

### The Place I Shall Choose

I am going to summarize the biblical Book of Kings: "And then there was King X, who did evil in the eyes of God and did not destroy the bamot - the private altars. And then was King Y who was a great king and followed God...except that he did not destroy the bamot - the private altars."

What were the bamot and why were they so tempting and why were they so problematic? During the time of the first temple, the first beit hamikdash, not everyone chose to make the journey to Yerushalayim to bring their sacrifices to the beit hamikdash. Instead, they built private altars in the courtyards of their homes and in the squares of their villages and towns. I had assumed at one time that the bamot were used for avodah zarah, for the worship of idolatrous gods, but it seems more likely that people mistakenly used those bamot to worship God. They didn't want to make the journey to Yerushalayim. They didn't want the inconvenience. And, as a matter of sophisticated religious insight, they understood that there is no need to travel to any particular location in order to encounter God. As the song says, "Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere!"

Why then, does the Torah, here in Sefer Devarim, introduce and emphasise the selection of one location where we are to seek God's presence?

כִּי אִם-אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחָר ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִכָּל-שְׁבִטֵיכֶם לָשׂוּם אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שָׁם לְשִׁכְנוֹ תִּדְרָשׁוּ וּבָאתֶם שָׁמָּה:

"but look only to the site that the LORD your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there. There you are to go."

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin explains: לשום את שמו שם. במקום בהמ"ק השראת שמו ומשכנו - that the Beit HaMikdash is the location alluded to in the phrase, "the place the Lord your god will choose.."

He elaborates that the phrase לְשִׁכְנוֹ תִּדְרָשׁוּ means that:

כשתתפללו יהי לשכנו. כידוע דהמתפלל צריך להפוך פניו לירושלים שנאמר והתפללו אל המקום הזה. והיינו לשכנו תדרשו אפילו בשעה שתהיו בביתכם במדינה

Whenever we pray, we are to face Yerushalayim and face that location selected by God - no matter where we find ourselves. But, ultimately, וּבָאתֶם שָׁמָּה, we are to travel to the Beit HaMikdash for all sacrifices.

This call for one central religious focal point is introduced in the Book of Deuteronomy and, notwithstanding the failure to live up to this demand as recorded in the Book of Kings, this shift is one of the most important developments in Jewish religious history.

Sefer Devarim, a book designed to prepare the Israelites for their imminent entry into Eretz Yisrael is a forward looking book. The Mishkan and its detailed keilim is never explicitly mentioned in the entire book. If Rav Amnon Bazak had not made that claim, I would not have believed it could be true that an institution so

central to so many chapters of the Torah (the second half of Exodus, all of Leviticus, the first half of Numbers) is entirely unmentioned in Sefer Devarim. Instead, the book is focused on the permanent beit hamikdash, the temple that will be built and the permanent and regular and routine resting of the Divine presence in that one location.

In the earlier books of the Torah, the Divine presence is experienced at unique and unpredictable moments in history. In Sefer Devarim, we can seek the Divine presence by traveling the one location that God will personally identify as the location where physics and metaphysics meet, where the Divine can be encountered in our physical and earthly existence.

But the rest of Biblical history should give us pause and should remind us that it took many generations and hundreds of years before we abandoned our desire to worship God using private local bamot. I think all of us can appreciate, perhaps more than in earlier years, both the power of a central location for worship, and the attraction of something a little more convenient and a little more casual, and a little more intimate. I hope all of you can still remember the excitement of coming back to pray with the congregation when we reconvened in-person gatherings. I hope you can remember the milestones along the way as we have inched, two steps forward, one step back, towards normal congregational life. Each new milestone was exhilarating. At every Shabbat morning for the past four months there has been someone praying with us who had not prayed with us for many months and those continue to be the most exciting milestones for me.

But I remember that it's quite possible to pray at home. Not only is it possible, I will forever cherish the tranquility of the prayers I recited at home when the shul was closed. I will forever remember the warmth of praying with my children surrounding me in our living room while our shul was closed. I think those memories, and similar memories that you may have, are also sacred. There is another explanation for the Torah's insistence that we seek God's presence at one central location. There is another explanation for Tanakh's condemnation of the bamot.

The place where God's presence will rest, the beit hamikdash, as it's described in our Torah portion, is not only a place of prayer and worship. It's described as a place of eating and rejoicing and communal gathering. When the Torah describes the mitzvah of ma'aser sheni, sacred foods that must be eaten in Jerusalem, the Torah elaborates on the performance of the mitzvah in this way:

וְאָכַלְתָּ שָׁם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשִׂמְחָתָא אַתָּה וּבֵיתְךָ

Eat the food there, in the presence of the Lord your God, and rejoice. You and your household.

Rabbi Ofran, (whom I've now quoted three weeks in a row), believes that this verse, and many other verses like it, indicate that the biblical notion of kedushah, sanctity, is not separate from real, embodied life. The realm of the sacred includes eating and celebrating with friends and family. And that's true.

But I think there is another layer and that should also be apparent to us right now:

We can pray at home, but we can't build community in isolation and we can't care for each other without proximity. If we don't come together and interact in person we won't know who is missing, we won't find out who is in distress and we won't find out who needs our help. The Torah's mitzvot create opportunities for the gathering of people together to worship and to eat and to celebrate. That allows us to encounter sanctity and

it allows us to experience and to build community. And - from the Torah's perspective, these two things are one and the same.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter famously said, "someone else's *gashmiut* is my *ruchniut*." Meaning, providing for someone else's physical needs is my spiritual obligation. I would paraphrase and elaborate: someone else's *naarishkeit* is my *ruchniot*. Making space for someone else's illogical fears, personality quirks, idiosyncratic preferences, is my spiritual obligation rooted in the biblical theology that in encountering the face of another human being I am encountering God's presence.

We read this morning: לְשַׁכְּנוּ תְּדַרְשׁוּ - seek God's presence. We do that by coming to the shul for prayer, on Shabbat and on weekdays. And we do that by finding safe and responsible ways to seek each other's presence and company.