

FINDING GOD—IN NATURE OR COMMUNITY?

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

If I've heard it once, I've heard it dozens of times—even out of my own mouth many years ago: “I don't go to synagogue on Shabbat [Sabbath] because I feel much closer to God when I'm praying out in nature.”

One of modernity's generic religious axioms is that the conventional, closed-in religious service doesn't hold a candle—forgive the expression—to praying spontaneously in the open, spiritually uplifting beauty of nature.

I recall vividly my own Shabbat morning experiences of *davening* (praying) while backpacking in the High Sierras more than 15 years ago. I was totally captivated by the beauty and serenity of the “high places.” I would pour out my heart and soul, holding back nothing. My prayers would often be punctuated by weeping, as my emotions were released. Afterwards I felt spiritually uplifted and empowered—close to God and at peace—beyond description.

All of this would seem to argue for abandoning the synagogue on Shabbat and, instead, spending the day in nature. And if we agree on that conclusion, we would probably be of one mind on several subsidiary points—to wit: If there's no need for a synagogue to pour out our heart and soul to God, then we don't need the presence of a whole congregational community for that purpose. If we can *daven* as a solo endeavor, then we don't need the services of a prayer leader. And given the uniqueness of the thoughts and feelings we want to express to God, there's hardly any need for a *sid-dur* (prayer-book). In the final analysis, given this scenario, there hardly seems to be any compelling need for organized Jewish worship services altogether.

What's wrong with this picture?

We can begin to get an insight from a verse in the *parashat hashavua* (the weekly Torah reading), Re'ei. It relates to us a somewhat enigmatic *mitzvah* (commandment): “You shall not do everything we do here today, every man what is right in his eyes.” (Deuteronomy 12:8)

The subject is certainly complicated, but to oversimplify: When there was a central sanctuary, whether it was the *ohel moeid* (Tent of Meeting—*אהל מועד*) in the wilderness or the Temple later in Jerusalem, it was forbidden for individuals to erect private altars or *bamot* (*במות*)—that is, literally, high places of worship, for the purpose of making offerings. However, when no such sanctuary

existed—for instance, during the period of the conquest and distribution of the land—individuals were permitted to build such altars of their own. These private altars, located on high places or *bamot*, could only be used for optional offerings (*נדרים* and *תרומות*), such as the *olah* (עולות) and *shelamim* (שלמים). The national altars, which also existed during those periods, had to be used for sin and guilt (*חטאות ואשמות*) offerings.

Incidentally, the punishment for ignoring the prohibition, once the *bamot* were forbidden, was *kareit* (כרת), effectively being uprooted from the present and future institutional life of the Jewish people. This drastic consequence seems commensurate with our contemporary experience, which is to witness the large-scale alienation of Jews from the Jewish people in rough proportion to their distance from organized Jewish congregational and communal life.

The prohibition of *bamot* would seem to be a forerunner to our present policy posture, which promotes a similar stringency, saying in effect: “Individual *davening* in ‘high places’ on Shabbat is inappropriate—you should come to the synagogue and pray with the congregation!”

To understand the stringency, then and now, it's necessary to consider the conceptual underpinning of an offering or “sacrifice.” The Hebrew word we use is *korban* (קרבן), the literal meaning and purpose of which is to bring us close to God. The sacrifice of the animal symbolizes ridding ourselves of our subjective “animalistic” desires, not “living solely for satisfying the senses.” (Hirsch commentary on Leviticus 17:8-9) It's the same regardless of whether the offering is represented by an animal or our prayer. In either case, what's being offered is our commitment to sacrifice *ourselves* to God. What that means, of course, is not that we'll kill an animal or ourselves for God's sake, but that we'll live our lives and take every opportunity to foster life around us for God's sake—in effect, that in our day-to-day lives, we are dedicated to observing God's laws as set out for us in the Torah rather than living like animals.

The spiritual purpose of both animal sacrifice and the prayer that replaced it is to achieve *kirvat Elohim* (קרבת אלהים), closeness to God. Judaism, however, doesn't communicate or comprehend any meaningful form of intimate relationship with God in the absence of learning, observing, and teaching God's laws.

What then was wrong with making offerings on *bamot* during those times when there was a central sanctuary?

Such offerings, like my heartfelt *davening* in the wilderness, had nothing to do with the Torah. The *bamot* were not places that served God by instructing the individual on how to live or return to a godly life, which was precisely the role of the Temple Sanctuary and all its furnishings and utensils. The *bamot* were venues for the individual to *pour out* personal thoughts and feelings rather than *take in* the words and expectations of Torah.

Worse yet, the *bamot* could potentially lead the individual away from God and towards worship of nature—in effect, towards heathenism. Thus not surprisingly we find Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaching that limiting sacrificial worship to a central location had the effect of dampening many pagan abominations that were widely practiced in the land at the time of the conquest, among the worst of which was child sacrifice.

Most problematic, given the implications suggested by Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), the effect of the *bamot* “. . . undermines the faithful attachment to duty of the members of the nation and opens wide the gate to the most pernicious subjectivity. . . .” (Hirsch on Deuteronomy 12:9) In short, the *bamot* encouraged religious, spiritual, and moral autonomy, in contrast to promoting the rule of Torah.

You may be thinking to yourself, “Wait a minute, here! We’re not sheep! We can think and decide for ourselves!”—which may be the crux of the problem of finding the *Jewish* God, because the Torah has a very different view, as you may recall. Israel is to be like a flock of sheep led by its Shepherd. That doesn’t mean, however, that we forego our capacity for thinking and deciding.

As unpleasant as it may be to acknowledge, the most easily identified antecedent of alienation from Torah and Judaism—consider both the ancient and modern worlds—relates primarily to authority. The issue is, whether on the one hand we will *exclusively* rely on our own thinking and decision-making to guide our lives, more or less rejecting the authority of the Torah; or, on the other hand, whether we will acknowledge that the wisdom of the Torah reaches infinitely beyond our personal ideas of moral spirituality, accepting its vision and path as the authoritative guide for our lives.

If our disposition is towards the former, so we’re inclined to rely mostly on ourselves, we can forego with alacrity any pangs of conscience about our privatized *davening*, focusing instead on our hope of finding God in nature. But if our disposition is towards the latter, relying mostly on Torah, we will respond not to the demands of our senses for comfort and emotional salve, but to the Torah’s demand for commitment.

And if meeting Torah’s demands is to be our *raison d’être*, then we will be clear on the purpose of our synagogue attendance and participation:

- We will come to be led (and, of course, to help lead others when we can) into learning God’s will.
- We will come to discern God’s will in the liturgy, Torah readings, and *divrei* Torah (sermons), which directly and indirectly bring the teachings into our minds and actions.
- And we will come knowing that the challenges and joys of these efforts are eased and made much more effective when we act not alone but together, dedicated to finding God as a Torah-centered congregational community.

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