and not pull them down; and I will plant them, and not pluck them up. And I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God; for they shall return to Me with their whole heart. And as the bad figs, which cannot be eaten, they are so bad; surely thus says the Lord: So will I make Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda, and his princes, and the residue of Jerusalem, that remain in this land, and them that dwell in the land of Egypt; I will even make them a horror among all the kingdoms of the earth for evil; a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I shall drive them. And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, among them, until they be consumed from off the land that I gave unto them and to their fathers. (*Yirmeyahu* 24:1-10)

This prophecy was delivered after the exile of Yehoyakhin before the Temple of God. There lie in a prophetic vision two baskets of figs, one basket of very good figs, of the quality that are brought as first-fruits, and one basket of very bad figs, which are of such poor quality that they cannot be eaten. The meaning of the parable in the prophetic vision is explicitly explained.

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The good figs are the people who have just been exiled in the exile of Yehoyakhin, whereas the bad figs are Tzidkiyahu, the king of Yehuda, his officers, and the remnant of the people living in Jerusalem and the rest of Eretz Israel. The prophet proclaims that this means that God will relate favorably to the exiles, rebuild them, and help them to take root in Eretz Israel and not send them out again into exile. But beyond the practical promises of their return to the land of Israel and their taking root in it, the prophet declares that the very relationship between them and God will be renewed. As for the bad figs, on the other hand, God will send them many calamities and exceedingly severe blows.

It is very reasonable to assume that those who remained in Yehuda after the exile of Yehoyakhin viewed those who remained and were not exiled as superior to those who were sent into exile, and thought that what happened to those who were exiled would not happen to them, and therefore they related to the exiles with scorn. But the prophet comes and preaches just the opposite – the exiles will return to Eretz Israel and they will be God's people, whereas those who are now in the land of Yehuda will be exiled to Babylonia and will have no part in the future redemption, though clearly if they repent, they will be able to remain in Eretz Israel and will be considered part of God's people.

This is the background to the spiritual and social reality of those who remained in the country after the exile of King Yehoyakhin at the beginning of the reign of Tzidkiyahu. Yirmeyahu's prophecy makes a clear distinction between those who remained in Eretz Israel but will be exiled from it and those who were exiled to Babylonia but will return to Eretz Israel.

In the next *shiur*, we will begin to examine Tzidkiyahu's kingdom.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to the book of *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)