

# PARSHAS VAESCHANAN - THE BITTER MYSTIQUE OF THE BAMAH

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## The Bitter Mystique of the Bamah

*Hashem became angry with me because of your deeds, and He swore that I would not cross the Yarden and not come to the good Land...*

Avodah zarah's popularity was like the weather. It changed a good deal. It had its highs and its low. It wasn't seasonal in the literal sense; its popularity didn't revolve around the yearly calendar - at least not entirely. While it did peak in the fall, as we shall discuss shortly, it also enjoyed (during the period of the first beis ha-mikdosh) epochs of greater popularity, and decades of lesser popularity. Looking at the record we find in Nach, we are puzzled. We can discern that avodah zarah took hold of the people precisely during the times that the mikdosh of the say was on a higher level of kedushah than at other times! Thus we find descriptions of Michah's idol during the days of Shiloh, and the worst flirtations with foreign gods during the time that Shlomo's Temple stood. Avodah zarah did not do as well when the mikdosh was in Gilgal, Nov, and Giv'on, all of which were further removed in madregah from the model mikdosh that would be built by Shlomo. This seems counterintuitive.

Every good idea can go bad, and turn truth into an ugly caricature of itself. So it was with the avodah of korbanos. The Bnei Yisrael took to korbanos, because they understood that parnasah depended on the quality of avodah. This led to a cheapening of the avodah, whereby people placed too much emphasis on the reward for the mitzvah at the expense of its core values. They looked to korbanos almost as a magic formula to get what they wanted, ignoring what korbanos were supposed to do to the inner person. (Many others had more noble interests - they understood the role of korbanos in achieving higher levels of ahavas Hashem. Ironically, this longing for closeness to Hashem was so intense, that it led people, at times, to pursue spiritual elevations in ways that the Torah forbade!)

This urge to offer sacrifices to G-d explains the recurring problem the Jewish people had with illicit bamos. These bamos, essentially private altars, were permissible at points in time, but became forbidden when there was a central mikdosh built to certain specifications[1]. Shlomo stands accused[2] of bringing offerings on these bamos; Chazal explain this as a harsh way of stating that he delayed building the beis ha-mikdosh for some four years[3]. The psukim indicate that he delayed because he was reluctant to usher in a period of time when bamos would be forbidden.

This artificial promotion of korbanos was so compelling to people, that when they were not permitted to use bamos, and travelling to Shiloh or to Shlomo's beis ha-mikdosh in Yerushalayim was too difficult, they took matters into their own hands. Some redirected their offerings to avodah zarah; others simply ignored the prohibition against bamos and used them nonetheless. (This was especially each year at the time of Sukkos, when people looked for Heavenly assistance in bringing the rains that would support the next growing season.) Even righteous kings like Yehoshafat and Asa were unable, try as they did, to uproot the bamos. People's objectivity was clouded by the promise of an easy segulah for parnasah. They convinced themselves that using them was not an aveirah, but a great mitzvah!

The single exception was Chizkiyah, who inspired a Torah revolution in his day. As Chazal<sup>[4]</sup> put it, he planted a sword in the beis medrash and decreed that whoever failed to involve himself with Torah would be put to the sword. Intense involvement with Torah study brings the same blessing of parnasah. It also nurtures ahavas Hashem. In a learning environment, people did not need korbanos other than the ones specified by the Torah as communal and individual responsibilities. They no longer sought out bamos upon which to display their religious devotion. They certainly had no need to turn part of their religious fervor to Hashem's "subordinates," like the sun.

The purpose of our pasuk is now abundantly clear. Before exhorting his people at length to distance themselves from avodah zarah, Moshe provides context. "Because of your aveiros," says Moshe, "Hashem was angered against me. He determined not to let me cross into the Land. Had I been permitted to lead you there, I would have planted Torah study so firmly within you, that it is quite possible that you would never be attracted to avodah zarah. You would have no need to look for quick-fix answers for your parnasah needs, as the merit of Torah would sustain you."

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1. *In effect, bamos were forbidden while Shiloh stood, and once the beis ha-mikdosh was completed. See Zevachim 112B*

2. Melachim<sup>1</sup> 3:3

3. Cited by Rashi, loc. cit.

4. Sanhedrin 94B

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