



GEULAS YISRAEL

RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Personalizing Prayer?

In Parashat Re'eh, Moshe Rabbeinu begins preparing us for the profound changes that will accompany our entry into the Land of Israel. The transition from a nomadic desert existence to settled national life in our own Land will transform every aspect of the experience. Agriculture will become a central part of our lives. We will encounter the beauty and abundance of Eretz Yisrael firsthand. It turns out that the “Land flowing with milk and honey” is actually the Land of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

Yet the blessings of settled life also carry new dangers. Financial and agricultural success can breed self-assuredness. Moshe warns us that our success is not a product of our virtue or righteousness, but rather of Hashem's selection.

Prosperity will also create economic

inequality. Some will be more successful, while others less so. For this reason, Moshe instructs us about tzedakah and about shem-itah, which resets the financial system once every seven years.

Finally, as society grows more prosperous and more complex, it will require courts and public institutions to govern it. Yet these institutions introduce a new danger - the corruption of justice. Moshe warns that the judicial system must never become slanted or corrupt. A society cannot function without respect for the rule of law, and the rule of law cannot exist without trust in the fairness of the judicial system.

ONE GOD, ONE PLACE

One of Moshe's primary concerns is the shift from scattered sites of worship to a single place in which we encounter Hashem. This concern reflects Moshe's dread throughout the entire first part of Sefer Devarim—the fear of idolatry. As we enter a Land filled with pagan shrines and altars, Moshe repeatedly warns us to demolish and uproot every vestige of idolatrous worship.

But Moshe's message extends beyond merely destroying pagan worship. He also instructs us not to imitate its model of worship. Unlike pagan worshippers, who maintain numerous sites of worship reflecting their numerous gods, we are to concentrate all of our ceremonies in one designated location. לא תעשון כן לה' אלוהיכם (Do not worship Hashem in this manner).

This instruction had practical halachic application. In the desert, *bamot* (private

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altars) were permitted. Likewise, during the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel, sacrifices on private *bamot* continued to be permitted. However, once Shiloh was established as the permanent location of the Mishkan—and certainly once the Beit HaMikdash was built - private *bamot* became forbidden.

The primary reason for concentrating worship in a single location is theological. Unlike paganism, which recognizes multiple gods - a different god for every force of nature, human experience, or aspect of creation - monotheism proclaims one God who created everything. If there is only one God, there should likewise be one place where He is worshiped.

However, there is a second reason for concentrating worship in a single location. Moshe seeks to move us away from the religious culture of *במות*, in which *איש כל הישר בעיניו יעשה* (each person does what is right in his own eyes). A private *במה* invites religious self-direction, allowing each individual to determine how he will worship. Moshe instead seeks greater regulation and standardization in how we stand before Hashem. Though the Beit HaMikdash is more public and less personal, he prefers that model to a religious culture of *איש כל הישר בעיניו יעשה*.

THE RETURN OF THE *BAMAH*?

The Torah is introducing a tension that every generation must negotiate: the desire for a deeply personal religious experience versus the need for a common religious culture. This tension between personalization and centralized worship continues to shape contemporary religious life. Should tefillah be conducted primarily in an institutional setting, such as a large shul, or should it take place in smaller, more intimate environments and *shtiebel*-like atmospheres?

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there has been a powerful shift away from large, collective tefillot. Many shuls are refurbishing their buildings and dramatically shrinking the size of their main sanctuaries in favor of multiple smaller rooms to accommodate smaller minyanim. Likewise, and even more dramatically, smaller *shtiebel*-style minyanim have become increasingly popular at the expense of large communal services. Equally popular are in-home minyanim.

There are numerous benefits to smaller minyanim. Firstly they personalize religious experience. In the era of the *bamot*, each family offered its own sacrifices, supervised by its own firstborn, who effectively served as the kohen of the family altar. The great challenge of religion is to find a personal voice within a world of regulations that is highly standardized and demands conformity. Similar to a *bamah*, smaller minyanim allow for that personalization. They can be tailored to specific

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populations and create a more personal religious experience.

Secondly, smaller minyanim build mini-communities, which in turn foster warm and enduring relationships that are much more difficult to develop in larger, more collective settings.

Finally, smaller minyanim are, by definition, less regulated and less bureaucratic. Larger settings require rules and guidelines, and sometimes the mere existence of those rules formalizes the experience and makes it feel less authentic. Often, people in large settings feel that they are simply following regulations rather than expressing genuine religious feelings.

To summarize, smaller minyanim offer personalization, warm and close-knit relationships, and a less formalized tefillah experience, all of which can hopefully lead to greater authenticity.

However, there are also significant drawbacks to these smaller settings. There are several benefits that only a larger, more institutional setting can provide.

WHY A BEIT KNESSET MATTERS

Before discussing the advantages of larger minyanim, it is important to note that any shul - large or small - offers a distinct religious experience that cannot be replicated in a home minyan.

Central to tefillah is not merely the words we recite, but the experience of standing before Hashem. The first recorded tefillah is

Avraham's prayer on behalf of Sedom. The Torah describes his prayer with the words אל שם המקום אשר עמד שם, from which Chazal derive the term Amidah. The verb used to describe the first tefillah is not one of speech or verbal expression. Rather, it describes standing in the presence of Hashem.

A Beit Kneset possesses a halachic level of kedushah. According to the Rambam, the sanctity of a shul parallels, in many respects, the sanctity of the Beit HaMikdash. If tefillah is, in part, the experience of standing before the Shechinah, should we not be more motivated to daven in an actual shul whenever possible?

Based on this, the Shulchan Aruch rules that one should strive to daven in an actual shul even if he has already missed the minyan and will be praying as a *yachid*. Even without the opportunity to recite Kaddish or Kedushah, the Beit Kneset provides the experience of standing before the Shechinah.

WHY LARGE SHULS MATTER

Assuming tefillah should ideally take place in a Beit Kneset, the question then becomes what type of shul best serves that experience.

Larger settings specifically allow people from different walks of life and different generations to stand side by side. In a world of ever-narrowing social circles, we have fewer and fewer opportunities to encounter people who are different from ourselves. There is great value in davening with a wide range of people and experiencing the diversity of Am Yisrael.

Large, intergenerational minyanim preserve our masorah in a way that smaller settings often cannot. Intergenerational minyanim, in which young and old stand together in prayer, give tangible expression to the continuity of our masorah. A child who grows

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up davening alongside parents, grandparents, and elderly members of the community experiences Judaism not merely as a personal practice, but as an unbroken chain linking past generations to future ones.

Imagine life in the Beit HaMikdash. It must have been filled with a constant flow of people from every sector of society, every background, and every generation. It brought together Jews who would otherwise never have met. Standing before Hashem alongside people who were different from ourselves was itself part of the religious experience.

Larger settings also provide stronger communal expectations. Communal expectations can certainly become stifling, but when kept within healthy limits they establish clear communal norms and encourage people to live up to them. The model of *איש כל הישר בעיניו יעשה* is not ideal.

In many ways, the highly decentralized shul system in the United States reflects the broader culture of personal choice and individual autonomy. While that culture offers many advantages, it also weakens a community's ability to establish shared norms and expectations.

Take, for example, the plight of an agunah. In more tightly structured communities, greater communal pressure can be brought to bear upon a recalcitrant husband. In the United States, by contrast, there are often simply too many places to go and too many shuls in which to daven, making it far more difficult for a community to create the healthy social pressure needed to confront this injustice.

A third advantage of larger shul settings is their ability to strengthen broader communal infrastructure. Historically, especially in developing Jewish communities, the shul served as the nucleus around which schools,

mikvaot, chesed organizations, and other communal institutions were built. That remains true in smaller communities today. In larger, well established communities, much of this infrastructure already exists, but larger shuls still provide the financial resources, volunteer base, and organizational capacity that sustain and strengthen communal life.

Finally, larger shuls make us feel part of something greater than ourselves. Tefillah, in general, is meant to expand our horizons and connect us to a story larger than our own lives. We recite the very same words that our ancestors prayed. We return to the template established by the Avot, who founded our nation. We envision the day when we will once again return as one people to Yerushalayim. Davening in a larger setting brings that sensibility into sharper focus. The more people with whom we stand in prayer, the easier it becomes to imagine standing among the millions of Jews who have uttered these same prayers throughout history and embracing Hashem together.

Perhaps we have lost some of the humility required to daven in larger shuls. Perhaps we should ask less how to create a tefillah that fits us and more how we can fit ourselves into tefillah. Perhaps in smaller settings we lose some of the gravitas of standing before Hashem. Perhaps in smaller tefillot the story shrinks, and we lose sight of the larger historical narrative that tefillah is meant to evoke. ■



Rabbi Moshe Taragin's latest sefer entitled: **Reclaiming Redemption, Vol. II: Faith, Identity, Peoplehood, and the Storms of War**, is available at: mtaraginbooks.com.