YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 370: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(180) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (156)**

In the previous *shiur*, we dealt with the prophet Yirmeyahu's admonition to the house of David that they should execute righteousness and justice. In this *shiur* we wish to examine the prophet's situation throughout the period from the beginning of the siege laid around Jerusalem on the tenth of Tevet in the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign until the destruction of the city.

We will not deal with the contents of the prophecies that Yirmeyahu delivered during this period, but rather with the physical conditions in which he was found, the conditions in the various places of his detention, and the attitude of King Tzidkiyahu, on the one hand, and his princes, on the other, toward the prophet.

### Yirmeyahu in the court of the guard

Scripture explains that Tzidkiyahu shut Yirmeyahu up in *"chatzar ha-matara*" because of his prophecy that God will deliver the city into the hands of Babylonia. *Chatzar ha-matara* – from the root *n-t-r*, "guard" – means "court of the guard." It would appear that this was a government-run area that was used to detain prisoners and keep them from escaping.

### The Location of the court of the gaurd

 Scripture notes that the court of the guard was adjacent to the house of the king of Yehuda. The royal palace from the days of Shelomo and until the days of Chizkiyahu was located at the foot of the house of God, north of the City of David and south of the house of God, in the area of the present-day Ofel excavations and Davidson Center, and the southernmost portion of the Temple Mount (the area of the Al Aksa mosque and Solomon's Stables which was included in the area of the Temple Mount in the days of Herod who greatly expounded the Temple Mount toward the south). But in the days of King Menashe, Scripture notes: "And Menashe slept with his fathers, and was buried in the garden of his own house, in the garden of Uzza; and Amon his son reigned in his stead" (II *Melakhim* 21:18). It is noted here for the first time that the royal palace was located in a new place called the garden of Uzza.

 There are different opinions regarding the location of the garden of Uzza. Gadi Barkai[[1]](#footnote-1) suggests to locate it in the area referred to today as the Tomb of David on Mount Zion, based on the assumption that the name Tomb of David might actually refer to the last kings of the house of David. According to this suggestion, Menashe was the first king buried in the garden of his house. If the garden of Uzza is located in the area of today's Mount Zion near the Tomb of David, in the highest and apparently most magnificent part of the city after it was expanded by Chizkiyahu to include the entire western hill of Jerusalem (including what we call today the Jewish Quarter, the Armenian Quarter and Mount Zion) – then this is also the location of the court of the guard in the royal palace in the days of Tzidkiyahu. There is no reason to assume that the location of the royal palace was changed between the days of Menashe and the time of the destruction of the First Temple.

What is more fascinating is the fact that Scripture emphasizes that the destruction came because of the sins of Menashe:

And the Lord spoke by His servants the prophets, saying: Because Menashe king of Yehuda has done these abominations, and has done wickedly above all that the Amorites did, that were before him, and has made Yehuda also to sin with his idols.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I bring such evil upon Jerusalem and Yehuda, that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Shomeron, 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. And I will cast off the remnant of My inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies; because they have done that which is evil in My sight, and have provoked Me, since the day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even to this day. Moreover Menashe shed innocent blood very much, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another; beside his sin with which he made Yehuda to sin, in doing that which was evil in the sight of the Lord. (II *Melakhim* 21:10-16)

Menashe chose to relocate the house of the king from its place at the foot of the house of God, and to be buried not in the tombs of the kings of the house of David in the southern part of the City of David, but in the garden of Uzza in the new part of the city.

The king whose evil actions caused the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple did not reside in the place where all the kings of the house of David had lived from the time of David to the time of Chizkiyahu, nor did he merit being buried in the tombs of the kings of the house of David together with his predecessors. We therefore assume that the court of the guard was located close to the garden of Uzza, and, according to Gadi Barkai, on Mount Zion in the higher and apparently more magnificent part of the city after it was expanded by Chizkiyahu.

This is the simple conclusion if we locate the house of King Tzidkiyahu in the same place as the house of King Menashe, and if we accept Gabi Barkai's suggestion as to the location of the garden of Uzza on today's Mount Zion. This understanding, however, must be examined in light of the description of Nechemya's wall. When Nechemya arrived in Jerusalem, he reconstructed the city wall from the time of the First Temple and described in detail its rebuilding.

Archaeologists have made various suggestions regarding the size of the city of Jerusalem during the period of Nechemya. According to one suggestion, the city extended over the two hills of Jerusalem – the eastern hill (the City of David and the Temple Mount), and the western hill (today's Jewish and Armenian Quarters and Mount Zion) the size of the city at the end of the First Temple period. According to another suggestion, the city was reduced to the eastern hill, that is to say, it was restricted to the City of David and the Temple Mount.

On the face of it, the fact that Scripture attests that "the city was wide and large; but the people were few therein" (*Nechemya* 7:4), and the fact that the building of the wall was completed in fifty-two days (*Nechemya* 6:15) accord with the possibility that we are dealing with a restoration of the existing wall that encompassed the two hills. But as stated, there are opinions that limit the city in the days of Nechemya to the eastern hill.

In the description of Nechemya's wall, Scripture relates to both the upper house of the king and to the court of the guard:

Palal the son of Uzai repaired over against the Turning, and the tower that stands out from the upper house of the king, which is by the court of the guard. After him Pedaya the son of Parosh repaired. Now the Netinim dwelt in Ofel, to the place over against the water gate toward the east, and the tower that stands out. (*Nechemya* 3:25-26)

It would appear from the context that Scripture is describing here the northeastern side of the restored wall. Among other things, mention is made here of the upper house of the king. The term "upper" assumes that there is also a lower house of the king. Is it possible that the "the upper house of the king" refers to the original royal palace built by King Shelomo, whereas the "lower house of the king" refers to a different place? If so, this location accords well with Nechemya's description of the wall: Mention is made of the Ofel, a high and lofty place which one ascends (*ma'apilim*). It stands to reason that the highest and most fortified place is the royal fortress, the seat of the king and administrative center of the kingdom. It turns out that according to Nechemya it is reasonable to assume that the upper house of the king was located between the City of David and the site of the Temple, and according to the aforementioned verse, the court of the guard was found there.

### Yirmeyahu's stay in the court of the guard

As mentioned, Yirmeyahu was imprisoned in the court of the guard in the tenth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, during the Babylonian siege of the city.

In *Yirmeyahu* 33:1, Scripture records another prophecy delivered by Yirmeyahu while he was still imprisoned in the court of the guard.

 In chapter 37, when Tzidkiyahu sends a second delegation to Yirmeyahu to ask him to pray on behalf of the people, which included Yehukhal the son of Shelemya and Tzefanyahu the son of Ma'aseya the priest, Scripture notes that "Yirmeyahu came in and went out among the people; for they had not put him into prison" (*Yirmeyahu* 37:4). It is reasonable to assume that when Pharaoh's army left Egypt to assist Yehuda in the war against the Chaldeans, the Chaldeans besieging Jerusalem anticipated their arrival and removed the siege for a period of time, and during that period King Tzidkiyahu freed Yirmeyahu from his detention in the court of the guard.

Then, however, Yirmeyahu prophesied that when the Egyptians return to their land, the Chaldeans will return to Jerusalem, lay siege to it, capture it, and burn it to the ground. Yirmeyahu leaves Jerusalem for the land of Binyamin, and at the gate of Binyamin he is arrested, on the suspicion that he was on his way to surrender to the Chaldeans. In the wake of this suspicion, Yirmeyahu is brought before the princes who beat him and put him in jail, the house of Yehonatan the scribe which they had made into a prison.

Scripture notes that "Yirmeyahu came into the pit-house, and into the stores, and Yirmeyahu remained there many days" (*Yirmeyahu* 37:16). It would appear that this pit was in the house of Yehonatan the scribe. At the time it was empty of water, and apparently this was the place where they brought the prisoners.

The "stores" mentioned here may actually be cells. It would appear that they divided the pit into cells, each cell taking one prisoner.

When Tzidkiyahu saw that Yirmeyahu's words were fulfilled, he sent a third delegation in order to take him from the cell in the pit in the house of Yehonatan the scribe to the house of the king. This he did secretly so that the matter not become known to the princes and all the officials of his kingdom.

Here we can point to the way that King Tzidkiyahu administered his kingdom. On the one hand, it is he who had Yirmeyahu brought to the court of the guard so that it be clear to the entire nation that he was not prepared to accept Yirmeyahu's prophecies, according to which the only way for the kingdom to survive involved surrendering to Babylonia. On the other hand, he sees that Yirmeyahu's prophecies are coming true. For example, regarding the Chaldeans' removal of the siege with the arrival of the Egyptians, the prophet proclaims that the Chaldeans will return and renew the siege, and this is exactly what happened.

Scripture states as follows:

Then Tzidkiyahu the king sent, and fetched him; and the king asked him secretly in his house, and said: Is there any word from the Lord? And Yirmeyahu said: There is. He said also: You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylonia.

Moreover Yirmeyahu said to King Tzidkiyahu: How have I sinned against you, or against your servants, or against this people, that you have put me in prison? Where now are your prophets that prophesied to you, saying: The king of Babylonia shall not come against you, nor against this land? And now hear, I pray you, O my lord the king: let my supplication, I pray you, be presented before you; that you cause me not to return to the house of Yehonatan the scribe, lest I die there. Then Tzidkiyahu the king commanded, and they committed Yirmeyahu into the court of the guard, and they gave him daily a loaf of bread out of the bakers' street, until all the bread in the city was spent. Thus Yirmeyahu remained in the court of the guard. (*Yirmeyahu* 37:17-21)

Yirmeyahu complains about his very imprisonment, and then he mocks the king and asks him how and where the words of the false prophets were fulfilled. Against all of their promises, the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem and are about to destroy it. He them pleads before the king and begs for his mercy, that he not be returned to the house of Yehonatan the scribe, so that he not die there.

It is quite possible that the living conditions in the cells built in the pit in the house of Yehonatan the scribe were such that some of the prisoners met their death there.

The king commands that Yirmeyahu be brought to the court of the court and be given each day a loaf of bread, until the famine grew worse and there was no bread for the people of the land, as is explained in *Yirmeyahu* 52:6. This happened on the ninth of Tamuz in the eleventh year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, with the breaching of the wall of Jerusalem.

In the wake of the words of the prophet, the princes ask Tzidkiyahu to kill Yirmeyahu because he is weakening the people and lowering the morale of the soldiers defending the city. Tzidkiyahu tells them that Yirmeyahu is in their hands, and they can do with him as they please.

As a result, they cast Yirmeyahu into the pit found in the court of the guard, as is stated in *Yirmeyahu* 38:6-13:

Then took they Yirmeyahu, and cast him into the pit of Malkiyahu the king's son, that was in the court of the guard; and they let down Yirmeyahu with cords. And in the pit there was no water, but mire; and Yirmeyahu sank in the mire.

Now when Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian, an officer, who was in the king's house, heard that they had put Yirmeyahu in the pit; the king then sitting in the gate of Binyamin, Eved-Melekh went forth out of the king's house, and spoke to the king, saying: My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Yirmeyahu the prophet, whom they have cast into the pit; and he is like to die in the place where he is because of the famine; for there is no more bread in the city. Then the king commanded Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian, saying: Take from hence thirty men with you, and take up Yirmeyahu the prophet out of the pit, before he die. So Eved-Melekh took the men with him, and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took there worn clouts and worn rags, and let them down by cords into the pit to Yirmeyahu. And Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian said to Yirmeyahu: Put now these worn clouts and rags under your armholes under the cords. And Yirmeyahu did so. So they drew up Yirmeyahu with the cords, and took him up out of the pit; and Yirmeyahu remained in the court of the guard. (*Yirmeyahu* 38:6-13)

It is quite possible that the term, "court of the guard," notes the fact that the detainees were imprisoned in a courtyard, but the space was not roofed nor was it divided into cells. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the place was exposed to the hardships of weather, to heat and cold and rain. As is evident from the description, within the compound of the court of the guard there was a pit that could pose a real danger (see also *Tehilim* 69:15: "Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink").

Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian heard from the adjacent house of the king that Yirmeyahu had been put into the pit. The king commanded him to take thirty people and raise Yirmeyahu from the pit, so that he not die. Yirmeyahu is drawn from the pit and returned to the court of the guard, where he had been previously.

 After his rescue, Tzidkiyahu once again sends a delegation to bring Yirmeyahu to him, to the third entry in the house of God. Here too it would seem that the king tried to do this secretly without the knowledge of the princes and royal officials. Perhaps he asks to meet the prophet in the third entry in the house of God, because the onlookers might imagine that they came there to pray or to offer sacrifices and their being together in that place would not raise any suspicions.

As for the content of their discussion, here too the conversation was carried out in secret between the king and the prophet. The prophet consistently repeats what he had said earlier that the only way for the king to save himself and the city is to surrender to the king of Babylonia, and that if he doesn't surrender to the Babylonians, the city would be destroyed and burned and the king would be unable to escape.

Tzidkiyahu asks Yirmeyahu once again not to tell others about their conversation, for if it were to become known, Yirmeyahu would be killed and it is possible that even the life of the king would be in danger. If he is asked, he should say that he had beseeched the king not to send him back to the house of Yehonatan. Indeed, Scripture states: "So Yirmeyahu abode in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken" (*Yirmeyahu* 38:28). Afterwards in *Yirmeyahu* 39:11-14, Nevuchadnetzar orders that Yirmeyahu be removed from the court of the guard, and that he be handed over unharmed to Gedalyahu the son of Achikam. Then Scripture adds a prophecy that had been given to Yirmeyahu on an earlier occasion:

Now the word of the Lord came to Yirmeyahu, while he was shut up in the court of the guard, saying: Go, and speak to Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring My words upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished before you in that day. But I will deliver you in that day, says the Lord; and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely deliver you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but your life shall be for a prey to you; because you have put your trust in Me, says the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 39:15-18)

The prophet relates that already when he was imprisoned in the court of the guard he was told in a prophecy to go to Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian and tell him that God would save him from the princes who hadn't forgiven him for having saved Yirmeyahu, and that he would be delivered both from the princes and from the Chaldeans. All this so that he would receive his reward and his life be saved, in the same way that he had saved Yirmeyahu's life.

In this *shiur* we tried to understand Yirmeyahu's fate from the beginning of the siege until the destruction of the city. In the next *shiur* we will examine the prophecy of consolation in chapter 32.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In his article, "*Li-Ba'ayat Mekom Kivreihem shel Malkhei Beit David ha-Acharonim*," in *Bein Chermon le-Sinai Yad le-Amnon*, pp. 75-92. We will not expand here upon his proofs regarding the location of the garden of Uzza.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)