YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

**Rav Yitzchak Levy**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

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**Lecture 368: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(178) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (154)**

In the previous *shiur*, we dealt with Yechezkel's prophecy concerning Ohola and Oholiva, that is, Shomeron and Jerusalem. This is an exceedingly severe prophecy of destruction that describes Israel's harlotry and the harsh punishment that awaits them.

The prophecy in chapter 24, unlike the previous prophecies, has a precise date – the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu, the tenth month the month of Tevet, the tenth of the month. The prophet is commanded to record for himself the name of the day, this selfsame day, the day on which the king of Babylonia lays siege on Jerusalem.

This chapter closes the first part of Yechezkel's prophecies; from now on the prophet will invest his energy in preparing the people for their salvation.

The chapter contains two prophecies. The first one explains once again the parable found in the mouths of the people: "this city is the cauldron, and we are the flesh" (verses 1-14). The second prophecy describes the death of the prophet's wife in a plague and the prohibition to mourn her. The meaning of this death is the destruction of the Temple.

And the word of the Lord came to me in the ninth year, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, saying: Son of man, write you the name of the day, even of this selfsame day; this selfsame day the king of Babylonia has invested Jerusalem. And utter a parable concerning the rebellious house, and say to them: Thus says the Lord God, Set on the pot, set it on, and also pour water into it; Gather into it the pieces belonging to it, even every good piece, the thigh, and the shoulder; fill it with the choice bones. Take the choice of the flock, and pile also the bones under it; make it boil well, that the bones thereof may also be seethed in the midst of it. 

Therefore thus says the Lord God: Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose filth is therein, and whose filth is not gone out of it! bring it out piece by piece; no lot is fallen upon it. For her blood is in the midst of her; she set it upon the bare rock; she poured it not upon the ground, to cover it with dust; that it might cause fury to come up, that vengeance might be taken, I have set her blood upon the bare rock, that it should not be covered….

Also the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with a stroke; yet neither shall you make lamentation nor weep, neither shall your tears run down. Sigh in silence; make no mourning for the dead, bind your headtire upon you, and put your shoes upon your feet, and cover not your upper lip, and eat not the bread of men. So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded. And the people said to me: Will you not tell us what these things are to us, that you do so? Then I said to them: The word of the Lord came to me, saying: Speak to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the desire of your eyes, and the longing of your soul; and your sons and your daughters whom you have left behind shall fall by the sword. And you shall do as I have done: you shall not cover your upper lips, nor eat the bread of men; and your tires shall be upon your heads, and your shoes upon your feet; you shall not make lamentation nor weep; but you shall pine away in your iniquities, and moan one toward another. Thus shall Yechezkel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done shall you do; when this comes, then shall you know that I am the Lord God. 

And you, son of man, shall it not be in the day when I take from them their stronghold, the joy of their glory, the desire of their eyes, and the yearning of their soul, their sons and their daughters, that in that day he that escapes shall come to you, to cause you to hear it with your ears? In that day shall your mouth be opened together with him that is escaped, and you shall speak, and be no more dumb; so shall you be a sign to them; and they shall know that I am the Lord. (*Yechezkel* 24)

### "THis city is the cauldron and we are the flesh"

This slogan was commonly found in the mouths of the people, as we saw earlier: "That say: The time is not near to build houses! this city is the caldron, and we are the flesh (*Yechezkel* 11:3), and it was meant to encourage the people and infuse the residents of Jerusalem with hope. The walls of Jerusalem are the cauldron, and the residents of the city are the flesh. Just as the cauldron protects the meat and allows it to be cooked at the desired rate and with the desired taste, so too the walls of Jerusalem protect its inhabitants from any siege or attack on the part of the enemy.

It is clear that this very idea is a continuation of what we saw explicitly in *Yirmeyahu* 7 in a prophecy from the days of Yehoyakim, in which the prophet Yirmeyahu turns to the people with a plea that they should not believe the false prophets. In that prophecy the prophet criticized the members of the kingdom of Yehuda who viewed the very existence of the Temple as an insurance policy. From their perspective, this over-confidence in the existence of the Temple means that God will preserve and protect them no matter what, and there is no connection between their behavior and the continued standing of the Temple. Seeing that they are protected, there is no need to repair their sins.

On the face of it, the slogan, "this city is the cauldron and we are the flesh," also stems from the same idea that the people of Israel have an insurance policy and that the walls of the city of Jerusalem will protect them, and therefore they are not required to change their actions in any way.

The prophet gives new meaning to the parable of the cauldron and the flesh that is drastically different from what was commonly accepted in the kingdom of Yehuda until that time. What the parable means is that the flesh that is found in the cauldron will become thoroughly burnt as a result of a strong and continuous fire and that the cauldron itself will be burnt by it. In other words, rather than protecting those located in the city, the walls will turn into a fire trap and the residents and the city itself will be completely burned.

The stages of the calamity as the prophet describes them are as follows: Placing the good pieces of meat into the pot so that they should cook well, and the removal of the good pieces from the pot. This is an allusion to the exile of Yehoyakhin and of the craftsmen and the smiths. What remains in the pot are the inferior pieces of meat, the residents of Jerusalem in the days of King Tzidkiyahu. The pot remains on the fire and it itself is burnt. This is the destruction of the city itself.

The Radak explains the prophetic message by way of the parable of the cauldron:

**This is what a person first does with a cauldron. He sets it down over the fire, and then pours water into it, and then puts the meat into it, and then burns a fire under it until the meat is cooked. Setting the cauldron down over a fire is a parable for the king of Babylonia coming close to Jerusalem, for that was the first thing that he did. Pouring the water into the cauldron is a parable for the fact that the fire will not immediately take hold of the city, for water slows down the cooking process, for when there is no water, the fire takes hold and the meat is quickly roasted, but when there is water, the meat cooks slowly. In the same way the days of siege dragged on from the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign to the eleventh year, so that the people would die slowly of hunger, plague and the sword. (*Yechezkel* 24:3)**

**The prophet defines the cauldron as a bloody city. This is the city of Jerusalem whose filth and grime have not yet been removed from it. The people living in the city have not yet repented. In verse 12, the prophet says: "It has wearied itself with toil; yet its great filth goes not forth out of it, yea, its noisome filth." What this means is that lies and deceit have led to weariness. The only way to remove the filth is by way of destruction.**

**The prophet goes on to describe the cause of the city's burning: the massive bloodshed that took place in it, and the blood that was never covered. Iyov said: "O earth, cover not you my blood, and let my cry have no resting place" (*Iyov* 16:18). On the face of it, the foundation of this matter is God's question to Kayin in the wake of the murder of Hevel**: "And he said: What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground" (*Bereishit* 4:10).

The underlying assumption is that when blood is shed the blood cries out and demands vengeance, even after it has been absorbed in the ground. In any event, this image of blood demanding vengeance and refusing to be absorbed in the ground became firmly rooted in the people's imagination, and he who succeeds in covering the blood silences the cries for revenge, as we find in the Aggadot about the destruction relating to the prophet Zekharya (*Yerushalmi*, *Ta'anit* 4:5). Therefore the prophet here describes how the blood shed by the residents of Jerusalem was never absorbed by the ground. It rests upon dry rock. It is spilled without shame, and people do not even bother to cover it with dust, as people are accustomed to do with the blood of animals and fowl after they have been slaughtered (*Vayikra* 17:13). God too will act in accordance with their deeds.

### "behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with a plague"

**The prophet is informed that God will take from him the desire of his eyes with a plague. It is clear from verse 18 that the reference is to the death of the prophet's wife. It is also clear from the series of prophecies that his wife's death takes place on the tenth of Tevet in the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign.**

**Beyond the tragic death of the prophet's wife for the sins of the people of Israel, the prophet is forbidden to mourn. He must not make lamentation, weep, or raise his voice, and at the same time he must continue to wear his head covering and his shoes, and not cover his upper lip or eat of a mourner's meal.**

**The prophet is commanded to do these things so that all the people will see that he is acting in a way contrary to the usual mourning practices and try to understand the meaning of such behavior. Why is he forbidden to mourn? On the face of it, all of the mourning rites are intended to internalize the death of the person being mourned, to digest the meaning of the event and supposedly to allow some kind of communion with the soul of the deceased. The simple meaning of the ban on mourning is refusal to reconcile with death, keeping death present in an open manner.**

**The prohibition cast upon Yechezkel to mourn his wife is similar to what happened in the wake of the death of Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu, as is described in *Vayikra* 10:6-7. Moshe says to Aharon, Elazar and Itamar that they must not let their hair go loose, or rend their clothes, or go out from the door of the Tent of Meeting. In both cases, the verses deal not with the impurity imparted by the corpse but with mourning. The relatives of the deceased are barred from mourning their loss because of the communal role that they fulfill. In the case of Aharon and his sons, mourning impairs the sanctity of the priesthood, for if they mourn they cannot continue serving in the Temple. In the case of Yechezkel, the reason not to mourn is that he must be "for them a sign."**

**Rashi in *Yechezkel* addresses the question why the prophet is forbidden to mourn:**

You shall not observe the mourning rites, as there are none to comfort you, for there is no one among you who will not be a mourner, and there is no mourning without comforters. Another explanation: You will be afraid to cry before the Chaldeans among whom you reside. (Rashi, *Yechezkel* 24:22)

**Rashi proposes two realistic and practical interpretations. If everyone is mourning, there is no one who can comfort. That is to say, in a case of such extreme collective suffering, there is no possibility of consolation. Usually, the mourner is the exception, and everybody else comforts him. Here, however, everyone should be in mourning, and this is a practical impossibility. The second explanation is concern about how such weeping will be interpreted by the Chaldeans.**

**Beyond that, and as we initially suggested, it may be that avoiding grief constitutes some kind of Divine punishment or acceptance of God's decree.**

**Without mourning at both the private and national levels, the abscess will remain as a living and present wound in the body, without encouragement. It is quite clear that with the death of the prophet's wife, the prophet's troubles are the troubles of the entire nation. The prophet is a living symbol of his mission. The prophet and his mission are, as it were, identical. In this act alone of his wife's death there is an identity between personal and public interest.**

**Obviously, the ban on grieving in general and in the eyes of the people in particular poses a major question mark as to the meaning of this sign. The prophet delivers the word of God to the people: "**Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the desire of your eyes, and the longing of your soul; and your sons and your daughters whom you have left behind shall fall by the sword" (v. 21). **That is to say, there is a full and direct parallel between the death of Yechezkel's wife and the destruction of the Temple. This correspondence teaches us that in a certain sense the relationship between God and the people of Israel is considered like the relationship between husband and wife, and the Temple expresses more than anything else God's presence in the world, its destruction being likened to the death of a wife.**

**This relationship appears in the Gemara in *Yoma* which states: "Rav Katina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the *parokhet* would be removed for them and the *keruvim* were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwisted with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman" (*Yoma* 54a). One *keruv* represents, as it were, God, and the other *keruv* represents the people of Israel, and Israel's very pilgrimage brings the *keruvim* to change their position and embrace one another. This Midrash as well expresses in a most original and unmediated manner the connection between Israel and God as a connection between husband and wife.**[[1]](#footnote-1)

***Chazal* in *Sanhedrin* relate to the prophecy in our chapter and say:**

**Rabbi Yochanan said: Any man whose wife dies first, it is as if the Temple were destroyed during his lifetime. As it is stated: "**Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes with a stroke; yet neither shall you make lamentation nor weep, neither shall your tears run down." And it is written: "So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died." And it is written: "Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, the pride of your power, the desire of your eyes**." (*Sanhedrin* 22a)**

**There is, however, a difference, namely, that the prophet's wife is taken from him, whereas it is God who profanes the Temple. Profaning the Temple means that this is an irreversible action. Just as the prophet is commanded not to mourn his wife's death, so too the people of Israel are commanded not to mourn the destruction of the Temple. Here too, after the meaning of the parable and the prohibition to mourn is clarified, all of the Jewish people, upon being informed about the destruction, must not weep or make lamentation, but rather they must remain silent and do nothing. In this way the reality of a destroyed Temple will remain present as an open wound, with no attempt made to digest, process or reconcile with its absence.**

"Thus shall Yechezkel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done shall you do; when this comes, then shall you know that I am the Lord God." With the arrival of the destruction, it will become clear to all that Yechezkel spoke the truth and that he was a sign. The end of the chapter describes the arrival of the escapee. It is possible that the Babylonians did not allow the refugees from after the destruction to join with the original exiles, hoping thereby to subdue them even further, and therefore only a single escapee arrives in the end and tells them about the destruction.

The prophet is told that on that day his mouth shall be opened. With the destruction the role of the prophet completely changes. On the one hand, all of Yechezkel's prophecies of doom come to an end. Until now the prophet spoke before the elders of the people who came to him, he remained quiet and did not leave his house. From now on his mouth will open with no bounds. Following the destruction, the prophet is charged with the task of raising up the people from the destruction, strengthening their spirits and guiding them with words of salvation.

In conclusion, it may be noted that there is a great novelty in Yechezkel's prophecy, namely, that the day that the siege was laid on Jerusalem is considered like the day of its destruction, with the death of his wife on that very day. That is to say, the very touching of the walls of Jerusalem defiles the entire city, which essentially means that the destruction has already arrived. In other words, we are not dealing with a gradual process of laying siege, breaching the city walls, and destroying the Temple, but rather the inner meaning of the siege is destruction.

In addition, the main destruction lies in the profanation of the holy, and not in the loss of the kingdom. Regarding these two points, the prophecy of Yechezkel stands out in comparison to the prophecy of Yirmeyahu.

In the next *shiur*, we will return to Yirmeyahu's prophecy in the days of Tzidkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. There are many other sources that express this idea, but this is not the place to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)