

The Chosen Place
By Rav Yair Kahn

1. The Main Theme of Parashat Re'eh

The Rambam begins the laws of the temple as follows: "There is a positive biblical commandment to construct a house for Hashem, ready to bring sacrifices therein ... as it says 'and you shall make for me a temple.' The *mishkan* constructed by Moshe is already described in the Torah and it was temporary, as it says 'for you have as yet to arrive etc.' Upon entering the land, they set up the *mishkan* in Gilgal ... and from there they came to Shiloh, where they erected a house of stone covered with the curtains of the *mishkan*, and it had no ceiling ... When Eli died it was destroyed and they came to Nov and built a temple. When Shmuel died it was destroyed and they came to Givon and built a temple. From Givon they came to the eternal house ... Once the temple was built in Yerushalayim, all other locations became forbidden for the construction of a temple and the bringing of sacrifices. There is no eternal house but for in Yerushalayim on Mount Moriah, as it is written regarding it 'And David said this is the house of Hashem the Lord and this is the altar for burnt offerings for Yisrael.' And it says 'this is my eternal resting place'" (*Hilkhot Beit Ha-bekhira* 1:1-3).

In the Torah, there is no explicit mention of Yerushalayim as the location of the eternal location of the temple. Instead, the Torah refers to "the place that Hashem will choose". At the beginning of our *parasha*, the Torah prohibits bringing sacrifices on any altar other than the one located at the place that Hashem will choose. The end of the *parasha* discusses the three *regalim*; the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot when Yisrael are obligated to appear at the Temple in the place that Hashem will choose. All told, the phrase 'the place which Hashem will choose' appears in *parashat Re'eh* sixteen different times. Therefore, if we were to isolate a single theme of *parashat Re'eh*, it would no doubt be "the place that Hashem will choose," which ultimately refers to Yerushalayim.

2. Theme and Variation

This week's *shiur* will focus on the beginning of the *parasha* where the phrase "the place that Hashem will choose" appears four separate times. In order to better appreciate the *shiur*, it would be worthwhile to take a *chumash* and read the first nineteen *pesukim* of chapter twelve. One will immediately notice that this chapter seems unusually repetitive. The Torah seems to repeat the obligation to bring sacrifices and other sanctified items, such as tithes (*ma'aser sheni*), to the 'the place that Hashem will choose' four separate times:

1. "You shall not do so to Hashem your God. But unto the place which your God shall choose ... there shall you come and there shall you bring your burnt-offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes ... " (*pesukim* 4-6)
2. "You shall not do all that we do here this day, every man whatever is right in his eyes ... then it shall come to pass that the place which Hashem your God shall choose ... there shall you bring all that I command you, your burnt-offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes ... " (8-11).
3. Take heed of yourself that you not offer your burnt-offerings in any place that you see, but in the place which Hashem shall choose ... there you shall offer your burnt-offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you" (13-14).
4. You may not eat within your gates the tithe of your grain, or of your wine, or of your oil, or the firstlings of your herd or of your flock ... But you shall eat them before Hashem your God in the place which Hashem your God shall choose" (17-18).

The oral law derives various *halakhot* from this 'repetition.' However, this does not discharge us from trying to decipher this passage based on *pehuto shel mikra* (a straightforward reading of Scripture). We will suggest a solution based on the nuances differentiating the four versions found in this chapter. Special note will be placed on the variant ways of describing the non-*mikdash* option; 1-You shall not do so to Hashem, 2-Whatever is right in his eyes, 3-Any place that you see, 4-In your gates. We will try to show how each version might deal differently with the prohibition of bringing sacrifices outside the *mikdash*.

3. Gateway to Idolatry

The first section begins with the obligation to destroy idolatry: "You shall surely destroy all the places wherein the nations that you are to dispossess served their gods ... And you shall break down their altars, and dash their pillars into pieces, and burn their *asherim* with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place" (12:2-3). The Torah then continues with a prohibition: "You shall not do so to Hashem your God" (12:4). It is not clear what this prohibition is referring to. One possibility mentioned by various commentators and supported by the Talmud, is the prohibition to destroy things of *kedusha* (sanctity). You must destroy an idolatrous altar, but are forbidden from breaking an altar consecrated for the service of Hashem. You must destroy the name of idols, but are enjoined from erasing the divine name (see Rambam *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 6:1).

However, when read together with the continuation, it seems to refer to the prohibition of sacrificing out of the *mikdash*: "You shall not do so to Hashem your God. Rather unto the place which Hashem your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put His name there, unto His divine glory shall you seek, and there shall you come; and there you shall bring your burnt-offerings ... " (12:5-6). It is here that the Torah first introduces the theme 'the place which Hashem shall choose' as the exclusive location for bringing sacrifices. The Torah seems to be saying; do not sacrifice all over. Rather, you should go to the temple and bring your sacrifices there. In other words, Yisrael are commanded to destroy objects connected with idol worship, which are found throughout the land, which indicates that it was customary for Canaanite idolaters to build private altars. However, you should not worship Hashem in such a manner. You must go to the temple that will be erected in the place that Hashem will choose and only there bring sacrifices to Hashem (see Rashi).

According to this interpretation, the command to bring sacrifices exclusively in the temple seems to be a reaction to the practices of idol worship. Even though one's intention is to bring sacrifices to Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu, he is prohibited from mimicking idolatrous customs. This is similar to the prohibition not to worship Hashem using the same methods and

ceremonies as idol-worshippers (12:30-31, see Ramban), even if one's intent is pure.

Moreover, the possibility of private altars enables defining the sacrificial act in subjective terms. This uncontrolled individual worship could lead to actual idolatry. Therefore, one reason that centralized sacrifice within the context of the *mikdash* is required is to inhibit an environment that can abuse the sacrificial act.

For instance, we find numerous references to illegal private altars (*bamot*) in *Neviim.Sefer Melakhim* records a number of righteous kings, who managed to combat idolatry, but did not remove the *bamot* (see [Kings I 15:14](#), 22:44, [Kings II 12:4](#), 14:4, 15:4, 35). Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu are unique in successfully removing the *bamot*. The impression is that even though the idols were destroyed, the continued practice of sacrifice on private altars was not pure worship of Hashem. Consider the following verse: "However he did not remove the *bamot* and the nation had not yet prepared their heart towards the Lord of their fathers" ([Chronicles II 20:33](#)).

4. The Limits of Individualism

The second section begins: "You shall not do all that we do here this day, every man whatever is right in his eyes (12:8). The expression 'whatever is right in his eyes' appears in *Sefer Shoftim* to describe the chaos that existed at that period: "In those days there was no king in Yisrael, every man did **whatever was right in his eyes**" (17:6 and 21:25). The lack of central authority led to a state of anarchy, as each person did what he felt was best. While individual freedom must be protected, the individual must be communally responsible as well. Therefore our sages taught: "Pray for the peace of the kingdom for if not for fear of its authority man would swallow up his fellow alive" ([Avot 3:2](#)).

There is a need to balance individual rights and communal responsibility in the spiritual arena as well. *Yahadut* has a very detailed halakhic system. This system is binding on all and creates a religiously committed community. Nevertheless, individual expression is allowed and even invited, within the halakhic context. Every person is unique and has singular spiritual experiences. Therefore, even though there is conformity of practice, religious experience, by its very nature, is a function of the individual.

It says in this week's *parasha*: "For you are a holy nation and you were chosen" (14:2). To explain the redundancy, Rashi comments: "'For you are a holy nation' – your sanctity that you received from your forefathers, and in addition 'you were chosen' ". Mori Ve-Rebbi Rav Soloveitchik *zt"l* clarified; that the sanctity we received from our fathers is the communal sanctity that exists equally to all the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. However, in addition there is a personal sanctity, whereby every individual is unique. He explained that a mitzva has two aspects; the mechanical act and the spiritual intent. As far as the mechanical act is concerned, we are all equal. We are all called upon to join in the same act of mitzva and the performance of one is no different than that of his fellow. Individuality finds expression in the spiritual intent, however not in the physical performance.

Regarding animal sacrifice, private altars are permissible only until Yisrael possess Canaan and establish a central place of worship. At that point the individual must show restraint and join the community at the *mikdash*. The Torah is warning against the danger of anarchy. In the attempt to nurture the covenantal community, the individual must conform and bring his sacrifices to the communal altar. Private religious expression must be limited to the subjective realms of experience and intent.

5. Wherever Your Heart Desires

The third section contrasts a *korban ola* (burnt-offering) with eating meat. The Torah forbids sacrificing an *ola* in any random place. However, meat may be eaten wherever your heart desires. As opposed to the other parallel sections, the Torah here limits its comments to the *korban ola*. In most sacrifices, only part of the animal is burned on the altar, while other parts of the animal are usually eaten (by the priest and/or the owner). However, regarding a *korban ola*, the meat in its entirety is sacrificed. At the opposite end of the spectrum we have the case of one who desires to eat meat. Upon entering Eretz Yisrael, this is permitted without sacrificing any part of the animal whatsoever (see 12:20-21).

The *korban ola* is an expression of total commitment to Hashem. By bringing an *ola*, one symbolically shows that everything belongs to Hashem. In contrast, the permissibility to eat meat, without any sacrifice, places man and his desires front and center.

In the third section, bringing an *ola* outside the *mikdash* is referred to as "any place that you see" (12:13). It is a term which is coupled with "wherever your heart desires" (12:15) mentioned in the context of eating meat. The Torah seems to be negating personal preferences regarding the *korban ola*, since they counter the entire symbolism of the sacrificial act whereby man surrenders his very self to the Almighty. At the opposite end of the spectrum, when Yisrael enter Canaan and find themselves distanced from the *mikdash*, meat may be eaten wherever your heart desires.

6. Breaking the Routine

The final section is not redundant insofar as it relates to eating as opposed to sacrificing on the altar. Nevertheless, I believe that the Torah is adding one final nuance in explaining the extra-*mikdash* prohibition.

"You may not eat within your gates" (12:17). In this section, the contrast to *mikdash* is 'your gates.' Instead of traveling to 'the place that Hashem will choose', one prefers to remain at home. The negative impact on the religious act is obvious. Remaining at home means maintaining a normal routine. However, the interface between man and sanctity requires elevation. The religious experience, in order to be meaningful, must be an uplifting one. The familiar must be changed and the everyday abandoned. In order to make a spiritual ascent, one is required to make the geographical ascent to Yerushalayim. This problem is even greater with respect to eating. After all, eating is a standard biological function and the danger of missing the spiritual opportunity is real. Nevertheless, even eating can be elevated to lofty heights when separated from the daily routine, traveling to the *mikdash* and dining in the presence of Hashem.

It is noteworthy that this section ends with a warning not to abandon the Levi. I believe that this warning is connected to the previous *pasuk*: "But you shall eat them before Hashem your God in the place which Hashem your God shall choose; you and your son and your daughter ... and the Levi who dwells in your gates" (12:18). Although we must leave our town and travel to the *mikdash*, the Torah instructs us to invite the *Leviim* from our town to join us as we dine in Hashem's presence. In our attempt to break the routine and search for different experiences, one might ignore the familiar faces of

the *Leviim* from his home town and prefer to invite others. Therefore, the Torah tells that even though one must leave his home and travel to the *mikdash*, nevertheless he should prefer the *Leviim* from his home town. (This is similar to the preference of local paupers, which is also derived from the phrase 'your gates' 15:7, see Rashi).

7. Summary

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov built altars in various different places in the Land of Canaan. However, this practice was prohibited once a central *mikdash* was erected. The Torah repeats this prohibition several times, each time changing the nuances of the prohibition. We suggested one possible way of analyzing the differences.

All the above, relates to the prohibition of extra-*mikdash* sacrifice. However, there is a much more compelling reason for the positive commandment to go to the *mikdash*. The *mikdash* is the place that Hashem chose as a dwelling place for His Presence, as it were. Therefore, when coming to the *mikdash*, one enters the place where he is able to experience the glory of Hashem's Presence, as it were.