YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky z"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Lecture 357: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(167) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (143)**

In the previous two *shiurim*, we tried to understand the various factions that arose in the Jewish people, both in the Babylonian exile and in the kingdom of Yehuda, and their positions on the desired nature and character of Jewish national life.

The fourth group that we considered was the group of false prophets. We saw the attitude of the prophets Yechezkel and Yirmeyahu towards this group. We related explicitly to the prophets living in Babylonia: Achav ben Kuliya, Tzidkiyahu ben Ma'aseya and Shemayahu the Nechlemite; to the letter that Yirmeyahu sent to the elders in the exile, the priests and the prophets; and in particular to the words of Shemayahu the Nechlemite.

In this *shiur* it is our intention to examine the false prophets living in the kingdom of Yehuda. One of these prophets is Chananya ben Azur.

Let us see *Yirmeyahu*, chapter 28:

And it came to pass the same year, in the beginning of the reign of Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, in the fourth year, in the fifth month, that Chananya the son of Azur the prophet, who was of Giv'on, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and of all the people, saying: Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylonia. Within two full years will I bring back into this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, that Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia took away from this place, and carried them to Babylonia, and I will bring back to this place Yekhonya the son of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, with all the captives of Yehuda, that went to Babylonia, says the Lord; for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylonia.

Then the prophet Yirmeyahu said to the prophet Chananya in the presence of the priests, and in the presence of all the people that stood in the house of the Lord, even the prophet Yirmeyahu said: Amen! The Lord do so! The Lord perform your words which you have prophesied, to bring back the vessels of the Lord's house, and all them that are carried away captive, from Babylonia to this place! Nevertheless hear you now this word that I speak in your ears, and in the ears of all the people: The prophets that have been before me and before you of old prophesied against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war, and of evil, and of pestilence. The prophet that prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord has truly sent him.

Then Chananya the prophet took the bar from off the prophet Yirmeyahu's neck, and broke it. And Chananya spoke in the presence of all the people, saying: Thus says the Lord: Even so will I break the yoke of Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia from off the neck of all the nations within two full years. And the prophet Yirmeyahu went his way.

Then the word of the Lord came to Yirmeyahu, after that Chananya the prophet had broken the bar from off the neck of the prophet Yirmeyahu, saying: Go, and tell Chananya, saying: Thus says the Lord: You have broken the bars of wood; but you shall make in their stead bars of iron. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylonia; and they shall serve him; and I have given him the beasts of the field also.

Then said the prophet Yirmeyahu to Chananya the prophet: Hear now, Chananya; the Lord has not sent you; but you make this people to trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will send you away from off the face of the earth; this year you shall die, because you have spoken perversion against the Lord. So Chananya the prophet died the same year in the seventh month. (*Yirmeyahu* 28)

This prophecy was delivered at the beginning of Tzidkiyahu's reign, in the fifth month of the fourth year, in the house of God before the eyes of the priests and all the people.

In order to better understand the prophecy, let us recall that in chapter 27, already at the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim, Yirmeyahu goes about with bands and bars upon his neck. There it is also noted: "And send them to the king of Edom, and to the king of Moav, and to the kingdom of the children of Amon, and to the king of Tzor, and to the kingdom of Tzidon, by the hand of the messengers that come to Jerusalem to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda" (*Yirmeyahu* 27:3). The kings of Yehuda and the surrounding nations thought to unite and fight against Babylonia when it would come to subjugate them, and from the fourth year of Yehoyakim's reign, Yirmeyahu advised them to abandon their plan and accept upon themselves the yoke of Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia.

Yirmeyahu's placing a wooden yoke on his neck and walking the streets of Jerusalem in that manner was meant to symbolize to Yehuda and the surrounding nations that they must bear the yoke of the king of Babylonia and serve him, for thus was it decreed. In the days of Tzidkiyahu, Yirmeyahu repeated his warning that they must not rebel against Nevuchadnetzar, but rather they must serve him.

Against this backdrop, we can well understand the issue discussed in chapter 28 between the false prophet Chananya ben Azur and the prophet Yirmeyahu. The false prophet Chananya ben Azur informed the priests and the people who were in the Temple that God would return all of the vessels of the house of God that Nevuchadnetzer had taken to Babylonia, and that he would also return King Yekhonya and all of the exiles of Yehuda that had been sent to Babylonia.

Yirmeyahu first expresses his fervent desire that this would indeed happen, and then he asks Chananya ben Azur to listen to his words. Yirmeyahu speaks about the difference between the prophets who prophesied about war, their purpose being to cast fear upon the people so that they might repent in time, and their prophecies proving that they were true prophets; and the prophets who prophesied about peace, contradicting the words of the true prophets.

As for a false prophet, the Torah in the book of *Devarim* states explicitly: "And if you say in your heart: How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you shall not be afraid of him" (*Devarim* 18:21-22).

Therefore, the test regarding the words of Chananya ben Azur is what will actually happen in another two years? If what he said will happen, this is a sign that he spoke the truth, and if not, this is a sign that he did not speak the truth, and that Yirmeyahu was indeed sent by God to prophesy about the calamity to come.

In verse 9 Yirmeyahu alludes to the matter of who is a true prophet: "The prophet that prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord has truly sent him."

Chananya takes the yoke that Yirmeyahu had borne on his neck and breaks it. Chananya demonstrates that with similar ease God will in another two years break the yoke of Nevuchadnetzar from upon the necks of all the nations, and not just from the kingdom of Yehuda.

Yirmeyahu does not respond to Chananya ben Azur's words or action, but merely goes on his way.

Following this incident, God reveals Himself to Yirmeyahu and commands him to go to Chananya and tell him that in place of the bars of wood He will make bars of iron. The meaning of this change is that the bars are a sign of subjugation. The iron bars come to show the weight and nature of the subjugation. God will cast a heavy burden for many years on all of the nations. He is probably referring to the nations mentioned earlier in the words of Yirmeyahu:

Jerusalem, and the cities of Yehuda, and the kings thereof, and the princes thereof, to make them an appalment, an astonishment, a hissing, and a curse; as it is this day; Pharaoh king of Egypt, and his servants, and his princes, and all his people; and all the mingled people; and all the kings of the land of Utz, and all the kings of the land of the Pelishtim, and Ashkelon, and Aza, and Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod; Edom, and Moav, and the children of Amon; and all the kings of Tzor, and all the kings of Tzidon, and the kings of the isle which is beyond the sea; Dedan, and Tema, and Buz, and all that have the corners of their hair polled; and all the kings of Erev, and all the kings of the mingled people that dwell in the wilderness; and all the kings of Zimri, and all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Madai; and all the kings of the north, far and near, one with another; and all the kingdoms of the world, which are upon the face of the earth. And the king of Sheshakh shall drink after them. (*Yirmeyahu* 25:18-26)

There will be no escape from the subjugation of all these nations. God will give Nevuchadnetzar even the beasts of the field, that is to say, undomesticated animals. Even though ordinarily undomesticated animals have no owners, they too will be given to Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia. This is meant to express the absolute control that the Babylonian king will wield, with no way available to escape his rule.

At the end of his words, Yirmeyahu says to Chananya that they both know that God did not send Chananya. But Chananya made the people believe and trust his lies. Yirmeyahu informs him that God will send him away from off the face of the earth, and that he will die within a year, because he spoke perversion against God. As the Torah states there in the book of *Devarim*: "But the prophet, that shall speak a word presumptuously in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die" (*Devarim* 18:20).

Chananya's argument with Yirmeyahu took place in the month of Av. Scripture states that Chananya died that year in the month of Tishrei, that is to say, within several months. It is clear that the short amount of time within which Chananya died proved to the people, on the one hand, that he was a false prophet, and on the other hand, that they should not fool themselves into rebelling against the king of Babylonia.

To complete the picture, let us consider the words of summation of Prof. Yehuda Elitzur:[[1]](#footnote-1)

In summation, on both sides, both Yechezkel in Babylonia and also Yirmeyahu in Eretz Israel, maintain that the future seed of Yehuda is the exile found in Babylonia, and that the remnant who are living in the land of Yehuda have no future. But the salvation of the exile will be neither today nor tomorrow, because the Babylonian exile will be long. The same exile will eventually return to the land of Yehuda and become reestablished there, but not now.

We find, then, two ways of coping in the responses of the members of that generation to the new situation; two lines of political, theological and historical thought. One line of thought came to terms with reality. This reconciliation found expression in three forms, in the framework of three different factions. One group in Eretz Israel said: We remained here and the land is ours, and those who went into exile were exiled. We are the officers, we are the landowners – we are the people of Yehuda. Another group in Babylonia said: We came to Babylonia, we must serve Babylonia, Nevo and Merodakh, like all the others living in this country. We will become Babylonian citizens. A third group was comprised of the elders, who were both proper and moderate. It did not give up its unique character, it wanted to foster and maintain connections to the past and the future of Israel. Therefore they said: We are Jews in Babylonia; hence we must build a Temple to God in Babylonia.

The second line of thought did not come to terms with reality. The party maintaining this line was ready to rebel against Babylonia. It was divided into a Babylonian faction and a faction in Eretz Israel, the two factions united together. The two factions were headed by passionate leaders who inspired the people: Chananya ben Azur in Yehuda, and Achav ben Kuliya, Tzidkiyahu ben Ma'aseya and Shemayahu the Nechlemite in Babylonia. They claimed to be prophets who were sent by God to announce that the exiles would quickly return to the land of Yehuda. There is no reason to build houses, plant gardens or marry women in Babylonia, because Nevuchadnetzar will soon fall and the kingdom of Yekhonya will be restored.

These are the five groups that responded to the new and difficult situation in which the Jewish people found themselves at that time. The prophets facing them, as in many cases, opposed all the camps and disagreed with all of the prevailing opinions. While it may be argued that they were close to the elders who argued that the people should remain faithful to Israel's heritage, the prophets argued that it is forbidden to reach a state of normalization in exile; no Temple, but a little sanctuary. The people should hope to return "after seventy years are accomplished for Babylonia" (*Yirmeyahu* 29:10).

Who is the people of Yehuda? From where will its salvation and future come? The answer given by Yechezkel and Yirmeyahu is that Yehuda's future will arise from the exiles living in Babylonia, but not immediately, as they think, but in the future.

There is an interesting element here that has accompanied Jewish history and the Jewish mentality in different periods. What distinguished the prophets from the various camps among the people is that the eternal people were not prepared to live with problems: We will be like the nations, we will build a Temple in Babylonia, we will return immediately. In many places in the Bible, we find a fierce argument between the prophets and the people. The prophets say: Slow down, history is a process, we must live with problems. A solution will arrive, but not today. In the meantime, seek peace for the city in which you live, pray to God on its behalf, for if it enjoys peace, so will you. In the existing conditions, you cannot expect a complete solution. There will be no normalization, but only a little sanctuary. This is an important line that runs throughout the Bible and accompanies the debates between the people and the prophets at different times. The difference between the reckless who wish to coerce history and reach a solution now, immediately, and the prophets who often preach: Not yet. The time will come, but not now; in the meantime we must live and act in an imperfect reality, in keeping with our eternal principles.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue our examination of Tzidkiyahu's reign as it finds expression in the book of *Yirmeyahu.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Yehuda Elitzur, *Shenei Nevi'im Mul Arba Miflagot; Yirmeyahu bi-Yemei Galut Yehoyakhin*, in: *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, pp. 228-229. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)