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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**MIKDASH**

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**Lecture 340: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(CXLX) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (CXXVI)**

### Yoshiyahu's efforts to eradicate Idolatary

In the framework of the attempts to eradicate idolatry that were undertaken by Yoshiyahu, the prophet spells out his actions in various places:

1. Removing all the vessels that were made for Ba'al and the Ashera from God's sanctuary, and breaking down the houses of the sodomites that were in the house of the Lord.

2. Putting down the idolatrous priests and the offering of sacrifices in the *bamot* in the cities of Yehuda and in the places round about Jerusalem.

3. Defiling the *bamot* where the priests made offerings from Geva to Be'er-Sheva, and breaking down the *bamot* of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of the city.

4. Defiling Tofet in the valley of Ben Hinom.

5. Taking away the horses that the kings of Yehuda had given to the sun.

6. Breaking down the altars that were on the roof of the upper chamber of Achaz, and the altars that Menashe had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

7. Defiling the *bamot* that were on the right hand of the mount of corruption.

Afterwards Scripture pays special attention to the altar that was in Bet-El and all the houses of the *bamot* in the cities of Shomeron:

Moreover the altar that was at Bet-El, and the high place which Yerovam the son of Nevat, who made Israel to sin, had made, even that altar and the high place he broke down; and he burned the high place and stamped it small to powder, and burned the Ashera. And as Yoshiyahu turned himself, he spied the sepulchers that were there in the mount; and he sent, and took the bones out of the sepulchers, and burned them upon the altar, and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord which the man of God proclaimed, who proclaimed these things. Then he said: What monument is that which I see? And the men of the city told him: It is the sepulcher of the man of God, who came from Yehuda, and proclaimed these things that you have done against the altar of Bet-El. And he said: Let him be; let no man move his bones. So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet that came out of Shomeron…  And he slew all the priests of the high places that were there, upon the altars, and burned men's bones upon them; and he returned to Jerusalem. (II *Melakhim* 23:15-20)

### The altar at Bet-El

What is the meaning of the incident at the grave of the man of God? It would appear from the verses that Scripture attaches special importance to this incident. It should first be noted that at the time of the division of the monarchy, a man of God came out of Yehuda with the word of God to Bet-El, and Yerovam was standing on the altar to offer:

And, behold, there came a man of God out of Yehuda by the word of the Lord to Bet-El; and Yerovam was standing by the altar to offer. And he cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said: O altar, altar, thus says the Lord: Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Yoshiyahu by name; and upon you shall he sacrifice the priests of the high places that offer upon you, and men's bones shall they burn upon you. And he gave a sign the same day saying: This is the sign which the Lord has spoken: Behold, the altar shall be rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out. )I *Melakhim* 13:1-3)

That is to say, already in the days of Yerovam, when the king stood on the altar in Bet-El, the man of God foretold what would happen at that very altar several centuries later at the hands of one of the kings of the house of David named Yoshiyahu. Our chapter describes the fulfillment of this prophecy.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The fulfillment of the prophecy of the man of God in Bet-El in the days of Yerovam by King Yoshiyahu is a direct continuation and completion of the prophecy in 1 *Melakhim* 1:13. These actions of Yoshiyahu took place about a hundred years after the destruction of the kingdom of Israel at the hands of Ashur. Yoshiyahu expanded the boundaries of his rule into the territories of the former kingdom of Israel, and thus he acted freely in Bet-El and in the cities of Shomeron. The Israelites who lived there continued with their previous modes of worship. The altar built by Yerovam was still an active altar and so too the *bamot* in the cities of Shomeron. It would appear that when the king of Ashur conquered the kingdom of Israel, he took the golden calf from Bet-El because of its monetary value, and therefore Yoshiyahu did not have to do anything to destroy it.

The proof that our book is a continuation and completion of the prophecy of the man of God is the fact that in both chapters (I *Melakhim* 13 and II *Melakhim* 23) the altar in Bet-El stands in the center of the prophecy. So too the act of burning a person's bones on the altar in order to humiliate him appears in Scripture only in these two places.

Yoshiyahu did not do what he did because he knew about the prophecy of the man of God and he wished to fulfill it. Rather, he acted on his own. It is Scripture that notes that his actions accorded with the earlier prophecy.

Yoshiyahu's actions are a repair of the man of God's failure. The man of God, after delivering his prophecy, sinned against his mission when he returned to Bet-El to eat and drink, thereby making peace with the people of the city and their worship. Yoshiyahu could not reconcile himself with the idolatry of Bet-El, but rather he acted with zealotry and with full severity, in accordance with the prophecy of old.

As for dating this incident within the years of Yoshiyahu's reign, it is clear that our story did not take place before the eighteenth year of Yoshiyahu's rule.

It would appear that the continued existence of the altar in Bet-El until the days of Yoshiyahu is a central and essential point in the story. Of all the sins of Yerovam, our chapter contends only with the existence of the forbidden altar in Bet-El. The failure to relate to the golden calf at Bet-El is probably due to the fact that it was taken by the king of Ashur when he destroyed the kingdom of Israel.

The breaking and defiling of the altar took place about a hundred years after the destruction of the kingdom. Bet-El was still standing, its Israelite inhabitants continue to live there and they had a three hundred year old tradition regarding the monument over a grave in their city. They knew who was buried there and the content of the prophecy that he delivered. Yerovam's altar still stood in Bet-El, and it remained in active use.

When Yoshiyahu eradicated the worship in Bet-El, his goal was to turn Jerusalem into the exclusive place for the worship of the God of Israel.

### Bet-El – a sacred place from the time of the Patriarchs through the period of the *Shofetim* and until almost the end of the first temple period

Bet-El was a sacred place already in the period of the Patriarchs. When Avraham first arrived in the Land of Israel, he pitched his tent between Bet-El in the west and Ay in the east. There he built an altar to God and called out in His name (*Bereishit* 12:8). After he went down to Egypt, he returned to the place where he had first set up his tent, between Bet-El and Ay (*Bereishit* 13:3-4). There Lot separated from Avraham, and God revealed Himself to Avraham and bestowed upon him a blessing concerning his seed and the land (*Bereishit* 13:14-17).

Yaakov arrived in Bet-El on his way to Charan. There he saw in a dream a ladder set up on the earth, its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending it. Yaakov understood how full of awe the place was, he took a stone and set it up as a pillar, and called the place Bet-El (*Bereishit* 28:10-22). When he returned from Charan, God commanded him to go back to Bet-El and build there an altar. It was there that God called Yaakov by the name of Israel and gave him the blessing of seed and the land (*Bereishit* 35:1-15).

In the book of *Yehoshua*, Bet-El is on the border separating between the territories of Binyamin and Efrayim (*Yehoshua* 16:1-2). It is counted among the cities of Binyamin (*Yehoshua* 18:21).

At the beginning of the book of *Shofetim,* we find an account of the conquest of Bet-El by the house of Yosef. In the story of the concubine at Giv'a, the *Mishkan* is located in Shilo, but the people of Israel bring the ark up to Bet-El:

Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came to Bet-El, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even; and they offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings before the Lord. And the children of Israel asked of the Lord – for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days. (*Shofetim* 20:26-27)

Shemuel went in circuit to several cities to judge Israel, and one of those cities was Bet-El (I *Shemuel* 7:16). So too when Shemuel anointed Shaul as king, one of the places noted on the way was Bet-El:

Then shall you go on forward from there, and you shall come to the terebinth of Tavor, and there shall meet you there three men going up to God to Bet-El, one carrying three kids, and another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a bottle of wine. (I *Shemuel* 10:3)

That is to say, Bet-El was a place in which worship took place at that time.

When Yerovam ascended the throne to rule over the kingdom of Israel and feared that the people would go up to Jerusalem and return to Rechavam, he set up two golden calves, one in Bet-El and one in Dan. He made a house of *bamot* and went up on the altar to offer sacrifices to the calves. (I *Melakhim* 13)

It seems that the sanctity of Bet-El, which began in the patriarchal period and continued throughout the period of the *Shofetim* and of Shemuel, brought Yerovam to establish Bet-El as a place of worship competing with Jerusalem on the southern border of his kingdom.

Bet-El’s place in the Bible continued when the king of Ashur settled a foreign population in Shomeron:

So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Shomeron came and dwelt in Bet-El, and taught them how they should fear the Lord. (II *Melakhim* 17:28)

It is interesting that that priest chose Bet-El as the place to instruct the people how they should fear God.

We now come to our story in II *Melakhim* 22-23 regarding the actions of King Yoshiyahu which constitute a fulfillment of the prophecy spelled out in I *Melakhim* 13:2-3.

We have presented this brief review in order to show the continuity of worship in Bet-El from the time of the Patriarchs through the period of the *Shofetim* and the Monarchy until close to the end of the First Temple period, until the time of King Yoshiyahu.

Let us return to the days of Yoshiyahu and the significance of his action regarding the altar at Bet-El. His contemporaries witnessed the king's vigorous efforts to uproot the *bamot* throughout the country and they had difficulty with the question how was it possible that alongside the Temple in Jerusalem there was a competing place of worship in Bet-El, regarding which nothing had been done until now. The central place of worship in Bet-El was meant at first to serve as an alternative to Jerusalem, but it continued to exist a hundred years after the destruction of the kingdom of Israel. It is clear that from a prophetic perspective there is no place for worship in Bet-El. Prophets opposed its existence from the time of its initial appearance. The breaking of the altar symbolized the prophetic attitude towards it and its later destruction was already determined at the time of its original construction.

But in practice this prophecy was not implemented against the altar of Bet-El:

1. The first opposition to the prophecy against the altar of Bet-El was on the part of Yerovam for a political reason.

2. The second opposition to the prophecy against the altar of Bet-El was on the part of the old prophet who lived in Bet-El – this opposition was on religious grounds.

3. The third opposition – it would seem that the man of God himself had doubts about his prophecy and caused it to fail. His unwitting behavior indicates a lack of identification with the prophecy for a social reason.

For all these reasons, the prophecy that opposed worship in Bet-El was not fulfilled until the time of King Yoshiyahu, when all the conditions for its fulfillment ripened.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. In this part of the *shiur* we will bring the gist of the words of Rav Elchanan Samet in his *shiurim* on the books of *Melakhim* (*shiurim* 19-23) at the Virtual Bet Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)