

PARSHAS REEH - THE PITFALLS OF PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY

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The Pitfalls of Private Spirituality¹

You shall not do like everything that we do here today, every man what is proper in his eyes. You will not have come to the resting place or to the heritage that Hashem your G-d gives you.

The restrictions are puzzling. The quest to connect with G-d is widespread - at times, almost universal. Yet, feelings of spiritual elevation are often fleeting and ephemeral. We would think that the Torah would encourage us to act on any impulse to draw close to the Shechinah through a korban. Instead, the Torah erects huge obstacles in front of bamos, the private altars which were the most convenient way for a person to bring an offering to Hashem. They were so popular that even the better kings had trouble eliminating them.

Somehow, the Torah is not as enamored of them as we would be. Yet, the Torah does not ban them altogether, but subjects them to a confusing list of requirements and limitations.

Let us first examine what might be objectionable about a bamah, and why the Torah curtailed their use.

The spiritual quest is so personal that nothing can externally differentiate a healthy turning towards G-d from a perverted one. The individual standing in front of a private altar - a bamah - may very well direct his heart to the One G-d of Israel. On the other hand, he may be serving the "spirits of the fields." In other words, he may find his sense of spirituality fulfilled in aligning himself with forces of Nature, as do so many. Rather than seek out the transcendent Source of Nature, he becomes deflected by and mired in Nature, thus trading in G-d for paganism.

The Torah knows of only one way to insure that an offering binds a person to the True G-d, rather than something warped. The full range of korbanos can only be brought in the place designated as a National Sanctuary of His Torah. Someone standing there cannot help but be reminded of the roots of Jewish service of G-d in the national revelation at Sinai, where G-d reached out to an entire nation. Moreover, moving closer to G-d is not a free-for-all, but follows a script. We only get where we want to go by scrupulously following the guidelines of the Torah. Both factors - the national experience and the guidance of the Torah - come together at the place picked by Hashem to be the sanctuary of His Torah.

While this idea rings true, it creates more problems than it solves. Why, then, not ban bamos altogether? Why allow them during the period before the establishment of the National Sanctuary? Why is the license limited (in the case of individuals) to voluntary, free-will offerings, but not the obligatory chatas and asham? Why does this change for the community, which can bring certain obligatory offerings on a central, national bamah (as in Shiloh, Gilgal, Nov and Givon)?

Ultimately, the National Sanctuary serves to draw together every aspect of our national existence - all our possessions, all our talents, all our plans and goals, and all our citizens. All things come together under its roof; there all things are directed to a higher purpose. Only the content of Hashem's Torah and the guidance that flows from it can do the job. Every aveirah distances a person from his Creator. It works at cross-purposes to the mission of the Sanctuary, which brings all things and all people closer to Hashem. The antidote to that distance must be built upon a foundation of submission to His Will and His dictates, i.e. the Torah and its authority. It cannot be found in the realm of human choice and volition.

All central places of avodah differed from the ones that eventually stood in Yerushalayim. The latter were selected by HKBH Himself. The others were chosen by Man. Thus, they could not be genuine Sanctuaries of the Torah, with its demand for obedience to laws laid down by G-d. They were Sanctuaries - but not Sanctuaries of the Torah. They were unsuited to bring about the return of the sinner to his previous place of closeness to G-d. No place could be this Sanctuary of Torah, save for the one chosen entirely by Hashem.

The individual who approaches with his chatas or asham to be readmitted to Hashem's presence must find Him at His Sanctuary of the Torah. No other place will do; the teshuvah procedure requires the combination of presence of the Shechinah and the centrality of the Torah. According to one opinion, even the community as a whole has no recourse except to this one, special place. The tzibbur does not differ from the individual in this regard. Only in one area does it differ. Korbanos that are joined to specific calendar times may be brought on the central, national bamos that preceded the one in Yerushalayim. The nation as a whole responding to a time-specific demand by G-d is itself enough evidence of standing ready to do whatever it is that Hashem asks of them!

What role, then, did all the other bamos - national and private - serve? If they could not be Sanctuaries of the Torah, what ideal did they manifest? We could explain as follows: The Torah, which makes myriad specific demands upon us, finds expression in a specific place - moreover, a place entirely of His choosing. One important concept does not need to be tied to a specific place. The existence of G-d Who fills the universe should not be tied to the specific. All places, in theory, are equipotent as places to turn to Hashem and find Him, providing that Man has prepared himself adequately. Bamos, then, could stand in many places, even those chosen by Man. There, people could bring free-willed offerings, nedarim and nedavos, which gave voice to seeking a closer relationship with Him. The bamah could be a Sanctuary to Hashem, just not to Hashem and His

Torah.

One bit of irony caps the process of moving from bamah to permanent National Sanctuary. In the end, Hashem made His choice clear. In selecting what we call the Temple Mount, Hashem brought history full circle. The single place on earth He chose to represent the national calling of the Jewish people - and in a larger sense, the mission of all humanity - took us right back to the beginning of time, when all stood in close proximity to G-d. On that spot Adam and Noach brought offerings expressing the aspirations of mankind as a whole; on that spot Avraham established the special relationship with the future Jewish people through the Akeidah. That place perfectly served two different messages, which in the end can come together: "Torah will go forth from Tziyon," as well as "My house will be a house of prayer for all the nations."

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 12:9
