YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levi**

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**L'iluy nishmat Yosef ben Aharon Shmuel H"YD, Grandpa Joe.**

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**Lecture #260: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXX) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XLVII)**

In the previous *shiur* we began to consider David's attitude toward the Divine service as it is portrayed in the book of *Tehilim*. In the framework of David's yearnings to build the house of God, prostration seizes a significant place. After examining the role of prostration in the chapters of *Tehilim* and in the verses of the Torah, we began to consider the matter of prostration in the words of the Prophets. We related to two passages in II *Shemuel* which describe David's bowing. In this *shiur* we wish to continue with the matter of prostration in the words of the Prophets, and then begin to consider its spiritual meaning.

### Bowing in the words of the Prophets

The first example of bowing relates to king Yehoshafat, in the framework of the war that he waged against the people of Moav and the people of Amon:

And Yehoshafat bowed his head with his face to the ground: and all Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, prostrating themselves before the Lord. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 20:18)

A second example is found by Chizkiyahu, where Scripture describes the renewal of the Temple service and the bringing of the Paschal offering following the removal of the idolatry of the days of Achaz:

And all the congregation prostrated themselves, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt-offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and all who were present with him bowed down, and prostrated themselves. Moreover Yechizkiyahu the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise to the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaf the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:28-30)[[1]](#footnote-1)

A third example is found in the words of Ravshakeh to inhabitants of Jerusalem:

But if you say to me, We trust in the Lord our God: is not that He, whose high places and whose altars Chizkiyahu has taken away, and has said to Yehuda and Jerusalem, You shall prostrate yourselves before the altar in Jerusalem? (II *Melakhim* 18:22)

What is special in this example is that the bowing is described as taking place specifically before the altar, rather than before the *Heikhal*. Ravshakeh scornfully describes Chizkiyahu's removal of the *bamot* and altars and his restriction of the Divine service to the altar in the Temple. The idolatrous perspective is that the multiplicity of altars adds to God's honor, whereas the restriction of the service to a single altar reduces the glory of Heaven. In the eyes of idolaters, prostration should be directed to the altar, and not the *Heikhal*.[[2]](#footnote-2) This idolatrous position stands in absolute opposition to bowing towards the site of the resting of the *Shekhina*, and therefore it sharpens the value of bowing down before God.

A fourth example is found in the words of the prophet Yirmeyahu. In a prophecy that was apparently delivered in the days of Yehoyakim, Yirmiyahu is commanded to do as follows:

Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all Yehuda, that enter in at these gates to prostrate themselves before the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:2)

According to this verse, prostration before God is the objective of those coming to the house of God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A fifth example of bowing is from the time of the return to Zion. Nechemya describes the people of Israel gathered in a fast and in sackcloth:

And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the Torah of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and prostrated themselves before the Lord their God. (*Nechemya* 9:2-3)

Here we see a connection between prostration and confession.

In the continuation an account is given of the words of the Levites:

You are Lord alone; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are in it, the seas, and all that is therein, and You preserve them all; and the host of heaven prostrate themselves before You. (*Nechemya* 9:6)

We have here a very interesting statement according to which prostration is not just a matter relating to those person who comes to worship God and express their absolute submission to Him. It is a matter relating to the entire cosmos which recognizes the Creator and knows that He rules, oversees, and directs the entire universe, its natural dimension and everything that happens in the world.

If so, bowing is an expression of the relationship between the created world and its Creator. All of creation recognizes that God is the Creator who oversees the world and maintains it, and therefore the proper relationship between the world and the Creator is that it should express before Him its submission and subjugation.

Among other things we are dealing also with the host of heaven, which apparently refers to the sun, the moon, and the stars, whose role, by definition, is: "to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness" (*Bereishit* 1:17-18). Therefore, the fact that it is precisely the host of heaven, whose job it is to give light and to rule over the day and over the night, that bows down before God, teaches us that even those who rule over time recognize God's absolute lordship over and control of the world and of themselves.

How does all this effect the idea of prostration? The Gemara in *Baba Batra* 25a deals with the issue of "the *Shekhina* in the west."[[4]](#footnote-4) The passage there speaks of matters relating to prayer and brings two explanations why the *Shekhina* is in the west. The first is to counter the idolaters who face the east and bow down to the sun, and the second cites the verse under discussion in *Nechemya*, according to which "the host of heaven prostrate themselves before You" (*Nechemya* 9:6). A second matter is when we apply this principle in the Temple, where the holiest section is found on the western side of the structure. It may be proposed that the sun, the moon, and the stars, which rise in the east, bow down as it were when they move from the east to the west towards the *Shekhina* that is found in the Holy of Holies.

A fundamental question arises: Seeing that the sun, the moon, and the stars are inanimate objects, how can we attribute to them the spiritual significance of prostration?

One answer is that the priestly service in the Temple is performed regularly from the east to the west, with the faces of the priests (and also those of the animals being sacrificed) turned to the west. It can therefore be said that when the priest serves in the Temple or bows down there toward the west, he, as it were, carries the sun, the moon, and the stars on his back, representing all of creation in his service.[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to this understanding, it may be suggested that in the Temple the night follows the day so that the day in the Temple should begin with the sun bowing down toward the *Shekhina* with its very shining.

### prostration in the future

Several prophets address prostration in the future. Yechezkel describes the future Temple, and the prostration that will take place there, both of the prince (*nasi*) and of the people of the land (*am ha-aretz*):

And the prince shall enter by the way of the porch of that gate from outside, and shall stand by the post of the gate, and the priests shall prepare his burnt-offering, and his peace-offerings, and he shall bow down at the threshold of the gate: then he shall go out; but the gate shall not be shut until the evening. (*Yechezkel* 4:2)

The Radak explains:

"And he shall bow down at the threshold of the gate" – at the threshold of the gate of the *Heikhal*. (Radak, *Yechezkel* 46:2)

The future *nasi* will bow down at the threshold of the gate of the *Heikhal*, and in that way he will express his submission in his high office to God.

The prophet continues:

Likewise the people of the land shall bow down at the door of this gate before the Lord on the Sabbaths and on the New Moons. (*Yechezkel* 46:3)

The Malbim explains:

"Likewise the people of the land shall bow down at the door of this gate" – since it is the Sabbath or New Moon, when they appear before the Lord, as it is stated: "And it shall come to pass, every New Moon, and every Sabbath, shall all flesh come to bow down before Me, says the Lord" (*Yeshayahu* 66:23), and therefore the gate is open all day. (Malbim, *Yechezkel* 46:3)

The gate is open all day because according to the prophet Yeshaya all flesh will come to bow down before God on the Sabbath and the New Moons. That bowing down is the ultimate objective of their coming to the Temple on those fixed days. Thus the future Temple is portrayed as the place where both the prince and the people of the land bow down before God.

Several prophets describe how in the future even the nations will go up to the Temple and bow down there before God in recognition of His kingship. Thus the prophet Yeshaya says:

And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great shofar shall be blown, and they shall come who were lost in the land of Ashur, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall prostrate themselves before the Lord in the holy mountain of Jerusalem. (*Yeshaya* 27:13)

Can we learn from here that there is special significance to bowing down before God on the holy mountain, that is, on the Temple Mount? If so, this accords with what is stated in *Tehilim* 99:

Exalt the Lord our God, and prostrate yourselves at His holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy. (*Tehilim* 99:9)

Another reference to the bowing down of the nations is found in *Zekharya*:

And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations who came against Jerusalem, shall go up from year to year to bow down before the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths. And whoever does not come up of all the families of the earth to Jerusalem to bow down before the King, the Lord of hosts, upon them shall be no rain. (*Zekharya* 14:16-17)

As part of the prophet Zekharya's vision of the future, the nations will make an annual pilgrimage and bow down before God. Interestingly, the only ritual act that is mentioned here is bowing down to God in the Temple, and not offering sacrifices or engaging in prayer.

If we come to briefly summarize the issue of prostration as it finds expression in the words of the prophets, we can say that bowing down to God is performed in the Temple, and apparently toward the *Heikhal* from inside the Temple courtyard. We find an allusion to this in connection with several kings (Yehoshafat, Chizkiyahu, and the prince in the prophecy of Yechezkel). The bowing down is performed towards the *Heikhal* or towards the ark, and not in the direction of the altar, as thought appropriate by the nations and by Ravshakeh. Prostration appears to stand independently of the sacrificial service.

At the same time, the prophets understand that in the future the nations as well will come to the Temple to bow down before God. It is therefore understandable why King David, based on what we saw in the book of *Tehilim*, as part of his yearnings for the Temple, attaches such great significance to the matter of prostration.

### The essence of prostration and its spiritual meaning

In order to under the deep essence of prostration and its spiritual meaning, we must compare it to two other actions that are similar to it, but yet different: *kida* and *keri'a.*

The Gemara in *Berakhot* defines the relationship between *kida*, *keri'a* and *hishtachava'a* as follows:

*Kida* [bowing] is upon the face, as it is stated: "Then Bat Sheva bowed (*va-tikod*) with her face to the ground" (II *Melakhim* 1:31). *Keri'a* [kneeling] is upon the knees, as it is stated: "From kneeling (*mo-kero'a*) on his knees" (I *Melakhim* 8:54). *Hishtachava'a* [prostration] is spreading out of hands and feet, as it is stated: "Shall I and your mother and your brothers come to prostrate ourselves (*le-hishtachavot*) before you on the ground" (*Bereishit* 37:10). (*Berakhot* 34b)

### *Kida*

According to the Gemara, *kida* refers to bowing down to the point that one's face touches the ground.

The Gemara in *Sukkot* relates about Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel at the *Beit ha-Sho'eva* celebration:

And when he prostrated himself, he used to dig his two thumbs in the ground, bend down, kiss the ground, and draw himself up again, a feat which no other man could do, and this is what is meant by *kida.* (*Sukka* 53a)

Rashi (ad loc.) explains:

And this is what is meant by *kida* – that is stated in Scripture, for the Master said: *Kida* is upon the face. He need not stretch out so that his body touches the ground, but only his face, he who knows and is capable of doing this. And in the generation of Rabban Shimon nobody standing in the courtyard was capable of doing this, except for him. (*Sukka* 53a)

It turns out according to the Gemara[[6]](#footnote-6) that in all these forms of bowing the face reaches the ground. In *kida* only the face touches the ground; in *keri'a* the knees and the face; and in *hishtachava'a* the face and the entire body.

When we examine *kida* in the Bible, wherever this term is mentioned, it always appears together with *hishtachava*'a, and always before it.

*Kida* and *hishtachava'a* in the Bible is performed also before human kings. The first example of this is found after David tears Shaul's mantle:

David also arose afterwards, and went out of the cave, and cried after Shaul, saying, My Lord the king. And when Shaul looked behind him, David stooped (*va-yikod*) with his face to the earth, and bowed himself (*va-yishtachu*). (I *Shemuel* 24:8)

Another example is found in connection with Bat-Sheva when she appears before David:

And Bat-Sheva bowed (*va-tikod*) and prostrated herself (*va-tishtachu*) before the king. And the king said, What would you? (I *Melakhim* 1:16)

And similarly later in that same chapter:

Then Bat-Sheva bowed (*va-tikod*) with her face to the earth, and prostrated herself (*va-tishtachu*) to the king, and said, Let my lord king David live for ever. (I *Melakhim* 1:31)

A third example is found in I *Divrei ha-Yamim* after David's words of encouragement to the people regarding the building of the Temple:

And David said to all the congregation, Now bless the Lord your God. And all the congregation blessed the Lord God of their fathers, and bowed down their head (*va-yikdu*), and prostrated themselves (*va-yishtachavu*) before the Lord, and the king. (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 29:20)

The novelty here that appears nowhere else is *kida* and *hishtachava'a* before both God and the king in a single action.

We find a connection between *kida* and *hishtachava'a* in one place also with respect to a prophet. We refer to Shaul when he turns to the sorceress who raises Shemuel's image from the dead:

And Shaul knew that it was Shemuel, and he stooped (*va-yikod*) with his face to the ground, and prostrated himself (*va-yishtachu*). (I *Shemuel* 28:14)

In contrast, in all the other contexts *kida* and *hishtachava'a* are directed toward God. So by Eliezer, Abraham's servant (*Bereishit* 24:26). And so by Yehoshafat in the campaign against the Moabites and the Amonites:

And Yehoshafat bowed (*va-yikod*) his head with his face to the ground: and all Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the Lord, prostrating themselves (*le-hishtachavot*) before the Lord. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 20:18)

So too in the early days of the people of Israel, when Aharon performs signs before them:

And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that He had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed (*va-yikdu*) their heads and prostrated themselves (*va-yishtachavu*). (*Shemot* 4:31)

And so in the words of Ezra to all the people after the reading from the book of the Torah:

And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands: and they bowed (*vayikdu*) their head, and prostrated themselves (*va-yishtachavu*) before the Lord with their faces to the ground. (*Nechemya* 8:6)

It is clear then that *kida* involves a bending of the head toward the ground. Opinions differ as to whether it is possible to engage in *kida* also from a standing or sitting position, or whether the face must touch the ground in accordance with the plain sense of some of the sources.

This bending of the head clearly implies submission or thanksgiving, and therefore it can be used also with respect to a human king, or to a prophet, and of course, to God.

### *Keri'a*

In its simplest form, when a person engages in *keri'a*, his shins rest on the ground and his body is erect. In the book of *Tehilim* King David relates to *keri'a* before God. *Keri'a* often appears after *hishtachava'a*. For example:

O come, let us prostrate ourselves (*nishtachaveh*) and bow down (*nikhre'a*): let us kneel before the Lord our maker. (*Tehilim* 95:6)

It is possible that this was the practice of those coming to the Temple, first prostrating on the ground and falling on their faces, and afterwards straightening their bodies and raising their faces from the ground, while keeping their shins on the ground and remaining in a state of kneeling, and in this way they would offer their prayers.[[7]](#footnote-7)

There are several instances of *keri'a* in the Bible. The first instance is in the days of Shelomo, by whom *keri'a* is mentioned twice. The first time at the dedication of the Temple:

And it was so, that when Shelomo had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication to the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling (*mi-kero'a*) on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven. (I *Melakhim* 8:54)

We learn from this verse that Shelomo offered his entire prayer while kneeling on his knees, his hands stretched out to heaven. This is also noted by the Gemara in *Berakhot*:

A king, once he has knelt down, does not rise again [until the end of the prayer]. (*Berakhot* 34b)

According to this, *keri'a* is an intermediate position between *kida*, where one bends his head down, and *hishtachava'a* where one lies face down to the ground, with outstretched arms and legs.

The second instance is in II *Divrei ha-Yamim*, which relates to the people of Israel themselves:

And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord upon the house, they knelt (*va-yikhre'u*) with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and prostrated themselves, and praised the Lord, saying, For He is good; for His steadfast love endures for ever. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 7:3)

The *Malbim* (ad loc.) explains:

"And when all the children of Israel… with their faces to the ground upon the pavement" – for it is forbidden to bow down on a stone pavement except for in the Temple, as we learned in the *Sifra*, at the end of *Parashat Behar*, and in tractate *Megila* (22b). But when they saw that this is the place that was chosen by God, they prostrated themselves on the pavement. (*Malbim*,II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 7:3)

It turns out that this is the first time following the dedication of the Temple that there is *keri'a* and *hishtachava'a* to God inside the Temple, and therefore they offer thanks to God for this novelty.

To conclude, the Bible also notes the opposite of *keri'a* and *hishtachava'a* to God in the chapters dealing with Eliyahu:

Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed (*kar'u*) to the Ba'al, and every mouth that has not kissed him. (I *Melakhim* 19:18)

The opposite of kneeling before God is kneeling before the Ba'al.

In this *shiur* we considered the phenomenon of *hishtachava'a* in the words of the Prophets, and we began to examine the essence of bowing down and its spiritual meaning. We also saw the meaning of *kida* and *hishtachava'a*.

In the next *shiur* we hope to complete our examination of the essence of *hishtachava'a*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The singing accompanies the offering of the sacrifices and the praising of God, and it is therefore an integral part of the Temple service. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a certain sense this involves a type of bowing before the work of their own hands, before the altar. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is implied also by what he says later: "Thus says the Lord, Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Yehuda, which come to prostrate themselves in the Lord's house, all the words tht I command you to speak to them; leave nothing out" (*Yirmeyahu* 26:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We dealt with this issue at length in an earlier series of *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Following the approach of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, it may be suggested that a priest serving in the Temple actualizes the yearning of all of creation for God. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The *Rishonim* have different opinions as to how this was performed. The Ri Migash (*Shevu'ot* 16b) understands that *kida* was done in a standing position. In contrast, the Rambam maintains that *kida* was done in a sitting position (*Hilkhot Tefila* 5:13-14). So it is also brought in a note to the Gemara in *Berakhot* 34a in the Schottenstein edition of the Talmud. On the other hand, Rashi in *Bereishit* 43:28 writes: "'And they bowed the head and prostrated themselves' – in recognition of his enquiry regarding their welfare. The term *kida* denotes bowing the head; the term *hishtachava'a* denotes prostration upon the ground." That is to say, *kida* involves only a bending of the head. According to this, it can be done even in a standing position. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. So proposes Amos Chakham in his explanation of this chapter in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to the book of *Tehilim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)