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 in loving memory of

Dr. Saul G. Agus, z”l

Whose 5th Yarzheit is Iyar 3

Marcelle A. Agus and

the Agus /Fox Families

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**Lecture 369: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(179) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (155)**

Having dealt in recent *shiurim* with the prophet Yechezkel's account of the abominations of Jerusalem, his wife's death, and the report of the destruction of the Temple, we wish today to return to Yirmeyahu's prophecies during the days of King Tzidkiyahu.

As the security and political reality became more and more difficult (the siege of Jerusalem, the breaching of the city's walls), Tzidkiyahu appealed to Yirmeyahu and asked to hear his opinion and that he should pray for the deliverance of the people of Israel.

In terms of dates, the order of events is as follows:

In the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, in the tenth month, came Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia and all his army against Jerusalem, and besieged it.

In the eleventh year of Tzidkiyahu, in the fourth month, the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city – that all the princes of the king of Babylonia came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergal-Saretzer, Samgar-Nevo, Sarsekhim Rav-Saris, Nergal-Saretzer Rav-Mag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylonia. And it came to pass, that when Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda and all the men of war saw them, then they fled, and went forth out of the city by night, by the way of the king's garden, by the gate between the two walls; and he went out the way of the Arava. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued after them, and overtook Tzidkiyahu in the plains of Yericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia to Rivla in the land of Chamat, and he gave judgment upon him. Then the king of Babylonia slew the sons of Tzidkiyahu in Rivla before his eyes; also the king of Babylonia slew all the nobles of Yehuda. Moreover he put out Tzidkiyahu's eyes, and bound him in fetters, to carry him to Babylonia. And the Chaldeans burned the king's house, and the house of the people, with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. (*Yirmeyahu* 39:1-8)

In the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, in the month of Tevet, the siege of Jerusalem began. In the eleventh year on the 9th of Tammuz, the wall of the city of Jerusalem was breached. With the breaching of the wall, Tzidkiyahu and all his soldiers fled from the city by way of the Arava. The Chaldeans pursued them and overtook them on the plains of Yericho, brought Tzidkiyahu to Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia, slaughtered his sons before his very eyes, blinded him and put him in shackles. Afterwards, they burned the king's house and the house of the people.

Therefore, the prophecies delivered by Yirmeyahu to Tzidkiyahu toward the end of his reign are basically from the time of the siege in Tevet in the ninth year of his reign, to Tammuz in the eleventh year of his reign when the king flees from the city.

Tzidkiyahu sends messengers to Yirmeyahu in order to ask him to pray for the city. The first delegation is that of Pashchur the son of Malkiya and Tzefanya the son of Ma'asiya the priest:

The word which came to Yirmeyahu from the Lord, when king Tzidkiyahu sent to him Pashchur the son of Malkiya, and Tzefanya the son of Ma'asiya the priest, saying: Inquire, I pray you, of the Lord for us; for Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia makes war against us; perhaps the Lord will deal with us according to all His wondrous works, that he may go up from us.

Then said Yirmeyahu to them: Thus shall you say to Tzidkiyahu: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands, with which you fight against the king of Babylonia, and against the Chaldeans, that besiege you outside the walls, and I will gather them into the midst of this city. And I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and with a strong arm, even in anger, and in fury, and in great wrath. And I will smite the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast; they shall die of a great pestilence. 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, and into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those that seek their life; and he shall smite them with the edge of the sword; he shall not spare them, neither have pity, nor have compassion. And to this people you shall say: Thus says the Lord: Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. He that abides in this city shall die by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence; but he that goes out, and falls away to the Chaldeans that besiege you, he shall live, and his life shall be to him for a prey.(*Yirmeyahu* 21:1-9)

**Paschur the Son of Malkiya and Tzefanya the Son of Ma’asiya the Priests**

The people who are sent to the prophet are priests. Pashchur the son of Malkiya is mentioned among the important people who heard the words of Yirmeyahu in the court of the guard, when he repeated what he had said that he who remains in Jerusalem will die by the sword and by the famine and by the pestilence, whereas he that surrenders to the Chaldeans will live:

And Shefatya the son of Matan, and Gedalyahu the son of Pashchur, and Yukhal the son of Shelemyahu, and Pashchur the son of Malkiya, heard the words that Yirmeyahu spoke to all the people, saying: Thus says the Lord: He that remains in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence; but he that goes forth to the Chaldeans shall live, and his life shall be to him for a prey, and he shall live. (*Yirmeyahu* 38:1-2)

The fact that Pashchur was the son of Malkiya the priest is proven from Nechemya 11:10, 12. Tzefanya the son of Ma'asiya the priest is mentioned already in *Yirmeyahu* 29:25 regarding the letter that the false prophet Shema'aya the Nechelamite sent from Babylonia to the priests and the people in Jerusalem, and especially to Tzefanya the son of Ma'asiya the priest. In the letter, Shema'aya scolded Tzefanya for not having prevented Yirmeyahu from prophesying in the Temple against the rebellion and for not punishing him for the prophecies that he delivered.

It is Tzefanya who reads the letter to Yirmeyahu (*Yirmeyahu* 29:29). Tzefanya will also be included in the second delegation that King Tzidkiyahu will send to Yirmeyahu (*Yirmayehu* 37:3). The fact that he reads the letter to Yirmeyahu and that earlier he refrained from punishing Yirmeyahu for his prophecies seems to indicate his loyalty to Yirmeyahu, and perhaps this is the reason that Tzidkiyahu sent him on two separate missions to the prophet.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The request that the priestly delegation made of the prophet Yirmeyahu was that he should pray to God on behalf of the people, the content of that prayer being that God should perform a kindness for Israel and bring Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia to go up from the kingdom of Yehuda. In fact, the king was hoping for a miracle that the Chaldeans would remove the siege that they had placed on the cities of Yehuda.

**Yirmeyahu’s Reply to the Delegation – Only Surrender to Babylonia will Save the King and the Kingdom**

Yirmeyahu's answer to the delegation was just the opposite of what King Tzidkiyahu had hoped for. God directs the fighters who had exited the city to fight the Chaldeans back into the city together with their weapons. The prophet then says something very harsh in the name of God: God Himself will fight the inhabitants of Jerusalem. God Himself will destroy the kingdom of Yehuda.

The prophet reiterates his fundamental position that he had sounded already in the days of King Yehoyakim: He that remains in this city will die by the sword, by famine, and by the pestilence, but he that surrenders to the king of Babylonia who is laying siege on Jerusalem will live. God has set His eyes against Jerusalem for evil and the king of Babylonia will burn it down, and therefore there is no hope that the city will be saved.

Menachem Bola notes[[2]](#footnote-2) that Yirmeyahu's prophecy that Tzidkiyahu would be caught by the Babylonians was delivered to the king five times. The first time is in our chapter in the answer to the delegation of priests that Tzidkiyahu had sent to the prophet. The second time is after the capture of the fortified cities of the kingdom of Yehuda, when Lakhish, Azaka and Jerusalem were also close to falling:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Go, and speak to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, and tell him: Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylonia, and he shall burn it with fire; and you shall not escape out of his hand, but shall surely be taken, and delivered into his hand; and your eyes shall behold the eyes of the king of Babylonia, and he shall speak with you mouth to mouth, and you shall go to Babylonia. (*Yirmeyahu* 34:2-3)

The third time is when Pharaoh's army came from Egypt to the assistance of Yehuda and the Chaldeans stopped the siege and went off to contend with the Egyptian army. Then Tzidkiyahu sent a second delegation to Yirmeyahu in order to seek counsel from God, and God's answer was that Pharaoh will return to his land, and Nevuchadnetzar will renew the siege on Jerusalem, capture it, and burn it down (*Yirmeyahu* 37:3-10).

The fourth time is after the siege was renewed and Tzidkiyahu's fears had grown. Tzidkiyahu secretly consulted with Yirmeyahu in his palace, and the prophet answered that Tzidkiyahu would be given over into the hands of the Babylonian king (*Yirmeyahu* 34:17).

The fifth time is when bread ran out in Jerusalem and almost all hope was lost, and the king repeatedly called upon Yirmeyahu to inquire of God. The prophet tells him that it would still be possible to surrender and thereby be saved:

Then said Yirmeyahu to Tzidkiyahu: Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: If you will go forth to the king of Babylonia's princes, then your soul shall live, and this city shall not be burned with fire; and you shall live, you, and your house; but if you will not go forth to the king of Babylonia's princes, then shall this city be given into the hand of the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape out of their hand. (*Yirmeyahu* 38:17-18)

According to the prophet, even at the final stage of the campaign, in the midst of the siege, even after its removal and renewal, the people and the king have the opportunity to choose between surrendering to Babylonia, an act that will save them and the city, and continuing the campaign, which will lead to the destruction of the city and their being beaten by the king of Babylonia.

As for the prophecy to the people, the prophet repeats it in his book four times. The first time is at the beginning of the siege in our chapter, verses 8-10.

The second time is shortly before the siege is interrupted, when hopes arose that Tifra, the king of Egypt, would save the kingdom of Yehuda. In the wake of that prophecy, Yirmeyahu was imprisoned in the court of the guard:

The word that came to Yirmeyahu from the Lord in the tenth year of Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, which was the eighteenth year of Nevuchanetzar. Now at that time the king of Babylonia's army was besieging Jerusalem; and Yirmeyahu the prophet was shut up in the court of the guard, which was in the king of Yehuda's house. For Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda had shut him up, saying: Why do you prophesy, and say: Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylonia, and he shall take it; and Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda shall not escape out of the hand of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him mouth to mouth, and his eyes shall behold his eyes; and he shall lead Tzidkiyahu to Babylonia, and there shall he be until I remember him, says the Lord; though you fight with the Chaldeans, you shall not prosper. (*Yirmeyahu* 32:1-5)

The third time is during the interruption of the siege and after the cancellation of the release of the Hebrew slaves. Yirmeyahu prophesies to the people that they should not fool themselves into thinking that the siege would not return:

I will even give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life; and their dead bodies shall be for food to the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth. And Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda and his princes will I give into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life, and into the hand of the king of Babylonia's army, that are gone up from you. Behold, I will command, says the Lord, and cause them to return to this city; and they shall fight against it, and take it, and burn it with fire; and I will make the cities of Yehuda a desolation, without inhabitant. (*Yirmeyahu* 34:20-22)

**And the last time is after the renewal of the siege in the city's last days, when the princes demanded to see Yirmeyahu (*Yirmeyahu* 38:2-3).**

**It would appear that some of the people heeded the words of the prophet and surrendered to the Chaldeans (*Yirmeyahu* 38:19; 39:9). On the other hand, the princes of Yehuda carefully monitored the inhabitants of the city so that they not flee to the Chaldeans (*Yirmeyahu* 37:12-16).**

**It is evident both from his prophecies to Tzidkiyahu and from his prophecies to the people that Yirmeyahu was consistent in what he said. Time and again he delivers the same prophecies in short intervals. The deep circumstances of these prophetic predictions do not change, and the prophet brings the word of God to the king and to the people. God's word is eternal and therefore its content can and must be repeated over time. In principle, a fundamental change in the behavior of the king and of the people could have caused a change in the prophecies, but as long as there was no change in their conduct, the prophecies did not change, and they were repeated in very similar terms to both King Tzidkiyahu and to the people.**

**The Prophet’s Warning to the House of David to Execute Justice and Righteousness**

Let us go back to the prophecy delivered to the first delegation, and see its continuation:

And to the house of the king of Yehuda: Hear you the word of the Lord; O house of David, thus says the Lord: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor, lest My fury go forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings. (*Yirmeyahu* 21:11-12)

**The king's house was in charge of the country's judicial system. It was the king's job to execute justice and righteousness in the country. Assuming that this prophecy is a direct continuation of the beginning of chapter 21, it was delivered at the beginning of the period of the Babylonian siege (as is proven by the fact that the prophecy begins with a copulative verb, "And to the house of the king of Yehuda," indicating that it adds something to the previous section).**

**The prophet foresees that if there will be no justice, if the kings of Yehuda fail to execute justice and to protect the disadvantaged from those who exploit them, God's fiery wrath will issue forth and consume everything.**

**The prophet had already threatened about such a situation: "**Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, you men of Yehuda and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest My fury go forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings**" (*Yirmeyahu* 4:4)**

**It turns out that in the very days of the siege the prophet points to the grim reality regarding everything having to do with the execution of justice in the kingdom of Yehuda, and draws a direct connection between the lack of justice in Jerusalem and the destruction of the city. So too the prophet Yechezkel in the framework of his description of the abominations of Jerusalem relates to the absence of justice in Jerusalem:**

Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey: to shed blood, and to destroy souls, so as to get dishonest gain…The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have wronged the poor and needy, and have oppressed the stranger unlawfully. And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the breach before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none. (*Yechezkel* 22:27-30)

**We are accustomed in the wake of the words of *Chazal* to see the main causes of the destruction of the First Temple as idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed, and without a doubt, these are three of the most severe transgressions in the Torah, and about them it is stated that one must allow himself to be killed, rather than violating one of these prohibitions. But the fact is that throughout the books of the prophets, we are informed about another major cause of the destruction of the Temple, namely, the absence of justice. We have seen throughout our *shiurim* from the days of Chizkiyahu and the prophecies of Yeshayahu and Mikha that the absence of justice, especially in the realm of the commandments between man and his fellow, and in particular when they are committed by the leaders of the people, is a direct cause of the destruction of the Temple.**

**In the past we explained that the very fact that the city is called Justice indicates that the name of the city is its essence. The relationship between the priests who wear justice and the atonement that they achieve for the sins of Israel is rooted in the fact that the essence of God's governance in the world is justice: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne" (*Tehilim* 97:2). Since this is the governance that establishes the kingdom of God, Jerusalem is the city chosen by God for the resting of His name, and the Temple is God's house which He consecrated so that His eyes and His heart would be there perpetually (see I Kings 9:3).**

**Therefore, just as justice establishes the kingdom of God in the world, so justice constitutes the appropriate foundation of the kingdom of flesh and blood. From this we understand how the existence of Jerusalem and the Temple directly depend upon the justice executed by the king and the people in the entire kingdom of Yehuda and in Jerusalem its capital.**

**The prophet is commanded at the beginning of chapter 22 to go down to the house of the king of Yehuda and prophesy there about the kingdom's obligation to execute justice. Between these two parts, the prophet (*Yirmeyahu* 21:13-14) relates to Jerusalem's excessive confidence, threatens it, and calls it: "inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain." What is the connection between its inhabiting the valley, and its being a rock that juts out of the plain? On the one hand, the city is lower than the surrounding areas, and surrounded by valleys and mountains that protect it. On the other hand, it is well-fortified, to the point that the verse in *Eikha* states: "**The kings of the earth believed not, neither all the inhabitants of the world, that the adversary and the enemy would enter into the gates of Jerusalem" (*Eikha* 4:12).

**Noga Hareuveni in his wonderful book, *Or Chadash*, on the book of *Yirmeyahu*, relates to this verse and explains that when the prophet Yirmeyahu goes each morning from Anatot in the north to the City of David*,* his vantage point allows him to see the city rising up from the valleys that surround it. Thus, the prophet calls the city, "inhabitant of the valley, and rock of the plain."**

**The residents of Jerusalem are complacent and self-confident, and do not believe that anything can pierce the walls of the city and penetrate it. Therefore God will punish the inhabitants of Jerusalem by burning the houses of the city and its environs (the term *ya'ar*, "forest," is a metaphor for the houses of the prominent members of the city, because of the cedars and cypresses brought from Lebanon to decorate them).**

**From here let us go back to the prophet's demand that the king of Yehuda sitting on the throne of David rule with justice and righteousness:**

Thus said the Lord: Go down to the house of the king of Yehuda, and speak there this word, and say: Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Yehuda, that sits upon the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people that enter in by these gates.

Thus says the Lord: Execute you justice and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor; and do no wrong, do no violence, to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place. For if you do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people. But if you will not hear these words, I swear by Myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.

For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Yehuda: You are Gilead to Me, the head of Lebanon; yet surely I will make you a wilderness, cities which are not inhabited. And I will prepare destroyers against you, everyone with his weapons; and they shall cut down your choice cedars, and cast them into the fire. And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbor: Why has the Lord done thus to this great city? Then they shall answer: Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them. (*Yirmeyahu* 22:1-9)

**The court is commanded to judge righteously, that there be no stealing or robbery or fraud, and of course that no innocent blood be shed. As was stated, this is one of the conditions for kings to sit on the throne for many generations. If the kings fail to act in this manner, their house will be destroyed. God will invite to the house of the king of Yehuda destroyers who will destroy the cedars and cast them into a fire. Then many nations will pass through the city and ask why it is that God destroyed it, and they will answer because the people abandoned their covenant with God and bowed down to other gods and worshipped them. The prophet concludes his words with the mention of idol worship, but most of the prophecy is about the justice that must be established in Jerusalem.**

**So too later in the chapter the prophecy relates to the absence of justice in the actions of Yehoyakim, as opposed to Yoshiyahu who was a model for the righteous king, as he judged the cause of the poor and needy:**

Woe to him that builds his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by injustice; that uses his neighbor's service without wages, and gives him not his hire; that says: I will build me a wide house and spacious chambers, and cuts him out windows, and it is ceiled with cedar, and painted with vermilion. Shall you reign, because you strive to excel in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know Me? says the Lord. But your eyes and your heart are not but for your covetousness, and for shedding innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it. (*Yirmeyahu* 22:13-17)

**This is prophecy's attitude toward the issue of justice, which turns out to be a most significant factor in the preservation of the city, and its absence, which is a major factor in its destruction.**

**In the next *shiur*, we will continue to examine Yirmeyahu's prophecies in the days of Tzidkiyahu.**

**(Translated by David Strauss)**

1. Tzefanya is also mentioned among the office-holders who were exiled by Nevuzaradan, as the second priest after Seraya the chief priest (II *Melakhim* 25:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yirmeyahu*, chapter 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)