YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**THE HISTORY OF DIVINE SERVICE**

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**Lecture 358: The History of the Divine Service at Altars**

**(168) – The Prohibition of *Bamot* (144)**

In the previous *shiurim* we characterized the various groups found in the people of Israel after the exile of Yehoyakhin and in the early days of the kingdom of Tzidkiyahu. In this *shiur* we shall examine several prophecies of the prophet Yirmeyahu that are not explicitly dated in the verses, but their contents accord with the period of the early years of the kingdom of Tzidkiyahu after the exile of the smiths and the craftsmen.

Let us start with a prophecy at the end of chapter 8:

Behold the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people from a land far off: Is not the Lord in Zion? Is not her King in her? Why have they provoked Me with their graven images, and with strange vanities? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I seized with anguish; I am black, appalment has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gil'ad? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! (*Yirmeyahu* 8:19-23)

The prophet opens with a lament and he hears the cry of his people from Babylonia. They argue that if God dwells in Zion, he should redeem the people of Israel, but this has not happened. God's answer to this is that they do not deserve to be redeemed, as they are worshipping idols in their exile.

The prophet speaks of the balm that grows in the northern part of the east bank of the Jordan, in Gil'ad, and is used by doctors to heal wounds. The prophet's pain and sorrow is exceedingly great; he cries day and night over the dead who apparently fell in the battles fought against the Babylonians. It is possible that he is referring also to those who will be slain in the future at the time of the destruction. God is still angry with His people, and the prophet knows that they will remain in exile for seventy years and only then will they return to the kingdom of Yehuda.

It is interesting that the prophet in his broken state deeply feels the pain of his people, but he does not seek God's mercy that he shorten their exile.

The reasons for dating the prophecy to the early days of Tzidkiyahu: The phrase: "Behold the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people from a land far off," relates to the exile of the smiths and the craftsmen in Babylonia. The exiles' words: "Is not the Lord in Zion? Is not her King in her?" clearly indicate that the Temple is still standing. These two arguments accord with the reality of the early days of Tzidkiyahu in the aftermath of the exile of the smiths and the craftsmen.

The next prophecy that most likely relates to the period under discussion is in chapter 9:

Oh that I were in the wilderness, in a lodging-place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people, and go from them! For they are all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men. And they bend their tongue, their bow of falsehood; and they are grown mighty in the land, but not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and Me they know not, says the Lord. Take you heed every one of his neighbor, and trust you not in any brother; for every brother acts subtly, and every neighbor goes about with slanders. And they deceive every one his neighbor, and truth they speak not; they have taught their tongue to speak lies, they weary themselves to commit iniquity. Your habitation is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know Me, says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will smelt them, and try them; for how else should I do, because of the daughter of My people? Their tongue is a sharpened arrow, it speaks deceit; one speaks peaceably to his neighbor with his mouth, but in his heart he lays wait for him. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord; shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this? For the mountains will I take up a weeping and wailing, and for the pastures of the wilderness a lamentation, because they are burned up, so that none passes through. And they hear not the voice of the cattle; both the fowl of the heavens and the beast are fled, and gone. And I will make Jerusalem heaps, a lair of jackals; and I will make the cities of Yehuda a desolation, without an inhabitant. (*Yirmeyahu* 9:1-10)

Regarding the time of this prophecy, beyond the wording of the beginning of the prophecy which is similar to that of the end of the previous prophecy and therefore its natural continuation, the prophet relates to the fact that all are adulterers and treacherous men. He says in verse 2: "And they bend their tongue, their bow of falsehood; and they are grown mighty in the land, but not for truth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and Me they know not, says the Lord." Beyond the falsehood that characterizes their words and actions, he emphasizes that they became rulers not by way of the truth. This description accords with the seizure of the governmental offices that became vacant with the exile of the smiths and the craftsmen. The people to whom Yirmeyahu refers seized those leadership positions with the help of their lies.

The more prominent theme of this prophecy is the lie: traitors, false tongue, not speaking the truth, deceit. It seems that after the former leaders were removed when they were sent into exile, a culture of lies, deceit, and treachery took root in the kingdom. Violent men who remained in Yehuda took over the kingdom and oppressed the poor. Tzidkiya in his weakness was unable to prevent this.

The prophet Yechezkel in his prophetic journey to Jerusalem in the sixth year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, which was the sixth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, describes at length the reality in Jerusalem and in the house of God, which constitutes the backdrop of the removal of the *Shekhina* from the Temple.[[1]](#footnote-1) Among other things, he says: "Then He said to me: The iniquity of the house of Israel and Yehuda is exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of wresting of judgment; for they say: The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord sees not" (*Yechezkel* 9:9).

This is the reality that the prophet Yirmeyahu experienced, and in all likelihood, the culture of falsehood, distortion, and biased judgment was so extreme that it brought Yirmeyahu to a most far-reaching statement: He wishes to leave Jerusalem and be in the wilderness.

Seeing the destruction before his very eyes, the prophet laments the destruction of the mountains on which the people had practiced idolatry and of the grazing pastures in the wilderness. All of these will burn up and be destroyed. So too the entire kingdom of Yehuda will become desolate. Even the city of Jerusalem itself will be a lair of jackals, its houses and walls will become ruins, and all of the cities of Yehuda will become a desolation, without inhabitants.

From here, let us move on to the prophecy in *Yirmeyahu* 23, which also has no explicit date:

Woe unto the shepherds that destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, against the shepherds that feed My people: You have scattered My flock, and driven them away, and have not taken care of them; behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, says the Lord. And I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries to which I have driven them, and will bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and multiply. And I will set up shepherds over them, who shall feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be lacking, says the Lord. Behold, the days come, says the Lord, that I will raise to David a righteous shoot, and he shall reign as king and prosper, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Yehuda shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely; and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord is our righteousness. Therefore, behold, the days come, says the Lord, that they shall no more say: As the Lord lives, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but: As the Lord lives, that brought up and that led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all the countries to which I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land. Concerning the prophets. My heart within me is broken, all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine has overcome; because of the Lord, and because of His holy words. For the land is full of adulterers; for because of swearing the land mourns, the pastures of the wilderness are dried up; and their course is evil, and their force is not right. For both prophet and priest are ungodly; yea, in My house have I found their wickedness, says the Lord. Therefore, their way shall be to them as slippery places in the darkness, they shall be thrust, and fall therein; for I will bring evil upon them, even the year of their visitation, says the Lord. And I have seen unseemliness in the prophets of Shomeron: they prophesied by Ba'al, and caused My people Israel to err. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies, and they strengthen the hands of evil-doers, that none does return from his wickedness; they are all of them become to Me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Amora. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets: Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and make them drink the water of gall; for from the prophets of Jerusalem is ungodliness gone forth into all the land. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Hearken not to the words of the prophets that prophesy to you, they lead you to vanity; they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to them that despise Me: The Lord has said: You shall have peace; and to everyone that walks in the stubbornness of his own heart they say: No evil shall come upon you; For who has stood in the council of the Lord, that he should perceive and hear His word? Who has attended to His word, and heard it? Behold, a storm of the Lord is gone forth in fury, yea, a whirling storm; it shall whirl upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord shall not return, until He have executed, and till He have performed the purposes of His heart; in the end of days you shall consider it perfectly. I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran; I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they have stood in My council, then let them cause My people to hear My words, and turn them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings.

Am I a God near at hand, says the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? says the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? says the Lord. I have heard what the prophets have said, that prophesy lies in My name, saying: I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be? Is it in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies, and the prophets of the deceit of their own heart? That think to cause My people to forget My name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Ba'al. The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that has My word; let him speak My word faithfully. What has the straw to do with the wheat? says the Lord. Is not My word like as fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, that steal My words everyone from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, that use their tongues and say: He says. Behold, I am against them that prophesy lying dreams, says the Lord, and do tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies, and by their wantonness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them; neither can they profit this people at all, says the Lord. And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask you, saying: What is the burden of the Lord? then shall you say to them: What burden! I will cast you off, says the Lord. And as for the prophet, and the priest, and the people, that shall say: The burden of the Lord, I will even punish that man and his house. Thus shall you say everyone to his neighbor, and everyone to his brother: What has the Lord answered? and: What has the Lord spoken? And the burden of the Lord shall you mention no more; for every man's own word shall be his burden; and would you pervert the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts our God? Thus shall you say to the prophet: What has the Lord answered you? and: What has the Lord spoken? But if you say: The burden of the Lord; therefore thus says the Lord: Because you say this word: The burden of the Lord, and I have sent to you, saying: You shall not say: The burden of the Lord; therefore, behold, I will utterly tear you out, and I will cast you off, and the city that I gave to you and to your fathers, away from My presence; and I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten. (*Yirmeyahu* 23)

The chapter deals with the shepherds, the leaders of the people and their various false prophets. In verse 2 Yirmeyahu refers to leaders who caused a loss of the sheep. It is very likely that this is a reference to all the members of the kingdom of Yehuda who were scattered to foreign lands with the exile of Yekhonyahu. Because of the evil deeds of the leaders, even those who are now in the kingdom of Yehuda will be dispersed in every direction.

The prophet blames the leaders who neither cared for their people, nor protected them, and through whose actions brought about their exile and dispersion, and for this they will be punished.

Yirmeyahu refers to the various false prophets, both the prophets of Shomeron who deceived the people of Israel and prophesied in the name of the Ba'al, and also the false prophets in Jerusalem who committed abominations. It is possible that it was the common practice of the false prophets to engage in relations with harlots. In addition to the evil of their own deeds, they also encouraged the people to act like them. Yirmeyahu likens them to Sodom and Amora. Sodom and Amora represent the very opposite of the justice that should characterize Jerusalem. From these prophets, flattery and evil spread throughout the land, because they taught the people falsehoods.

Yirmeyahu warns the people against the false prophets. These make promises that evil will not come. This is the total opposite of the words of the true prophets, including Yirmeyahu, who prophesy about the evil to come. For example: "Therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape; and though they shall cry to Me, I will not hearken to them" (*Yirmeyahu* 11:11). For it is not the way of a true prophet to prophesy anything unless he heard it explicitly from God.

The prophet offers a parable: Just as grain cannot be eaten while it is still mixed with the straw, there is no point to the words of the true prophets as long as the false prophets are deceiving the people, and the people are unable to distinguish between false prophecy and true prophecy. It is also possible that the false prophets would add to their lies some of the words of the true prophets in order to create the impression that their words are true and came from God. In this way, they further deceive the people.

Towards the end of the chapter (*Yirmeyahu* 23:33-40), the prophet speaks of the "burden of the Lord." The words burden of the Lord" can be interpreted in two ways: One meaning is prophecy, the word burden denoting speech. Thus, for example, at the beginning of the prophecy of Nachum: "The burden of Ninveh" (*Nachum* 1:1), or at the beginning of the prophecy of Chabakuk: "The burden which Chabakuk the prophet did see" (*Chabakuk* 1:1). The second meaning is an actual burden or load: "Lying under its burden" (*Shemot* 23:5); or bother: "How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife" (*Devarim* 1:12). Because of its two meanings, the word can be interpreted in two different ways.

The prophet says: "And the burden of the Lord shall you mention no more; for every man's own word shall be his burden; and would you pervert the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts our God" (v. 36). That is to say, every man will have prophecy in accordance with his own words. The prophet accuses them of having turned the word of God from prophecy into a burden (in the sense of a load). People mock Yirmeyahu, and instead of asking the prophet what God has said, they ask him what is the burden of the Lord, in order to allude to the meaning of the word in the sense of load and suffering.

The prophet forbids them to speak in this manner both to the prophet and among themselves. They must ask the prophet directly what the word of God is. And the Prophet tells them that God will deal with them in the manner of measure for measure: just as one casts off and abandons a burden that had been placed on him, so God will abandon the people of Israel, and just as they disgrace the words of the living God, so God will turn them into an eternal disgrace that will never be forgotten.

In summary, the chapter refers to three types of prophets - true prophets, prophets of the Ba'al, and false prophets who speak in the name of God. The true prophets never speak on their own, but only when sent by God, and they are privy to God's secrets. They reproach the people of Israel who do not walk in God's ways.

Against the false prophets, Yirmeyahu casts the following accusations:[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. They do not bring the people to better their ways, which is their primary role.

2. They delude the people into thinking that there will be peace, even though they are doomed to major disasters.

3. God did not send them, and their prophecies are their own fabrications.

4. Instead of stirring the people to worship God, they cause them to forget His name.

5. They themselves sin in adultery.

From this chapter we understand that in the early days of Tzidkiyahu's reign, one of Yirmeyahu's most difficult struggles was with the false prophets who reassured the people instead of bringing them to mend their ways and repent.

In the next *shiur* we will continue to examine the prophecies of Yirmeyahu in the days of Tzidkiyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. We will relate to this prophecy at length in future *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the way that Menachem Bula summarizes the prophet's arguments in his summary of chapter 23 in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yirmeyahu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)