YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 356: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(166) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (142)**

In the [previous *shiur*](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lecture-355-history-divine-service-altars-165-%E2%80%93-prohibition-bamot-141), we dealt with the attitudes of the prophet Yirmeyahu in the kingdom of Yehuda and the prophet Yechezkel in the Babylonian exile toward the various ideologies and factions that arose in the Jewish people in the harsh conditions that prevailed in the aftermath of King Yehoyakhin's exile and at the beginning of the kingdom of Tzidkiyahu. We related to the faction in the kingdom of Yehuda that believed that God's rule is only over Eretz Israel. We also described Yechezkel's attitude toward the exiles in Babylonia who wished to build a temple in that country. The prophets strongly opposed both of these groups.

In this *shiur* we will continue to examine the attitudes of the prophets Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel to other groups in the Jewish people in the kingdom of Yehuda and in the Babylonian exile.

**A Third Group – In Babylonia – Tries to Assimilate into Babylonian Culture**

There was a group of opportunists in Babylonia who tried in pragmatic fashion to enjoy the benefits and advantages of the new situation. They wanted to resemble the Gentiles.

The prophet Yechezkel says to them as follows:

And that which comes into your mind shall not be at all; in that you say: We will be as the nations, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone. As I live, says the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out, will I be king over you; and I will bring you out from the peoples, and will gather you out of the countries wherein you are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out. (*Yechezkel* 20:32-34)

The prophet responds to these people with a forceful answer, telling them that God will rule over them, take them out from among the nations, and gather them up from all the countries "with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out." Thus we see that in addition to the group in the kingdom of Yehuda that related only to itself, in Babylonia there were two groups. All three groups advocated political realism. The political outlook that they accepted was that what Nevuchadnetzar did was done, only that in Babylonia the two groups reached different conclusions. The elders wanted to continue their relationship with the God of Israel and the heritage of Israel, and therefore they proposed that a temple be built in Babylonia to the God of Israel. In contrast, there were radicals, "worldly people," in Babylonia who wanted to integrate themselves into the world around them. According to their approach, the God of Israel rules in Jerusalem, but Nevo and Mordach rule in Babylonia. The prophet Yechezkel says about them: "Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they are come" (*Yechezkel* 11:16). The prophet says that in Babylonia it is impossible to live full and perfect national and religious lives. But in place of a real Temple which cannot possibly be built in Babylonia, a connection to the God of Israel will continue to exist in Babylonia by way of a "little sanctuary."

Yechezkel continues:

Therefore say: Thus says the Lord God: I will even gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And they shall come there, and they shall take away all the detestable things thereof and all the abominations thereof from there. And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh. (*Yechezkel* 11:17-19)

In Babylonia there will be a little sanctuary. In Eretz Israel there will be a perfect reality: "And they shall be My people, and I will be their God" (*Yechezkel* 11:20). In place of the great Temple in Jerusalem, God, as it were, will rest his *Shekhina* in the exile in the synagogues and study halls that will be erected there.

This is the way that the early authorities expounded the expression "little sanctuary." So the phrase is translated by Yonatan ben Uziel, as cited by Rashi: "synagogues which are second to the Temple." This is also the way that the verse is explained by the Radak (ad loc.): "If there in the lands they are far off from God's Temple, which is a great Temple, I will be for them a little sanctuary" (Radak, *Yechezkel* 11:17). In other words, in the synagogues, where the people will gather to pray to God, there He will hear their voices, and save them from their enemies, and in the future He will also gather them together, as it says below: "I will even gather you" (*Bereishit* 11:17).

**A Fourth Group in Yehuda and Babylon – False Prophets – Eretz Israel Will Not be Destroyed and the Exiles in Babylon Will Speedily Return**

In addition to the three groups mentioned thus far, there is another ideological, national and patriotic stream which speaks of a swift return to Eretz Israel. These circles are headed by people who call themselves "prophets," but in the eyes of Yechezkel and Yirmeyahu they are false prophets. Yechezkel relates to them as follows:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesy, and say you to them that prophesy out of their own heart: Hear you the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God: Woe unto the vile prophets, that follow their own spirit, and things which they have not seen! O Israel, your prophets have been like foxes in ruins. You have not gone up into the breaches, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel, to stand in the battle in the day of the Lord. They have seen vanity and lying divination, that say: The Lord says; and the Lord has not sent them, yet they hope that the word would be confirmed! Have you not seen a vain vision, and have you not spoken a lying divination, whereas you say: The Lord says; albeit I have not spoken?

Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have spoken vanity, and seen lies, therefore, behold, I am against you, says the Lord God. And My hand shall be against the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies; they shall not be in the council of My people, neither shall they be written in the register of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord God. Because, even because they have led My people astray, saying: Peace, and there is no peace…

Therefore thus says the Lord God: I will even cause a stormy wind to break forth in My fury; and there shall be an overflowing shower in Mine anger, and great hailstones in fury to consume it… 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* 13:1-16)

In times of trouble, people who call themselves prophets take advantage of the desire of the masses to find an easy way out of their problems. The prophet Yechezkel tries to teach the people to contemn those people who utter vain statements and spread false visions. He mocks them before his audience. Yechezkel wants to prepare the people for the destruction of the Temple, and also to properly prepare them for the arrival of the redemption. This stands in contrast to the cultivation of the illusion of a return to Eretz Israel with which the false prophets mislead the people. The false prophets were familiar with the people's hopes for peace and were quick to cultivate them with the slogan of "Peace, peace." What this meant to the lower strata of society that remained in Jerusalem was that the destruction would not materialize and that the people would continue to live in peace in Eretz Israel, and to the exiles in Babylonia it meant that they would quickly return to their homes and land.

In due time these high hopes turned into false expectations and left a great deal of frustration. The prophet Yechezkel says to the exiles in Babylonia: "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). And similarly earlier: "Horror comes; and they shall seek peace, and there shall be none" (*Yechezkel* 7:25).

Yirmeyahu also prophesies to the people of the kingdom of Yehuda using similar formulations: "They have healed also the hurt of My people lightly, saying: 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (*Yirmeyahu* 6:14; and again in *Yirmeyahu* 8:11). The false prophets promise quiet and rest. But this is not the promised peace, and therefore it will not happen.

It is reasonable to assume that these false prophets are the very same prophets that are mentioned in *Yirmeyahu* 29:

Now these are the words of the letter that Yirmeyahu the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the residue of the elders of the captivity, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people, whom Nevuchadnetzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylonia, after that Yekhoniya the king, and the queen-mother, and the officers, and the princes of Yehuda and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen, and the smiths, were departed from Jerusalem… Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the captivity, whom I have caused to be carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylonia: Build you houses, and dwell in them, and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take you wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply you there, and be not diminished. And seek the peace of the city to which I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in the peace thereof shall you have peace.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Let not your prophets that are in the midst of you, and your diviners, beguile you, neither hearken you to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are accomplished for Babylonia, I will remember you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place… And I will be found of you, says the Lord, and I will turn your captivity, and gather you from all the nations, and from all the places to which I have driven you, says the Lord; and I will bring you back to the place from where I caused you to be carried away captive. For you have said: The Lord has raised us up prophets in Babylonia. For thus says the Lord concerning the king that sits upon the throne of David, and concerning all the people that dwell in this city, your brethren that are not gone forth with you into captivity; thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will send upon them the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, and will make them like vile figs, that cannot be eaten, they are so bad. And I will pursue after them with the sword, with the famine, and with the pestilence, and will make them a horror unto all the kingdoms of the earth, a curse, and an astonishment, and a hissing, and a reproach, among all the nations to which I have driven them; because they have not hearkened to My words, says the Lord, wherewith I sent to them My servants the prophets, sending them betimes and often; but you would not hear, says the Lord. Hear you therefore the word of the Lord, all you of the captivity, whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylonia: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Achav the son of Kolaya, and concerning Tzidkiyahu the son of Ma'aseya, who prophesy a lie to you in My name: Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia; and he shall slay them before your eyes; and of them shall be taken up a curse by all the captivity of Yehuda that are in Babylonia, saying: The Lord make you like Tzidkiyahu and like Achav, whom the king of Babylonia roasted in the fire; because they have wrought vile deeds in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and have spoken words in My name falsely, which I commanded them not; but I am He that knows, and am witness, says the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 29:1-23)

In a letter that the prophet Yirmeyahu sent to the exiles in Babylonia he instructs them to build houses, plant gardens, take wives, and have children in Babylonia. The Babylonian exile will continue and will not end soon. Certain prophets claim to have been sent by God, but Yirmeyahu and Yechezel firmly deny this and explicitly tell the people that they are false prophets. These false prophets promise the people that there will be a speedy return from Babylonia and that the redemption is soon to come. But Yirmeyahu tells them in verse 10: "For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are accomplished for Babylonia, I will remember you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place." That is to say, after seventy years, but not before that. Only then will Babylonia fall and will Israel be redeemed from their hands.

Yirmeyahu implores the exiles to pray to God throughout their exile, and God will eventually hear their supplications and return them to their land. Yirmeyahu warns them mainly about the false prophets Achav the son of Kolaya and Tzidkiyahu the son of Ma'aseya, and brings proof from the fact that they committed idolatry and will be punished with death by fire.

According to Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel, the false prophets committed two evils: God did not send them, and the political outlook that they preach is fundamentally wrong and will cause the people to stumble.

Later in the chapter, the prophet Yirmeyahu refers to Shemayahu the Nechelamite:

And concerning Shemayahu the Nechelamite you shall speak, saying: Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: Because you have sent letters in your own name to all the people that are at Jerusalem, and to Tzefanya the son of Ma'aseya the priest, and to all the priests, saying: The Lord has made you priest in the stead of Yehoyada the priest, that there should be officers in the house of the Lord for every man that is mad, and makes himself a prophet, that you should put him in the stocks and in the collar. Now therefore, why have you not rebuked Yirmeyahu of Anatot, who makes himself a prophet to you, forasmuch as he has sent to us in Babylonia, saying: The captivity is long; build you houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them? And Tzefanya the priest read this letter in the ears of Yirmeyahu the prophet. Then came the word of the Lord to Yirmeyahu, saying: Send to all them of the captivity, saying: Thus says the Lord concerning Shemayahu the Nechelamite: Because that Shemayahu has prophesied to you, and I sent him not, and he has caused you to trust in a lie; therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will punish Shemayahu the Nechelamite, and his seed; he shall not have a man to dwell among this people, neither shall he behold the good that I will do to My people, says the Lord; because he has spoken perversion against the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 29:24-32)

Shemayahu the Nechelamite sent letters from Babylonia to the priests and the people in Jerusalem, and especially to Tzefanya the son of Ma'aseya the priest. He rebukes Tzefanya in his letter for not preventing Yirmeyahu to prophesy in the Temple against the rebellion and for not punishing him for the prophecies that he delivered.

Tzefanya read Shemayahu the Nechelamite's letter before Yirmeyahu, but he did not scold or punish him. Yirmeyahu responded to Shemayahu's letter with a new letter addressed to the exiles, saying that Shemayahu and his descendants will not merit seeing the return to Zion after seventy years. It is interesting that the prophet Yechezkel prophesied in similar style: "They shall not be in the council of My people, neither shall they be written in the register of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel" (*Yechezkel* 13:9).

Another aspect of the activity of the false prophets is revealed here. They correspond with colleagues in Jerusalem who share the same view with them. That is to say, there is a connection between the Babylonian faction and the faction in Eretz Israel.

Those patriots, in opposition to Yirmeyahu's opinion, did not want to build houses in Babylonia. They sit on their bags and refrain from building, from planting, and from marrying, because they are sure that they will soon return to the land of Yehuda.

This is the patriotic party in Babylonia, headed by the leaders who "prophesy in the name of God," Achav the son of Kolaya, Tzidkiyahu the son of Ma'aseya and Shemayahu the Nechelamite. This party has a branch in Yehuda. One of its leaders is Chanan the son of Azur, who also claims to be a prophet, like his comrades in Babylonia. The prophets Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel explicitly state that those leaders, false prophets, were not sent by God, and that they are wrong, misleading, and lying.

It takes a fair amount of courage, daring and dedication to preach in Babylonia against Nevuchadnetzer and against living in the exile. Indeed, Nevuchadnetzar burns Achav the son of Kolaya and Tzidkiyahu the son of Ma'aseya. When Chananya the son of Azur "the prophet" from Givon enters the Temple while Tzidkiyahu is sitting on his throne in Jerusalem and prophesies that in another two years he will restore to the Temple those vessels that were taken by Nevuchadneztar, and also Yekhoniya the king of Yehuda and all of the exiles from Yehuda, this is an open rebellion against both the kingdom of Tzidkiyahu and the kingdom of Nevuchadnetzar.

In the next *shiur* we will examine the prophecies of Chananya the son of Azur and Yirmeyahu's attitude toward him. We will then summarize the coping mechanisms found in the generation's reactions to the new situation when, following the exile of Yehoyakhin, all of the senior government officials of the kingdom of Yehuda are in Babylonia.

(Translated by David Strauss)