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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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012

לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**Lecture 375: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(185) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (161)**

After having examined Yirmeyahu's prophecies of consolation and also chapter 34 which describes the release and re-subjugation of the Jewish slaves, let us now take a look at the final prophecies that Yirmeyahu delivered to Tzidkiyahu prior to the breaching of the city in *Yirmeyahu,* chapter 38.

And Shefatya the son of Matan, and Gedalya 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.

Thus says the Lord: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it. Then the princes said to the king: Let this man, we pray you, be put to death; forasmuch as he weakens the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words to them; for this man seeks not the welfare of this people, but the hurt. Then Tzidkiyahu the king said: Behold, he is in your hand; for the king is not he that can do anything against you. 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 likely 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 here 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 from 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.

Then Tzikiyahu the king sent, and took Yirmeyahu the prophet to him into the third entry that was in the house of the Lord; and the king said to Yirmeyahu: I will ask you a thing; hide nothing from me. Then Yirmeyahu said to Tzidkiyahu: If I declare it to you, will you not surely put me to death? and if I give you counsel, you will not hearken to me. So Tzidkiyahu the king swore secretly to Yirmeyahu, saying: As the Lord lives, that made us this soul, I will not put you to death, neither will I give you into the hand of these men that seek your life.

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 Babylon'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 Babylon'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.

And Tzidkiyahu the king said to Yirmeyahu: I am afraid of the Jews that are fallen away to the Chaldeans, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they mock me.

But Yirmeyahu said: They shall not deliver you. Hearken, I beseech you, to the voice of the Lord, in that which I speak to you; so it shall be well with you, and your soul shall live. But if you refuse to go forth, this is the word that the Lord has shown me: Behold, all the women that are left in the king of Yehuda's house shall be brought forth to the king of Babylon's princes, and those women shall say: Your familiar friends have set you on, and have prevailed over you; your feet are sunk in the mire, and they are turned away back. And they shall bring out all your wives and your children to the Chaldeans; and you shall not escape out of their hand, but shall be taken by the hand of the king of Babylon; and you shall cause this city to be burned with fire…

So Yirmeyahu abode in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken. And it came to pass, when Jerusalem was taken - (*Yirmeyahu* 38)

### Lowering Yirmeyahu back into the pit

Yirmeyahu is consistent in all of his prophecies and does not change them. Yirmeyahu brings to the people the timeless and fixed word of God that does not change during all the days of Tzidkiyahu because the king, his ministers and the people change nothing in their behavior.

It is clear that the prophecies refer first and foremost to the political, social and spiritual reality prevailing in the kingdom of Yehuda and in Jerusalem. As long as that reality remains unchanged, there is no justification to change the content of the prophecies.

The ministers Shefatyahu ben Matan, Gedalyahu ben Pashchur, Yukhal ben Shelamyahu and Pashchur ben Malkiyahu once again hear the words of Yirmeyahu who says that whoever remains in the city will die of famine or pestilence, whereas those who go out to the Chaldeans will live. Yirmeyahu's proposal in order to preserve Jerusalem is to surrender to the Chaldeans, any other alternative leading to destruction.

The ministers appear before the king and suggest killing Yirmeyahu, because his words are weakening the determination of the troops in the city and of the people in general. Though Yirmeyahu is still in the court of the guard, it would appear that he found ways – by way of messengers or books that he managed to get out of the court of the guard – to communicate his message to all of the people.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The ministers' argument that the words of the prophet are having an exceedingly serious impact on the morale of the soldiers and of the people is clear. They define the situation as follows: Yirmeyahu seeks not the welfare of the people, but their hurt.

It is reasonable to assume that the execution of the prophet was a matter that could be authorized only by the king, and that the ministers could not take such a step on their own (in *Yirmeyahu* 26:20-24 we see that it was King Yehoyakim who sought to kill the prophet Uriya ben Shemayahu from Kiryat-Ye'arim, and that it was he who sent Elnatan ben Akhbur together with others to Egypt in order to arrest him, and they bring him back to the king who carries out the execution).

Tzidkiyahu's answer is that the prophet is in the hands of the ministers and that he is incapable of saying anything to them. Once again we see the weak figure of King Tzidkiyahu secretly consulting with the prophet and seeking to hear from him the word of God, but he dares not openly oppose his ministers or adopt a policy that would protect the prophet. He simply allows them to do with him as they please. Indeed, they cast him into the mire-filled pit of Malkiyahu the king 's son that is located in the court of the guard.

### Yirmeyahu's rescue from the pit

Eved-Melekh the Ethiopian, an officer in the king's house, hears that Yirmeyahu was cast into a pit in the court of the guard. The king at the time was sitting at the gate of Binyamin, apparently in the northern part of the city, opposite the place where the Chaldeans were laying siege to the city. He informs the king that the officers who had come to him earlier have done evil to Yirmeyahu, and cast him into a pit, where he is likely to die because of the famine.

Upon hearing about these developments, Tzidkiyahu orders Eved-Melekh to take thirty men and raise Yirmeyahu out of the pit before he dies. Eved-Melekh assembles the men, takes rags from the treasury and sends them to Yirmeyahu. He tells the prophet to place them under his armpits, so that he not suffer injury when he is raised from the pit. Yirmeyahu is then raised from the pit, and he remains in the court of the guard.

### Tzidkiyahu's last conversation with Yirmeyahu

Once again we see that Tzidkiyahu sends for Yirmeyahu to be brought to him in secret, so that his ministers and officials not know about their meeting. Apparently the meeting was set in the house of God so that if it is discovered the ministers will think that it was by chance that the king and the prophet went up at the same time to the house of God for prayer or to offer a sacrifice.

Yirmeyahu fears for his life and shares that fear with the king. Tzidkiyahu assures him that he has nothing to fear and he swears to him that he will not kill him or hand him over to the ministers who are pursuing him. On the other hand, the prophet believes that delivering the prophecy will not help in any way, because Tzidikiyahu will not listen to him. After all, the prophet had already prophesied (*Yirmeyahu* 37:10) that the Chaldean army would burn down the city, and the prophet is prepared to cancel the prophecy about the destruction of the city if the king surrenders to the Babylon and thereby save himself as well. In the absence of such a surrender, Jerusalem will be burnt by the Chaldeans and even Tzidkiyahu will not escape. Did the prophet sense or think that Tzidkiyahu would try to escape?

Tzidkiyahu tells Yirmeyahu that he is afraid that the Chaldeans will hand him over to those Jews who had already surrendered to them and that they would humiliate and mock him. Apparently, those Jews who had surrendered to the Chaldeans opposed Tzidikiyahu's rebellion and blamed him for the situation. Yirmeyahu tries to reassure Tzidkiyahu and tells him that the Chaldeans will not deliver him into their hands, and implores him to obey God.

The prophet repeats once again that if Tzidkiyahu does not surrender, he will not escape and the city will be burned, and the king's wives and children will be brought out to the Chaldeans. It would appear that the ministers continued the war against Babylon, hoping that in that way they would be saved from death or exile (as happened to Yehoyakhin and his ministers).

### The Conquest of Jerusalem

At the beginning of chapter 39, the prophet describes the conquest of Jerusalem and its consequences:

In the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, in the tenth month, came Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylon 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 Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergal-Sar-Etzer, Samgar-Nevu, Sar-Sekhim Rav-Saris, Nergal-Sar-Etzer Rav-Mag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon. And it came to pass, that when Tzikdiyahu 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 Babylon to Rivla in the land of Chamat, and he gave judgment upon him. Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Tzidkiyahu in Rivla before his eyes; also the king of Babylon slew all the nobles of Yehuda. Moreover he put out Tzidkiyahu's eyes, and bound him in fetters, to carry him to Babylon. And the Chaldeans burned the king's house, and the house of the people, with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. Then Nevuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive into Babylon the remnant of the people that remained in the city, the deserters also, that fell away to him, with the rest of the people that remained. But Nevuzaradan the captain of the guard left of the poor of the people, that had nothing, in the land of Yehuda, and gave them vineyards and fields in that day. (*Yirmeyahu* 39:1-10)

The city was breached on the ninth of Tamuz. After the breach of the city, the ministers of the king of Babylon sat in the middle gate. It may be presumed that this gate was in the northern wall of Jerusalem. The late Prof. Nachman Avigad in his excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City uncovered a wall that he dated to the days of King Chizkiyahu and identified with the broad wall (*Nechemya* 3:8). North of the wall he discovered a tower, which he identified with a gate that was probably built some time shortly after the construction of the wall. He speculated that it may be possible to identify this gate with the middle gate mentioned in our chapter. It may be noted that in the excavations at the site of the tower, impressive remains were found of a burnt layer that can be dated to and identified with the destruction of the city and the breaching of its wall. Among the many finds in the burnt layer were found many Babylonian and Jewish arrowheads that attest to the difficult battle that took place at the site.

When they saw the ministers of the king of Babylon, Tzidkiyahu and all his men understood that if they will be discovered they will all be killed, and therefore they decided to flee the city at night by the way of the king's garden, by the gate between the two walls, in the direction of the Arava. The king's garden can be identified outside the southern tip of the City of David, and most likely the gate between the two walls is located at the southern end of the city in the area of ​​the ancient pool of the City of David. Remains of an outer wall, east of the main wall of the City of David, were uncovered on the eastern slope of the City of David in Area E, and it is assumed that this wall continued south to the area of ​​the ancient pool, referred to in *Yeshayahu* 22:11 as: "a basin between the two walls."

Of course, this action also testifies about King Tzidkiyahu, that instead of taking responsibility and leading the campaign against the ministers of the king of Babylon, he chooses to try to save his own life by fleeing the city. The Chaldeans overtake him in the plains of Yericho and bring him to Nevuchadnetzar, who judges Tzidkiyahu for violating his oath and rebelling against him.

Scripture describes how after breaching the walls of the city, the Babylonians burned the king's house and the house of the people. The people who survived the famine, the plague, the sword and the burning of the city were exiled by Nevuzaradan, the captain of the people, to Babylon. The poor of the people, apparently families of farmers who were deprived of their fields and left landless and with nothing of value, were allowed to remain in the land of Yehuda, and were given vineyards, orchards, and fields to plow and sow.

Apparently this was intended to enable them to supply the needs of the armies of the king of Babylon. It is reasonable to assume that the fields that were given to them had belonged to those who fled from the land of Yehuda or were killed or taken captive. God, measure for measure, gave their fields to the poor and oppressed, the very fields that they had earlier plundered from them.

In the next *shiur*, we will deal with the chapters of the destruction and with the fate of the prophet Yirmeyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In the excavations in the City of David, in the elevated area of the city below the Visitors Center, two clay seals were found in the burnt layer bearing the names of the ministers Gedalyahu the son of Pashchur and Yehokhal the son of Shelamyahu, both of whom are mentioned in our chapter. When the late Prof. Yigal Shilo conducted excavations to the east of this area on the slope in Area G, among the other clay seals that he found were seals of Gemaryahu the son of Shafan, the scribe of King Yehoyakim who defended Yirmeyahu. It is very exciting to find physical evidence of known characters in the Bible from 2700 years ago, one of whom tried to defend Yirmeyahu and two of whom tried to have him killed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)