YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 374: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(184) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (160)**

After having dealt in the previous *shiur* with *Yirmeyahu* 33 – with Yirmeyahu's prayer and God's response, while the prophet was still imprisoned in the court of the guard – in this *shiur* we will examine chapter 34 which was also told to the prophet during the period that Nevuchadnetzar was laying siege to Jerusalem, and also on the remaining fortified cities in Yehuda, including Lakhish and Azeka.

The word which came to Yirmeyahu from the Lord, when Nevuchadretzar king of Babylon, and all his army, and all the kingdoms of the land of his dominion, and all the peoples, fought against Jerusalem, and against all the cities thereof, saying: 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 Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire; and you shalt 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 Babylon, and he shall speak with you mouth to mouth, and you shall go to Babylon. Yet hear the word of the Lord, O Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda: Thus says the Lord concerning you: You shall not die by the sword; you shall die in peace; and with the burnings of your fathers, the former kings that were before you, so shall they make a burning for you; and they shall lament you: Ah lord! for I have spoken the word, says the Lord.

Then Yirmeyahu the prophet spoke all these words to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda in Jerusalem, when the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Yehuda that were left, against Lakhish and against Azeka; for these alone remained of the cities of Yehuda as fortified cities.

The word that came to Yirmeyahu from the Lord, after that the king Tzidkiyahu had made a covenant with all the people that were at Jerusalem, to proclaim liberty to them; that every man should let his manservant, and every man his maidservant, being a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, go free; that none should make bondmen of them, even of a Jew his brother; and all the princes and all the people hearkened, that had entered into the covenant to let every one his man-servant, and every one his maid-servant, go free, and not to make bondmen of them any more; they hearkened, and let them go; but afterwards they turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids.

Therefore the word of the Lord came to Yirmeyahu from the Lord, saying: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying: At the end of seven years you shall let go every man his brother that is a Hebrew, that has been sold to you, and has served you six years, you shall let him go free from you… but you turned and profaned My name… and you brought them into subjection, to be to you for servants and for handmaids.

Therefore thus says the Lord: You have not hearkened to Me, to proclaim liberty, every man to his brother, and every man to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim for you a liberty, says the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

And I will give the men that have transgressed My covenant, that have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts thereof; the princes of Yehuda, and the princes of Jerusalem, the officers, and the priests, and all the people of the land, that passed between the parts of the calf; 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 Babylon'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)

### The Babylonians are fighting in Lakhish and in Azeka

From here it would appear that the king of Babylon's troops already conquered many cities of Yehuda, and that Lakhish and Azeka are the last two cities in the kingdom that have not been conquered. These two cities, located in the coastal plain of Yehuda, were particularly strong and important, and heavily fortified.

Lakhish is mentioned in the campaign waged by Sancheriv king of Ashur against the kingdom of Chizkiyahu, and it was apparently the second most important city in the kingdom of Yehuda. Its exceedingly strong fortifications required the Assyrians to build a rampart in order to conquer it. Impressive remains of both the Assyrian rampart (together with arrowheads and other findings) and the city's fortifications have been found at the site. Since Sancheriv did not succeed in capturing Jerusalem at that time, the conquest of Lakhish was memorialized in particularly striking reliefs that were discovered in Nineveh. The archeological excavations at the site have unearthed remnants that correspond in a most remarkable fashion to what is portrayed on those reliefs. Azeka too was an important city located in the Ela Valley.

Remains that survived fire and destruction were found in both cities. Those remains can be dated to the time of the Babylonian conquest of the cities that apparently took place very close in time to the conquest of Jerusalem.

### THe Prophecy regarding Tzidkiyahu

At the beginning of the chapter, Yirmeyahu receives another prophecy concerning Tzidkiyahu (in addition to the prophecy told to him in *Yirmeyahu* 21:3-7; the prophecy told to him at the time of the lifting of the Babylonian siege when Pharaoh Tifra came from Egypt to help Yehuda in *Yirmeyahu* 37; and the prophecy told to him at the time of the end of the siege when there was no longer any bread in the city in *Yirmeyahu* 38:17-18).

The prophet is commanded to go to Tzidkiyahu and once again tell him that Jerusalem will be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon who will burn it to the ground, and that Tzidkiyahu himself will not escape the king of Babylon, but rather he will be captured by him. On the other hand, he informs him that he will not die by the sword, but rather he will die in peace.

The prophet does not inform him here that his sons will be killed before his eyes, or that he will be blinded. The Radak comments about this as follows:

Even though his eyes will be gauged out, since he will not die by the sword, and he will die in his bed, and he will be shown honor as is shown to kings, this is "in peace." *Chazal* say: What is in peace? That Nevuchadnetzar will die before him. (Radak, *Yirmeyahu* 34:5)

The king is further told: "And with the burnings of your fathers, the former kings that were before you, so shall they make a burning for you; and they shall lament you: Ah Lord." *Chazal* explain (*Avoda Zara* 11a) that it was the customary practice that when a king died, a huge fire would be built in which the king's bed and personal articles would be burned, so that nobody else make use of them.

The Radak refers us to what is stated about King Asa: "And they laid him in the bed which was filled with sweet odors and diverse kinds [of spices] prepared by the perfumers' art; and they made a very great burning for him" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 16:14). On the other hand, there is the counter-example of Yoram the son of Yehoshafat, king of Yehuda, regarding whom it is explicitly stated: "And his people made no burning for him, like the burning of his fathers" (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:19).

The second thing that the prophet promises will be done in honor of the king is that the people will sing a mourning dirge for him, "Ah lord" – in total contrast to the prophecy that Yirmeyahu delivered to Yehoyakim: "They shall not lament for him: Ah lord, or: Ah his glory" (*Yirmeyahu* 22:18). It is possible that the recognition of his lordship means that even after the destruction the Jews of Babylon will see him as the lord and king who represents them. On the other hand, it says here: "Ah lord," but it does not say: "Ah, his glory," for after Nevuchadnetzar removes him from his royal throne, he will no longer enjoy royal glory.

Everything that the prophet Yirmeyahu prophesied came true. Tzidkiyahu was indeed caught and brought to Babylon:

And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nevuchadretzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, and encamped against it; and they built forts against it round about. So the city was besieged to the eleventh year of king Tzidkiyahu. In the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled, and went forth out of the city by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which was by the king's garden - now the Chaldeans were against the city round about - and they went by the way of the Arava. But the army of the Chaldeans 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 Babylon to Rivla in the land of Chamat; and he gave judgment upon him. And the king of Babylon 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 Babylon bound him in fetters, and carried him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death. (II *Melakhim* 25:3-7; *Yirmeyahu* 52:4-11)

But Tzidkiyahu will not be killed by the sword, but rather he will die in peace. There is no indication in Scripture as to whether the Jews of Babylon showed him royal honor in his death. *Chazal* (*Moed Katan* 28b) say that Nevuchadnetzardied during Tzidkiyahu's lifetime. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* (II, 321), Tzidkiyahu died soon after Nevuchadnetzar.

How is it that despite the terrible destruction in his days, in the course of which the house of God in Jerusalem and all of the kingdom of Yehuda were destroyed, Tzidkiyahu merited Yirmeyahu prophesying for him a quiet life in Babylon and royal honor upon his death? The reason may be that Tzidkiyahu rescued Yirmeyahu and secretly consulted with him on several occasions, giving his words serious consideration. While it is true that outwardly he did not show this, because he was unable to take a firm stand against his princes, he took care to turn to the prophet throughout the entire period.

### The release and re-subjugation of the slaves

According to this chapter, there were Jewish slaves in the kingdom of Yehuda at the end of the First Temple period. It is reasonable to assume that this was the reality already in the days of King Yehoyakim. Owing to their poverty, people sold themselves into slavery for six years in accordance with Torah law. But in our case, the slave owners did not release their slaves in the seventh year, but rather they turned them into permanent slaves.

It would appear that when King Tzidkiyahu understood that the words of the prophet were coming true, and that the Babylonian siege was continuing and no other country was coming to his aid, he tried to repent around the issue of the release of Jewish slaves. It is possible that he did this with Yirmeyahu's encouragement, and that Tzidkiyahu even believed that in this way he would succeed in appeasing God's anger. In response, the people in fact heeded the king and released their Jewish slaves and maidservants.

Later in the chapter the prophet relates that King Tzidkiyahu made this covenant before God in the house of God. Partners to the covenant were the princes of Yehuda, the princes of Jerusalem, the officers, the priests and all the people of the land.

The covenant was made in the customary manner – they cut a calf into halves before God, and passed between the parts. One meaning of this ceremony is that if they fail to keep the covenant, their fate will be the same as that of the calf. Rabbi Yosef Albo (*Sefer ha-Ikarim* IV, 45) and Shadal explain the symbolism of cutting the calf into two pieces. Just as the two cut parts were at first a single body, and therefore the one part could feel sickness in the second part while the calf was still alive, so too the two parties to the covenant are like one body in life, and will not be separated in death.

The people of Jerusalem make a covenant before God and free the slaves. Making the covenant in the house of God greatly strengthens the validity of the covenant that was made right before God. On the face of it, we are dealing with a mutual commitment stemming from the notion that deep down the two parts are one. But Scripture attests that after the covenant was made, it was broken and many people were re-subjugated as slaves and maidservants.

Let us try to understand what brought the people to enter into such a covenant, and what caused them to breach it.

The causes of the covenant:[[1]](#footnote-1) It is very possible that when the people saw that the siege was ongoing and that the words of the prophet Yirmeyahu were coming true, they decided to repent. In addition, owing to the siege, the slaves were unable to leave the city in order to work the fields of their masters or to tend their flocks, so that in actuality they could not work. At the same time, the masters were legally bound to support their slaves and their families. Thus, the slaves turned into an economic burden to their masters without yielding them any benefit. On the other hand, the slaves could not be sent to fight the Chaldeans, because they had been unlawfully enslaved and had not been set free by their masters in the seventh year of their servitude. At the same time, the ranks of the army became dwindled by the war, in the wake of the difficult siege, and it became necessary to fill those ranks with new soldiers.

Why was the covenant broken? In order to understand what caused the breach of the covenant, let us go back and consider the political reality after the siege of Jerusalem was first laid by Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylon on the tenth of Tevet, in the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, about a year and a half before the destruction of the First Temple. Yirmeyahu relates to the attempt made by Egypt to assist the kingdom of Yehuda when the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem:

And Pharaoh's army was come forth out of Egypt; and when the Chaldeans that besieged Jerusalem heard tidings of them, they broke up from Jerusalem.

Then came the word of the Lord to the prophet Yirmeyahu, saying: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Thus shall you say to the king of Yehuda, that sent you to Me to inquire of Me: Behold, Pharaoh's army, which is come forth to help you, shall return to Egypt into their own land. And the Chaldeans shall return, and fight against this city; and they shall take it, and burn it with fire. (*Yirmeyahu* 37:5-8)

It turns out that Pharaoh Tifra the king of Egypt ascended the throne about a year and a half before the destruction of the Temple. As a result of his going out to help the kingdom of Yehuda, the siege was removed for the time. But the prophet warns that Pharaoh's army will return to Egypt and the Chaldeans will return to Jerusalem, fight over the city, capture it and burn it to the ground.

The prophet Yirmeyahu mentions at the end of chapter 34 (v. 22): "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." It turns out that Tifra encouraged Tzidkiyahu to rebel against the king of Egypt and he came to his aid. Tzidkiyahu did indeed stop paying a levy to the king of Babylon in the ninth year of his reign, relying on the military assistance of Pharaoh Tifra king of Egypt.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Once the siege stopped, the people thought that a great miracle had been performed and that the siege would not resume. As a result, they regretted releasing their slaves and maidservants and immediately re-enslaved them, breaking the covenant that they had recently made.

The prophet prophesied that God would respond measure for measure. They cancelled the freedom that they had proclaimed for the Jewish slaves, and in return God will set the sword and hunger free in the land. Essentially, their fate will be like that of the cut-apart calf, between whose parts they had passed. God will deliver them into the hands of their enemies, and their corpses will serve as food for the birds in heaven and the beasts on earth. And in the wake of the fact that Tzidkiyahu turned a blind eye to the breaking of the covenant and to the re-subjugation of the slaves, God will deliver him and his princes into the hands of the army of the king of Babylon.

It seems that during the short break in the siege, the residents of Jerusalem did not have the chance to restock the food supply in the city in sufficient quantities, nor could they work their fields outside the city. When the fighting and the siege resumed, hunger and plague broke out in the city, which brought the destruction of the city every more close.

### Breach of the Covenant with Babylon

Incidental to the study of this chapter, the issue of the release of the Jewish slaves and their re-enslavement at the time of the break in the siege, we mentioned that King Tzidkiyahu broke the covenant that he had made with the king of Babylon.

It should be mentioned that the prophet Yechezkel relates to the breaking of a covenant with exceedingly great severity (*Yechezkel* 18). On the one hand, he who violates a covenant will not escape punishment. On the other hand, the breaking of a covenant is a desecration of God's name. A covenant involves an oath taken in God's name, and its breach involves a desecration of God's glory.

In chapter 27, the prophet Yirmeyahu explains his condemnation of Tzidkiyahu's rebellion against the king of Babylon on political grounds. God will eventually make far-reaching changes in the regimes in the lands surrounding Yehuda, and therefore the covenant that Edom, Moav, Amon, Tzor and Tzidon are trying to establish under the leadership of Tzidkiyahu will not help, God will deliver Tzidkiyahu and his people into the hands of the king of Babylon.

Zvi Moskowitz[[3]](#footnote-3) beautifully explains the differences between the rationales offered by the two prophets. Yechezkel focuses on the moral repair of the people and therefore he emphasizes the punishment that will come because of their sins. Yirmeyahu tries to influence the concrete reality in his land, and therefore he relates both to the people in the kingdom of Yehuda and to the power of Nevuchadnetzar whom God had set above them, and declares that the people's efforts to break loose of Nevuchadnetzar's yoke will not succeed.

In this *shiur* we encountered King Tzidkiyahu, who, on the one hand, breaks the covenant with the king of Babylon, but also encourages the release of the Jewish slaves, and makes a covenant with the people in the house of God, while on the other hand, he lacks the power to oppose the re-subjugation of the slaves.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue to study Yirmeyahu's prophecies about the end of the kingdom of Yehuda and the rule of Tzidkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. These factors are nicely formulated in Menachem Bula's summary of *Yirmeyahu* 34 in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The prophet Yechezkel relates to the covenant with Pharaoh Tifra in *Yechezkel* 17:17 and 30:20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yechezkel* 17, note 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)