

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Pekudai
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Pekudai – The kedusha of a shul (part 5)

This week's Parasha of Pekudai is the final Parasha of the Torah that deals with the construction of the Mishkan. This is also the final week of our series which focuses specifically on our “Mikdash Me'at”, the shul - its holiness and some of the relevant halachot that apply. The Parasha focuses on the manufacture of the special clothes worn by the Kohen Gadol and the setting up of the completed Mishkan.

Last week was Parashat Shekalim, the first of the four special Shabbatot leading up to Purim and Pesach. We read the Torah portion relating to the half shekel donation that Bnei Yisrael made towards the Mishkan. The Haftara dealt with a similar topic – the funds that were raised for the upkeep of the Bet Hamikdash. The events of the Haftara took place at an interesting time historically. The wicked queen Atalia had killed almost the entire royal family in the kingdom of Yehuda so that she could reign. The only remnant was the infant Yehoash, a grandson of the previous king, who was hidden away by the righteous Jehoiada, the Kohen Gadol. When Yehoash turned seven years old, he was introduced to the nation and was appointed as king and Atalia finally received her just deserts.¹ As well as introducing a system to fund the upkeep of the Bet Hamikdash, Yehoash successfully removed avoda zara from the kingdom. But he was not entirely successful in his endeavours to return the kingdom to the proper path:

“Only the Bamot did he not remove; the people continued to slaughter sacrifices and burn incense on the Bamot.”

This was a common theme in our history during that era. After sliding into idol worship, a righteous king would successfully wipe it out, but they could not eradicate the Bamot. Finally, the righteous king Chizkiyahu was eventually able to get rid of the Bamot.² But they returned after his reign.

What are these ‘Bamot’? (And how are they relevant to our topic of shuls?) The Bamot were private alters. In many cases they were used exclusively to serve Hashem.³ At various times in our history they were permitted or forbidden, depending on the status and location of the central Mishkan. When the Bet Hamikdash was eventually built, Bamot became forbidden permanently. But even when they were forbidden, many people broke the rule and continued to use them. Why were they so popular? The Bamot were convenient. Instead of schlepping the family to Yerushalayim, one could offer korbanot to Hashem from the comfort of their own backyard. In addition, there was more ‘audience participation’. When offering a korban at the Bet Hamikdash, the Kohanim did most of the work. The one who brought the korban just got to watch. But when offering a korban on a private altar, one would essentially get to be the Kohen!

What could be so wrong with offering a korban to Hashem on a Bamah? After all, one was worshipping Hashem. It was not avoda zara. But there was one very important thing wrong with the Bamot – they were forbidden by Hashem. When worshipping Hashem it is important to worship Him the way He wants to be worshipped. Not the way we want to worship Him.

We can suggest some other reasons why the Bamot were forbidden. Perhaps Hashem wanted us to put a bit of effort into our service by leaving the comfort of our homes and travelling to Yerushalayim. As we learn

¹ FYI – this isn't a typo. The correct term has only one ‘s’, but it is pronounced like ‘desserts’ with a double ‘s’.

² Melachim Bet 18:4.

³ Of course private altars were also used to serve avoda zara, but we are discussing here the private altars that were used purely for the service of Hashem.

in Pirkai Avot - according to the effort is the reward.⁴ Or perhaps Hashem wanted us to travel specifically to a central place of worship. This would help to foster unity, rather than each group doing their own thing.

So how is this concept relevant to shuls? During the pandemic, many of us have been locked out of our shuls for an extended period of time. Depending on the regulations in place at the time, a lot of people have been davening in temporary 'pop-up' minyanim outdoors. Many people found this to be particularly enjoyable over the warmer months. It is convenient and pleasant. But it is not ideal. A Rav in Eretz Yisrael compared this phenomenon to the Bamot. Yes, we are davening to Hashem. But whenever it is feasible, Hashem wants us to gather together in places that are designated for tefillah. When we have our shuls back, that is where we should be.

In fact, there may even be a halachic problem davening outdoors. The Shulchan Aruch rules that one should not daven in an exposed place like a field.⁵ The Shulchan Aruch explains that in a secluded place one will be more likely to have fear of Hashem and to be appropriately contrite. According to the Zohar, one should specifically daven indoors.⁶ The Shulchan Aruch rules that one should make an effort to daven in a shul with a minyan. If for some reason he cannot make it to shul, he should at least try to daven at the same time as the community is davening. If he is not able to daven at the same time as the community, and he needs to daven on his own, he should still daven in the shul by himself if possible.⁷ The Mishnah Berurah⁸ adds that even if one is able to form a minyan at home, one should still make an effort to daven at shul.

Of course, there are cases when it is not possible or feasible to daven in a shul.⁹ For instance, there was a time during the pandemic when only adults over a certain age were allowed to be vaccinated and thus have permission to enter a shul. In such cases, many fathers made a conscious (and admirable) choice to daven outside with their sons. Additionally, some people are not able or willing to get vaccinated and don't feel comfortable going to crowded places. Further, some are in high risk groups or just feel unsafe in a large crowd. Every case needs to be judged on its own merits. Undoubtedly, there are many circumstances where it is perfectly justifiable and appropriate for a person to daven outside. However, convenience and comfort are not valid reasons.

All things being equal, we should all make the effort to come to shul, our Mikdash Me'at, our holy place to congregate and be part of the tzibbur as we pray to our G-d together.

Thank you, dear reader, for joining me in this series as we explored the holiness and halachot of the shul. May we realise and appreciate the enormous privilege we have to return to our shuls. And may we behave accordingly and appropriately while in our Mikdash Me'at.

Chazak Chazak v'nitchazek!

Let's try something this week:

1. When we enter a shul, focus on the fact that it is a Mikdash Me'at and it is a great privilege for us to be inside.
2. Try to behave more appropriately when inside a shul and remember the various halachot that we have discussed over the past five weeks.
3. Before acting or speaking inappropriately, ask yourself a simple question – would I act this way in a palace or while standing before a king of flesh and blood?

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Pirkai Avot 5:21.

⁵ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 90:5. Davening amongst trees is permitted (Pri Megadim Mishbetzot Zahav).

⁶ Quoted by the Mishnah Berurah siman 90, seif katan 11.

⁷ Orach Chaim 90:9.

⁸ Seif katan 27.

⁹ The Shulchan Aruch himself acknowledges this in Orach Chaim 90:9.