YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #306: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (CXVI) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XCII)**

In this *shiur* we will continue our examination of the service of Molekh. In the previous *shiur* we discussed the source of this worship – whether like the Ibn Ezra we are dealing with Molekh the detestation of the children of Amon, or like the Ramban the reference is to Adramelekh and Anamelekh the gods of Sefarvayim. So too we addressed the two main understandings of the service itself – whether like Rashi we are dealing with passing a child between two pyres, or like the Ramban the reference is to the actual burning of children in a fire. The plain sense of many different passages supports the Ramban's understanding.

We also related to the fact that King Achaz burned his son in fire and that according to *Chazal*,had it not been for his mother, Chizkiyahu would have been burned for Molekh. Achaz was the first king of Yehuda who brought the service of Molekh into the city of Jerusalem (unless we are dealing with Molekh the detestation of the children of Amon to whom King David built a *bama* on Mount Asher before Jerusalem).

As we emphasized, the service of Molekh took place in Jerusalem during the reigns of the kings Achaz, Menashe and Yehoyakim. We wish to expand upon our examination of the service of Molekh in order to understand its spiritual significance.

**In the Torah**

The Torah mentions two prohibitions:

1. A prohibition to give of one's seed to Molekh, as part of the prohibitions of forbidden sexual relations:

And you shall not give any of your seed to pass them to Molekh, neither shall you profane the name of God; I am the Lord. (*Vayikra* 18:21)

And also:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Moreover, you shall say to the children of Israel: Whosoever he be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, that gives of his seed to Molekh; he shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. I also will set My face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given of his seed to Molekh, to defile My sanctuary, and to profane My holy name.And if the people of the land do at all hide their eyes from that man, when he gives of his seed to Molekh, and put him not to death; then I will set My face against that man, and against his family, and will cut him off, and all that go astray after him, to go astray after Molekh, from among their people. (*Vayikra* 20:1-5)

1. A prohibition to pass a child through fire, which appears as one of the prohibitions of sorcery:

There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that uses divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or one that consults a ghost or a familiar spirit, or a necromancer.  (*Devarim* 18:10)

In the Prophets, there appears to be an identification between the prohibition to give to pass of one's seed to Molekh and the prohibition to pass one's son in fire to Molekh. *Chazal* in tractate *Sanhedrin* derive by way of a verbal analogy that "giving to pass" means through fire:

It says here: "[To give] to pass" (*Vayikra* 18:21), and it says below: "There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire" (*Devarim* 18:10). Just as below in fire, so too here in fire. And just as here to Molekh, so too below to Molekh. (*Sanhedrin* 64b)

This type of worship involves a profaning of God's name and a defiling of the Temple. It is a sin that leads to communal punishment – stoning – over and beyond the prohibition that applies to each and every individual. The Torah imposes here communal responsibility for the conduct of the individual.

**In the Words of the Rishonim**

The *Rishonim* disagree about the details regarding the nature and essence of this cult. Rashi maintains that this falls into the category of idol worship, whereas according to the Ramban it is forbidden as sorcery but not as idolatry.

In practice, how was this service conducted? Rashi in *Vayikra* writes:

To Molekh – This was an idol the name of which was Molekh, and this was the manner in which it was worshipped: that he [the father] handed his child over to the priests of the idol. These lit two large pyres one opposite the other and made the child to pass on foot between the two pyres.

You shall not let – refers to the handing over of the child to the priests.

Pass to Molekh – refers to the passing through the fire. (*Vayikra* 18:21)

The Rambam writes:

What was done? A person would kindle a great fire and then take some of his progeny and give them to the priests who serve the fire. After the child was given to them, the priests return the son to his father to pass him through the fire at his will. **The father of the child is the one who passes his child through the fire with the priest's permission. He passes him through the fire from one side to the other [while carrying him, the father walking on] his feet in the midst of the flames.** Thus, the father does not cremate his son to Molekh, as sons and daughters are cremated in the worship of other deities. Rather, this form of worship called Molekh involved merely passing [the child through the fire]. Therefore, if one performed this service to a deity other than Molekh, one is not liable. (*Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 6:3)

According to the Rambam and Rashi (this is also the position of Rava in the Gemara), they would pass the child over the fire from one side to the other. (It is possible that the goal of this action was to purify and strengthen the child, as it is the nature of fire to purify).

The Ramban (ad loc.) writes:

Nevertheless it seems to me from the verses that the son was consumed by the fire. For the verse states: "And their sons, whom they bore unto Me, they have also passed them to be devoured" (*Yechezkel* 23:37). And there it is stated: "For when they had slain their children to their idols" (*Yechezkel* 23:39). They would pass him in fire until he was burnt or he died in the fire, and this was his slaying. For this term, "pass them," is used in connection with Molekh, and the verse says "to be devoured" and mention is made of slaying. If so that which they said "like the stirrup thrust over a bonfire on Purim," that is to say, they would pass him over the flames many times and he would die in the flames of the fire.

The Ramban understands that we are dealing with the actual burning of children. He cites many verses as proof to his understanding. Thus in *Yehezkel*:

Moreover you have taken your sons and your daughters, whom you have born to Me, and these have you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your harlotries a small matter, that you have slain My children, and delivered them up, in passing them to them?  (*Yechezkel* 16:20-21)

And similarly later in the book:

For they have committed adultery, and blood is in their hands, and with their idols have they committed adultery; and their sons, whom they bore to Me, they have also passed them to them to be devoured. Moreover this they have done to Me: they have defiled My sanctuary in the same day, and have profaned My sabbaths. For when they had slain their children to their idols, then they came the same day into My sanctuary to profane it; and, lo, thus have they done in the midst of My house. (*Yechezkel* 23:37-39)

And in *Tehilim*:

Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood.  (*Tehilim* 106:36-37)

It is possible that *Chazal* had different traditions on the matter. Some may have practiced a symbolic burning, while others actually burned their children. It is also possible that there were differences between different groups of people, places and periods.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Who Performed this Service?**

Rashi and the other *Rishonim* also disagree about who performed this service. As we saw earlier, Rashi maintains that it was the priests who performed this service. But according to most *Rishonim*, the father himself would pass his child through the fire. They also disagree about the meaning of "to defile My sanctuary." Rashi understands that this refers to the people of Israel. According to the Ramban, we are dealing here with the departure of the *Shekhina*, and therefore there is a special cutting off of the guilty party performed by God Himself.

In addition to what we have seen in the *Rishonim* regarding the manner in which this service was carried out, let us see the following Midrash in *Yalkut Shimoni* – *Yirmeyahu*:

"And they have built the high places of Tofet, which is in the valley of Ben Hinom" (*Yirmeyahu* 7:31) – Our Rabbis of blessed memory said: Even though all the idolatrous temples were in Jerusalem, that of Molekh was outside Jerusalem in a far-removed place.

How was [the Molekh worship] arranged? There was an idol behind seven enclosures. Its face was that of a calf, and its hands were held out like that of a man, who opens his hands to receive [something] from his fellow. And they would place the fire deep inside, as it was hollow, and each person would enter in accordance with this offering. How so? Whoever had a bird would enter the first enclosure and offer his sacrifice; a goat to the second; a lamb to the third; a calf to the fourth; a bull to the fifth; an ox to the sixth; and one who would offer his son would enter to the seventh and kiss it. About this it says: "They that sacrifice men kiss calves" (*Hoshea* 13:2). And they would put the child before Molekh, and heat from inside, until its hands were like a flame, and they would take the child and put him in its hands. And they would bring drums and beat them loudly, so that the boy's voice not issue forth and his father hear him and his bowels moan for him. Why is it called Ben Hinom? Because the voice of the child would shriek (*nohem*)under the fire. Another explanation: Because those standing around would shriek and say: May [the sacrifice] be pleasing to you, may it be sweet to you, may it well agree with you. Therefore it was called Ben Hinom.

The Radak cites this Midrash and agrees with the Ramban and the plain meaning of the verses that they would actually burn the children.

It is possible that there was a bronze idol the arms of which were pointed to the ground and the child would roll into a pit, caught on fire, like sort of a moving oven. The night clearly added mystery to the service, when the idol's hands glowed from the fire. In addition there were deafening drum beats to drown out the wailing of the child.

It is highly probable that in the Valley of Ben Hinom, regarding which it is explicitly stated that children were burned there as part of the worship of Molekh, the service was performed at the eastern end of the valley in the cliffy section, near where the valley meets Nachal Kidron. This area is more isolated and closed off and would have allowed for this service to be performed. The choice of this location may also have allowed a large crowd to view the service from the slopes of the valley itself, from the west to the east.

**The History of the Worship of Molekh**

We mentioned that the worship of Molekh in Yehuda took place during the reigns of the kings Achaz, Menashe and Yehoyakim. The worship performed by Achaz was repaired by his son Yechizkiyahu, as is stated in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

Now when all this was finished, all Israel that were present went out to the cities of Yehuda, and broke in pieces the pillars, and hewed down the Asherim, and broke down the high places and the altars out of all Yehuda and Binyamin, in Efrayim also and Menashe, until they had destroyed them all. Then all the children of Israel returned, every man to his possession, into their own cities. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 31:1)

The worship of Molekh returned in the days of Menashe, about whom it is stated in *Melakhim*:

And he made his son to pass through the fire, and practiced soothsaying, and used enchantments, and appointed them that divined by a ghost or a familiar spirit: he wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him.  (II *Melakhim* 21:6)

And in *Divrei ha-Yamim*:

He also made his children to pass through the fire in the valley of Ben Hinom; and he practiced soothsaying, and used enchantments, and practiced sorcery, and appointed them that divined by a ghost or a familiar spirit; he wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 33:6)

This worship was repaired in the days of Yoshiyahu:

And they broke down the altars of the Baalim in his presence; and the sun-images, that were on high above them, he hewed down; and the Asherim, and the graven images, and the molten images, he broke in pieces, and made dust of them, and strewed it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed to them. And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and purged Yehuda and Jerusalem. And so did he in the cities of Menashe and Efrayim and Shimon, even to Naftali, with their axes round about. And he broke down the altars, and beat the Asherim and the graven images into powder, and hewed down all the sun-images throughout all the land of Israel, and returned to Jerusalem. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 34:4-7)

The worship of Molekh returns once again in the days of Yehoyakim:

And they have built the high places of Tofet, which is in the valley of Ben Hinom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded not, neither came it into My mind. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:31).

Some have argued that it was precisely during these periods (of Achaz, Menashe and Yehoyakim) that the political situation in Yehuda was at a particular low, and in their desperation the kings and the people in those times thought that the only path left untested was to sacrifice what was most precious to them – their children – and set them on fire. Perhaps this would calm God and allow for a change in their situation, similar to the act performed by the king of Moav in II *Melakhim* 3:27. (So Achaz in his war against Aram, and so Menashe against Ashur and Yehoyakim against Bavel.)

It is quite clear that if this opinion is correct, it is completely contrary to the idea of sacrifices in the Torah. The Torah is not interested in the payment of a ransom – as dear at it might be – but rather it seeks the desire to draw close to God in the manner in which He commands. The God of Israel is not a cruel god who exacts a heavy price from those who believe in him for their very faith, or who collect the ultimate price for his own reconciliation.

In the next *shiur* will continue our examination of the worship of Molekh and try to understand its spiritual significance.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The historian Devoe cites a Roman source which tells of the burning of two hundred children in Carthage, a Phoenician colony in North Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)