YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 359: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(169) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (145)**

In the last few *shiurim*, we have tried to describe the social and spiritual reality of the Jewish people both in the kingdom of Yehuda and in the Babylonian exile, as well as the struggle of the prophet Yirmeyahu in the early days of King Tzidkiyahu.

Just as it is important to understand the spiritual reality of the multitude of false prophets who deluded the people with their false promises, so too it is important to understand the external reality, and the kingdom of Yehuda's attitude toward Babylonia, the superpower to whom the prophet Yirmeyahu preached to the people to surrender, in order to ensure that kingdom of Yehuda and the city of Jerusalem continue to exist.

**Tzidkiyahu’s Oath Not to Rebel against the King of Babylonia**

Early in his reign, King Tzidkiyahu took an oath not to rebel against the king of Babylonia. Where does this oath appear? In *Divrei ha-Yamim*, where it is stated in reference to the reign of Tzidkiyahu: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God; he humbled not himself before Yirmeyahu the prophet speaking from the mouth of the Lord. And he also rebelled against king Nevuchadnetzar, who had made him swear by God; but he stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning to the Lord, the God of Israel" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 36:12-13).  Beyond Tzidkiyahu's overall attitude toward the prophet Yirmeyahu,[[1]](#footnote-1) Scripture mentions here that Nevuchadnetzar had made him take an oath to him, and that Tzidkiyahu rebelled against him. This in itself is a great desecration of the name of God.

Let us first address the oath itself, and then we will examine when and how Tzidkiyah rebelled against Nevuchadnetzar. Tzidkiyahu's oath to Nevuchadnetzar appears in *Yechezkel* 17:

Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Say now to the rebellious house: Know you not what these things mean? tell them: Behold, the king of Babylonia came to Jerusalem, and took the king thereof, and the princes thereof, and brought them to him to Babylonia; and he took of the seed royal, and made a covenant with him, and brought him under an oath, and the mighty of the land he took away; that his might be a lowly kingdom, that it might not lift itself up, but that by keeping his covenant it might stand. But he rebelled against him in sending his ambassadors into Egypt, that they might give him horses and much people. Shall he prosper? shall he escape that does such things? shall he break the covenant, and yet escape? As I live, says the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwells that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he broke, even with him in the midst of Babylonia he shall die. Neither shall Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company succor him in the war, when they cast up mounds and build forts, to cut off many souls; seeing he has despised the oath by breaking the covenant, when, lo, he had given his hand, and has done all these things, he shall not escape. Therefore thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely My oath that he has despised, and My covenant that he has broken, I will even bring it upon his own head. And I will spread My net upon him, and he shall be taken in My snare, and I will bring him to Babylonia, and will plead with him there for his treachery that he has committed against Me. And all his mighty men in all his bands shall fall by the sword, and they that remain shall be scattered toward every wind; and you shall know that I the Lord have spoken it. (*Yechezkel* 17:11-21)

The prophet does not mention Tzidkiyahu by name, but it is clear beyond any doubt that the prophecy relates to him. The content of the covenant is for Yehuda to be a lowly kingdom that will not rebel against Babylonia. The rebellion expressed itself in the sending of ambassadors to Egypt.

It is quite clear that Nevuchadnetzar's primary goal was to establish his position throughout the region, and especially vis-a-vis Egypt. One component of this policy was to make sure that the minor local rulers remain loyal to him. Since Yehoyakhin did not win his trust, he was exiled to Babylonia and held there as a king, with the intention that he would be returned to Yehuda as king if that ever became necessary. Matanya, whose name was changed to Tzidkiyahu, was established as king in his place, and Nevuchadnetzar made a covenant with him and made him swear that he would not rebel against him.

Nevertheless, Tzidkiyahu rebelled, as is spelled out in detail in the book of *Yirmeyahu*:

But the army of the Kasdim pursued after the king, and overtook Tzidkiyahu in the plains of Yericho; and all his army was scattered from him. Then they took the king, and carried him up to the king of Babylonia to Rivla in the land of Chamat; and he gave judgment upon him. And the king of Babylonia slew the sons of Tzidkiyahu before his eyes; he slew also all the princes of Yehuda in Rivla. And he put out the eyes of Tzidkiyahu; and the king of Babylonia bound him in fetters, and carried him to Babylonia, and put him in prison till the day of his death. (*Yirmeyahu* 52:8-11)

Tzidkiyahu broke the covenant and was punished. In addition to the harsh punishment to which the violator of a covenant is liable, the prophet brings another argument, namely, the desecration of God's name. When entering into a covenant, one swears in the name of God, and so one who breaks a covenant also desecrates God's name. He will therefore be brought to Babylonia for the treachery that he committed against God (Yonatan translates, ad loc.: "for the lie that he lied before Him").

The prophet Yechezkel refers to the death of King Tzidkiyahu in Chapter 21: "And you, O wicked one, that are to be slain, the prince of Israel, whose day is come, in the time of the iniquity of the end" (*Yechezkel* 21:30). Because of his wickedness, Tzidkiyahu will be slain, because he is guilty for the calamity that the king of Babylonia will bring upon Jerusalem. Thus the Radak explains in his commentary, ad loc.:

"Whose day is come" – the time has come to remove the kingship from him. "In the time of the iniquity of the end" – in the time when his iniquity caused the end, namely, the end of his kingship. That which it says: "the iniquity of the end" means that because of it [= the iniquity] his end arrived, the iniquity being the false oath that he swore to Nevuchadnetzar in the name of God (see II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 36:13), and his rebellion against him – "seeing he has despised the oath by breaking the covenant" (*Yechezkel* 17:18). Therefore Nevuchadnetzar rose up against him, and blinded him (*Yirmeyahu* 39: 30), and exiled him, and destroyed the land.

**Tzidkiyahu’s Breaking of the Oath**

Tzidkiyahu rebelled against Nevuchadnetzar twice:

**The First Rebellion in the Fourth Year of His Reign**

In the fourth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, ambassadors from Edom, Moav, Amon, Tzur, and Tzidon arrived in Jerusalem in order to discuss the organization of the revolt. The prophet Yirmeyahu warned the kings of the nations, including Tzidkiyahu, not to rebel against Babylonia and not to risk conflict with it. The false prophets in the kingdom of Yehuda encouraged the rebels, but in the end this rebellion never took place. No explanation is given as to why the revolt never occurred.

In the wake of this rebellion, Tzidkiyahu was summoned to come to Babylonia:

The word which Yirmeyahu the prophet commanded Seraya the son of Neriya, the son of Mahseya, when he went with Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda to Babylonia in the fourth year of his reign. Now Seraya was quartermaster. And Yirmeyahu wrote in one book all the evil that should come upon Babylonia, even all these words that are written concerning Babylonia. And Yirmeyahu said to Seraya: When you come to Babylonia, then see that you read all these words, and say: O Lord, You have spoken concerning this place, to cut it off, that none shall dwell therein, neither man nor beast, but that it shall be desolate forever. And it shall be, when you have made an end of reading this book, that You shall bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates; and you shall say: Thus shall Babylonia sink, and shall not rise again because of the evil that I will bring upon her; and they shall be weary. Thus far are the words of Yirmeyahu. (*Yirmeyahu* 51:59-64)

Saraya the son of Neriya is probably the brother of Barukh ben Neriya, and the prophet Yirmeyahu had full confidence in him. It is clear that Saraya took a risk when he did this, because had he been caught with this book in his hands, he would have been seen as a rebel. It would appear that Tzidkiyahu was summoned to come to Babylonia in the wake of the attempted revolt.

Saraya is commanded by Yirmeyahu to read the prophetic scroll and then roll it up, tie a stone to it so that it not float, and throw it into the Euphrates so that it sink deep into its waters.

Yirmeyahu works toward the fulfillment of his prophecies of calamity regarding the nations. Alongside his demand of Tzidkiyahu and the kingdom of Yehuda to surrender to Babylonia and not to rebel against it, he prays and acts to bring about Babylonia's downfall and uproot the wicked kingdom. On the one hand, Israel is required to fulfill the will of God in full manner, in this case to submit to Babylonia. But on the other hand, the enemies who are beating Israel are the enemies of God, and therefore they will receive their full punishment.

**The Second Rebellion in the Ninth Year of Tzidkiyahu’s Reign**

The instigator of the rebellion was Psamtik, the king of Egypt, and after his death, his son Chofra. The plan was that during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (from the tenth of Tevet in the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign until the ninth of Tamuz in Tzidkiyahu's eleventh year), the Egyptian army would advance in a pincer movement. From the north it would capture Tzor and Tzidon by way of the sea, the land of the Phoenicians, and from the south, it would invade Eretz Israel on land.

Even though the Kasdim temporarily removed the siege, apparently in Adar of the eleventh year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, in the end the Egyptian plan failed.

Just as Chizkiyahu thought that the covenant with Egypt would save him from the Assyrian army, but it turned out that Egypt was "a bruised reed" (II *Melakhim* 18:21; *Yeshayahu* 36:6), as stated by Ravshakeh, the representative of the king of Ashur, so too with Tzidkiyahu, it became clear that Egypt could not be relied upon. Alongside this, false prophets in the kingdom of Yehuda and in Babylonia were delivering reassuring prophecies and promising a quick and final victory, and as a result of these prophecies the people were absolutely confident about Jerusalem's strong stand in the future.

At the end of Egypt's rebellion, the kingdom of Yehuda remained on its own in the campaign against Babylonia. During the second uprising, Tzidkiyahu was worried that Jerusalem would fall into the hands of Babylonia. He consulted several times with the prophet. Even if it is possible that he was prepared to surrender to the Kasdim as advised by Yirmeyahu in order to save the city, his ministers overcame him so that their plan to fight Babylonia, as advised by the false prophets, would be implemented. Tzidkiyahu was a weak king who could not overcome his ministers. In practice many fled from the kingdom of Yehuda and those who remained did not want to fight against Babylonia.

In practical terms, in the ninth year of his reign, Tzidkiyahu stopped paying the levy to the king of Babylonia, apparently relying on the military assistance of Chofra, the king of Egypt, against the advice of Yirmeyahu, who had warned that the Egyptian help would be of no avail.

Interestingly, the prophet Yirmeyahu sees Tzidkiyahu's breach of the covenant with the king of Babylonia as a sin against God, much like the prophet Yechezkel. But the arguments adduced by Yirmeyahu are political. Yirmeyahu speaks of the far-reaching changes that God will make in the regimes of the lands surrounding Yehuda when all the nations to whom the prophet turns (Edom, Moav, Amon, Tzur and Tzidon) will serve Nevuchadnetzar the king of Babylonia. Therefore the covenant that those countries are trying to make with Tzidkiyahu at the head will be of no avail: "And afterward, says the Lord, I will deliver Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, and his servants, and the people, and such as are left in this city from the pestilence, from the sword, and from the famine, into the hand of Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia" (*Yirmeyahu* 21:7).

It is possible that the difference between the prophets is that Yechezkel who is living in the Babylonian exile is working on the moral rectification of the rebellious house, and therefore he clearly relates to the issue of the desecration of God's name and to the punishment that comes as a result of the sin. Yirmeyahu who is in the kingdom of Yehuda is trying to influence the concrete reality in his country. His description relates also to the surrounding peoples and to the power of Nevuchadnetzar, and their efforts to cast off his yoke will in the end be of no use.

To complete our study, let us note that *Chazal* describe Tzidkiyahu's oath in a light that is different from the plain meaning of the verses. This is what is stated in tractate *Nedarim*:

Why did he rebel? Tzidkiyahu found Nevuchadnetzar eating a live rabbit. Nevuchadnetzar said to him: Swear to me not to reveal this, that it may not leak out! He swore. Subsequently he grieved about this, and had his vow absolved and disclosed it. (*Nedarim* 65a)

The Sages do not relate here to the personal morality of Nevuchadnetzar, who eats flesh that had been removed from a live animal. The Midrash, however, says as follows: "He brought before him [Nevuchadnetzar] raw meat. He saw Nevuchadnetzar eat it, with saliva running down his beard. Tzidkiyahu looked at him in wonderment, saying: To such a person, the entire world submits?" (*Tanchuma* [Buber] *Va'era* 18).

According to *Chazal*, an oath that comes to cover up Nevuchadnetzar vile nature is forbidden and void from the outset. Tzidkiyahu did not accept Nevuchadnetzar's barbarity and the depth of his moral corruption.

Surrendering to the rule of evil is forbidden and reconciling with it involves agreeing that the world was given into the hands of a wicked person. For the prophet, the kingdom of Babylonia is a kingdom of wickedness, but the sinful kingdom of Israel is not fit to wage war against it. It is asked to surrender to Babylonia, to repair itself, and once again to serve God in proper manner, and by doing so, it will be possible to repair the world and clear it of evil. At this point, surrender is the only way to bring the kingdom of Yehuda to repair its ways internally.

In the next *shiur* we will continue with the prophecies of Yirmeyahu and Yechezkel in the days of Tzidkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We will address this issue in one of the coming *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)