YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 360: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(170) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (146)**

In this *shiur* we would like to study Yechezkel's prophetic journey to Jerusalem, and examine one by one the stages and accounts of that journey. The journey takes place when the elders of Yehuda who are in the Babylonian exile sit before him in his house in the sixth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, which is also the sixth year of the reign of Tzidkiyahu. In this journey, the prophet is taken in a prophetic vision to see the abominations in the Temple that will lead in the end to the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. The journey is described in *Yechezkel*,chapters 8-11.

It is possible that expectations concerning Yehoyakhin's return to Jerusalem arose in the exile, and these expectations brought the elders of Yehuda to turn to the prophet Yechezkel. This suggests that the count of the years to the exile of Yehoyakhin, rather than to the reign of Tzidkiyahu, is not accidental, and that it alludes also to the prophet's inclination toward King Yehoyakhin.

The meaning of these Divine visions is that the destruction of the Temple and the city is inevitable. Even if in fact the Temple is still standing, the prophet in his vision already sees it in ruins. We will look at the beginning of Yechezkel's journey through the abominations in the house of God:

And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, and the elders of Yehuda sat before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell there upon me. Then I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins and downward, fire; and from his loins and upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the color of electrum. And the form of a hand was put forth, and I was taken by a lock of my head; and a spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the gate of the inner court that looks toward the north; where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain. Then said He to me: Son of man, lift up your eyes now the way toward the north. So I lifted up my eyes the way toward the north, and behold northward of the gate of the altar this image of jealousy in the entry. And He said to me: Son of man, see you what they do? even the great abominations that the house of Israel do commit here, that I should go far off from My sanctuary? but you shall again see yet greater abominations.  And He brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, behold a hole in the wall. Then said He to me: Son of man, dig now in the wall; and when I had dug in the wall, behold a door. And He said to me: Go in, and see the wicked abominations that they do here. So I went in and saw; and behold every detestable form of creeping things and beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Yaazneyahu the son of Shafan, every man with his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said He to me: Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in his chambers of imagery? for they say: The Lord sees us not, the Lord has forsaken the land. He said also to me: You shall again see yet greater abominations which they do. Then He brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat the women weeping for Tammuz. Then said He to me: Have you seen this, O son of man? You shall again see yet greater abominations than these. And He brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house, and, behold, at the door of the Temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east. Then He said to me: Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it a light thing to the house of Yehuda that they commit the abominations which they commit here in that they fill the land with violence, and provoke Me still more, and, lo, they put the branch to their nose? Therefore will I also deal in fury; My eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them. (*Yechezkel* 8:1-18)

It may be suggested that the great concentration of idolatry described in this journey is not only what is happening now in the house of God, but also a kind of summary of the reality of the idolatry in the house of God in Jerusalem that eventually led to the destruction of the First Temple.

**The Seat of the image of Jealousy, which Provokes to Jealousy**

The prophet is brought to the door of the gate of the inner court that looks toward the north, where was the seat of the image (*semel*) of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. We are apparently dealing with the northern part of the central courtyard, north of the burnt-offering altar.

The word *semel*, "image," appears in *Devarim*: "Lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image, even the form (*semel*) of any figure, the likeness of male or female" (*Devarim* 4:16).

The last mention of idolatry in the house of God is from the time of King Menashe:

And he built altars in the house of the Lord, whereof the Lord said: In Jerusalem will I put My name. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord… And he set the graven image of Ashera, that he had made, in the house of which the Lord said to David and to Shelomo his son: In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, will I put My name for ever. (II *Melakhim* 21:4-7)

It is quite clear that King Yoshiyahu uprooted all of the idolatry in the kingdom of Yehuda and in the house of God. If so it turns out that when Yechezkel mentions the image of jealousy that provokes to jealousy, he is referring to that which existed in the days of Menashe, or else he is describing the reality in the house of God after the days of Yoshiyahu (in the days of Yehoyakim, Yehoyakhin, or Tzidkiyahu).

In all, the word *semel* appears in Scripture five times: once in *Devarim*, 4, twice in *Yechezkel* 8, and two more times in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 33 (vv. 7 and 15), in the context of the idolatry that Menashe had introduced into the Temple. *Devarim* 4 describes the sins of idolatry. These prohibitions were in fact transgressed in the house of God at the end of the First Temple period. The parallel to Menashe is evident both in the act itself of placing the graven image in the house of God, and in the severe consequences of his action with regard to the destruction of the city and the Temple.

Both in *Melakhim* and in *Divrei ha-Yamim* Scripture mentions the placement of the image: "And he set the graven image of Ashera, that he had made, in the house of which the Lord said to David and to Shelomo his son: In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, will I put My name forever" (II *Melakhim* 21:7; II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 33:7). The mention of the setting of the image in the house of God, along with the mention of David and Shelomo and the Divine selection of Jerusalem in their days, comes to say that because of Menashe's actions that selection was revoked. Therefore, King Menashe himself is informed about the destruction of Jerusalem: "And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Shomron, and the plummet of the house of Achav, and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down" (II *Melakhim* 21:13).

Despite the repentance and great repair that took place in the days of Yoshiyahu, after Yoshiyahu turns to the prophetess Chulda with the discovery of the book of the law in the house of God, Chulda answers as follows: "Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Yehuda has read; because they have forsaken Me, and have offered to other gods, that they might provoke Me with all the work of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and it shall not be quenched" (II *Melakhim* 22:16-17). The decree of Jerusalem's destruction remains in place.

Therefore, after the description of Yoshiyahu's removal of idolatry throughout the country and his uprooting of the *bamot* in all places, we read: "Notwithstanding the Lord turned not from the fierceness of His great wrath, wherewith His anger was kindled against Yehuda, because of all the provocations wherewith Menashe had provoked Him" (II *Melakhim* 23:26). So too in the days of Yehoyakim, Scripture repeats: "Surely at the commandment of the Lord came this upon Yehuda, to remove them out of His sight, for the sins of Menashe, according to all that he did; and also for the innocent blood that he shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood; and the Lord would not pardon" (II *Melakhim* 24:3-4).

The prophet Yirmeyahu himself says this: "And I will cause them to be a horror among all the kingdoms of the earth, because of Menashe the son of Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda, for that which he did in Jerusalem. For who shall have pity upon you, O Jerusalem? Or who shall bemoan you? Or who shall turn aside to ask of your welfare? You have cast Me off, says the Lord, you are gone backward; therefore do I stretch out My hand against you, and destroy you; I am weary with repenting" (*Yirmeyahu* 15:4-6).

An examination of all the verses that we have cited from the days of King Menashe himself, from the days of Yoshiyahu and Yehoyakim, and from the mouth of the prophet Yirmeyahu, indicates that prophetic judgment makes a strong connection between the actions of King Menashe and the destruction of the Temple (all this despite Menashe's own repentance that is described in II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 33:10-20).

Therefore, it is not by chance that in Yechezkel's prophetic journey, the first thing among the various abominations that he sees is the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. Whether we are dealing with Menashe's image itself, or we are dealing with its restoration after the days of Yoshiyahu, there is a direct connection between this image and the destruction of the Temple.

**Every Detestable Form of Creeping Things and Beasts**

The prophet sees detestable forms of creeping things and beasts portrayed upon the walls of the Temple. Beyond the fact that creeping things are impure and impart impurity, the worship of monstrous creatures like these is exceedingly grave:

Take you therefore good heed to yourselves, for you saw no manner of form on the day that the Lord spoke to you in Chorev out of the midst of the fire, lest you deal corruptly, and make you a graven image, even the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flies in the heaven, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. (*Devarim* 4:15-18)

It is possible that this form of worship was brought from Egypt or Babylonia, and perhaps the people attributed superhuman qualities to these creatures. Before the images portrayed on the walls stand seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, each man with his censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense going up.

**Yaazenyahu the Son of Shafan**

Among the seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, mention is made of Yaazneyahu the son of Shafan. We do not know exactly to which family he belongs, and whether he is perhaps the brother of Achikam the son of Shafan who is mentioned in the time of Yoshiyahu together with Shafan the scribe (II *Melakhim* 22:12). That same Achikam is mentioned in the book of *Yirmeyahu* following the account of the killing of Uriya the son of Shemayahu the prophet from Kiryat-Ye'arim at the hand of King Yehoyakhin, as one who defended Yirmeyahu: "Nevertheless the hand of Achikam the son of Shafan was with Yirmeyahu, that they should not give him into the hand of the people to put him to death" (*Yirmeyahu* 26:24). He may be connected to Gemaryahu the son of Shafan the scribe who is mentioned in the time of King Yehoyakim (*Yirmeyahu* 36:10). It is very possible that he belongs to the Shafan family, even though there is no clear statement of relationship to one of the family members.

The Shafan family was one of the most important families in the kingdom of Yehuda, loyal to God and His servants the prophets, which tried at the end of the First Temple period to rehabilitate the people and bring them to repent. From Shafan himself who was appointed by King Yoshiyahu to organize the purification of the country, through Achikam who rescued Yirmeyahu, and Gedalyahu his grandson who was appointed by the Babylonians to head the remnant of the people which remained in the country and did not go into exile.

Based on this hypothesis, two important things can be learned from this mention of Yaazneyahu. We are dealing with an important and influential family in Jerusalem's society. So too we are dealing with a family that for several generations demonstrated exemplary loyalty to God and His prophets. If it is possible that one of the members of this family actively participated in the idol worship conducted in the house of God together with seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, this teaches that even important God-fearing families were not immune to idolatry. Therefore, the mention made of Yaazneyahu in this context teaches us how widespread and strong was the worship of idols in Jerusalem and in the Temple at that time.

**What the Elders of the House of Israel do in the Dark, Every Man in His Chambers of Imagery [*Chadrei Maskito*]**

As for the meaning of the words *chadrei maskito*, there are those who understand the phrase in the sense of "cover." On the other hand, the phrase brings to mind the Torah's prohibition in the book of *Vayikra*: "You shall not place any figured [*maskit*] stone in your land, to bow down on it" (*Vayikra* 26:1). If so, the reference is to a room the floor of which is covered in stone and people bow down on it, thereby transgressing the prohibition when done outside the Temple courtyard. A third possibility is that *maskit* means "decorated, painted."

It is quite possible that the prophet is referring to what he sees in the homes of the elders of Israel, and not in the Temple itself. If so, the elders are acting in secret. They may not have considered practicing such idolatry in public, and so they did so only in the privacy of their own homes. If so, this involves even greater disdain for God's honor, seeing that these people feared human beings but not God.

**The Lord Sees Us Not, The Lord Has Forsaken the Land**

This phrase appears for the first time here in our chapter, and twice in all of Scripture. On the face of it, the reason that the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in his chambers of imagery, is: "For they say: The Lord sees us not, the Lord has forsaken the land" (*Yechezkel* 8:12). In chapter 9, it says: "Then said He to me: The iniquity of the house of Israel and Yehuda is exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of wresting of judgment; for they say: The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord sees not" (*Yechezkel* 9:9). There appear to be two statements here: "The Lord sees not" – that is to say, there is here a denial of God's knowledge of the particular. As it were, that which a person does in private is not seen by God. "The Lord has forsaken the land" – this is a denial of God's providence.

The Ramban in *Parashat Shemot* says:

From the time that there was idol worship in the world, from the days of Enosh, opinions regarding faith began to go wrong… Some denied God's knowledge of the particular: "And they say: How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" (*Tehilim* 73:11). Others concede knowledge, but deny providence, making man like the fish of the sea, who God does not oversee, and who are not subject to reward and punishment. They say that the Lord has forsaken the land. (*Shemot* 13:15)

A worldview which denies God's knowledge of particulars and His providence over the entire world essentially maintains that there is no reward and punishment. There is no obligation falling upon man to do anything; there are no rules of conduct.

This is a negation of the words of Yirmeyahu: "Great in counsel, and mighty in work; whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (*Yirmeyahu* 32:19); and also of God's involvement in what happens in the world in the wake of man's actions, as we find in the Torah: "And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (*Bereishit* 6:5). Seeing in the wake of which God decided to flood the world and erase all that is on the earth, from man to beast, from creeping thing to the birds of heaven. God's seeing leads to His taking steps relating to man's actions.

The Torah offers a general description of God's providence over Eretz Israel: "A land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (*Devarim* 11:12). Or as the prophet Zekharya says: "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro through the whole earth"(*Zekharya* 4:10).

There is a special connection between Divine Providence and the Temple as was explained by King Shelomo at the time of the dedication of the house of God. He said as follows: "That Your eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place whereof You have said: My name shall be there; to hearken to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place" (I *Melakhim* 8:29). And in the continuation: "That Your eyes may be open to the supplication of Your servant, and to the supplication of Your people Israel, to hearken to them whenever they cry to You" (I *Melakhim* 8:52). And similarly when God appears to Shelomo in the wake of the dedication of the Temple: "And the Lord said to him: I have heard your prayer and your supplication, that you have made before Me: I have hallowed this house, which you have built, to put My name there forever; and My eyes and My heart shall be there perpetually" (I *Melakhim* 9:3).

The Temple expresses more than anything else God's providence over His creations and the revelation of His presence in the world. Yechezkel sees all of the abominations committed in the house of God as coming to blatantly deny God's connection to His people, His land, and His Temple. Therefore, they are a clear expression of the world view that "God left the land, God does not see us."

**The Women Who Weep for Tammuz**

With each of the abominations the prophet is brought to another – usually more inner – place. Here he is brought to the door of the gate of the house of God which was toward the north, that is to say, the prophet is brought from the outer court to the northern gate of the Temple. There the women mourn for the land and weep for Tammuz.

We are familiar with this worship from inscriptions from the ancient near east. Tammuz is the name of the Sumerian god of the shepherds, Dumuzi. He is regarded as the god of plant life who plays a central role in fertility rites. He is described as a tragic figure of a dying God who goes down to Sheol and comes back to life each year. During his stay in Sheol, lamentation ceremonies of a magical character are conducted in his honor. These rituals are performed specifically by women.

**Bowing Down to Heaven**

The prophet is brought to the inner courtyard of the house of God between the porch and the altar, and he sees twenty five men with their backs toward the Temple of God, and facing eastward and bowing toward the sun.

An explicit prohibition to bow down to the host of heaven is found in the book of *Devarim*: "And lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, even all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them, and serve them" (*Devarim* 4:19). And similarly in the continuation: "And has gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, or the sun, or the moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have commanded not" (*Devarim* 17:3).

Turning to the sun is a natural thing to do. Every morning sunrise is an exceedingly significant occurrence: light, heat, photosynthesis, life. The idolatrous world very quickly accustomed itself to turning to the sun every day and bowing down to it.

The direction of the Temple service was always east to west. Therefore, the Holy of Holies, the holiest chamber in the Temple, is on the western side (according to Rabbi Akiva). There are two explanations of the opinion that the *Shekhina* is in the west. First, to counter the idolaters who turn eastward toward the sun, and second, "And the host of heaven bow down to You" (*Nechemya* 9:6). As it were, the host of heaven, the sun, the moon and the stars, bow down every day as they shine from east to west toward the *Shekhina*, and the priest serving in the Temple acts, as it were, as the representative of all of creation. It is as if he represents all the host of heaven in his very bowing down toward the west.

The Mishna in *Sukka* describes the water libation ceremony:

When they reached the gate which leads out to the east, they turned their faces from east to west and proclaimed: Our fathers who were in this place stood with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun toward the east. But as for us, our eyes are turned toward the Lord. Rabbi Yehuda said: They used to repeat the last words and say: We are the Lord's and our eyes are turned to the Lord. (*Sukka* 5:4)

That is to say, we are not like them, as we turn to God in the west.

**They Fill the Land with Violence (*Chamas*)**

It is reasonable to assume that *chamas* is a violent social iniquity, as it is mentioned already in connection with the flood: "For the earth is filled with violence (*chamas*) through them" (*Bereishit* 6:13). This phrase might come to allude that in addition to the abomination of idolatry in the Temple, there are also moral, social sins in the kingdom of Yehuda for which they will be punished. Another possibility is that it indicates the severity of the matter and of the expected punishment.

In this *shiur* we saw four abominations of the people of Israel that take place on the Temple grounds. The prophet sees through Divine visions four symbolic sins – the image of jealousy, images on the walls and the burning of incense, weeping for Tammuz, and bowing down to the sun. Each vision appears to be more severe than the previous one, and each one takes place in a different place in the Temple. Each time it seems to be in a more internal place in the Temple.

We have seen that the prophet describes abominations that the Torah already warned against in *Devarim* 4.

The account of these abominations serves as the backdrop of the description of the departure of God's glory from the Temple, which is described in detail in chapters 9-11 and will be the subject of the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)