

LESSON 7

SHOULD RELIGIOUS WORSHIP BE CONFINED TO A RELIGIOUS CENTER?

I. What is the aim of this lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to examine, according to the Bible, concepts of centralized worship and their implications as well as the role that these concepts played in the lives of the people.

II. Why is this lesson important?

Not only were the establishment of a religious center and the centralization of religion issues of great importance to the Jews who first lived in the Land but they have played an important role in Jewish life in subsequent generations as well. Long after its destruction, the Temple continued to be perceived as the religious center of our people. It determined the direction of prayer and much of its content, and represented our hopes and dreams for the future. Because of its centrality in our collective dreams and hopes, regaining control over it in 1967, through the courageous effort of the Israeli Defense Forces, was a monumental event in Jewish history. And it is our claim to it as our spiritual center that continues to be one of the main stumbling blocks in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. The issue of the centralization of religion also plays an important role today in the State of Israel in which some critical aspects of religion have been centralized under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate and this centralization is a continued source of tension and debate within Israeli society. Finally, once the Jews left the Land, the Land of Israel as a whole became a religious center for Jews worldwide. And whether or not, and the extent to which, Israel should be the center of Jewish life today is a subject that continues to generate much interest and discussion.

III. Texts, questions and central ideas of the lesson:

Text 1 – Exodus 29:42-46 – The Tent of Meeting in the Desert

What was the Tent of Meeting (also known as the Tabernacle) and what was its significance?

This "Tent" was an elaborate structure to be set up by the people in the desert and placed in the midst of the camp which was to house the Ark, the lamp stand, the table and the incense altar and, next to its entrance, the altar upon which sacrifices were offered, sacrifices being the central form of religious worship in those days. According to this text, it is called the "Tent of Meeting" (*ohel mo-ed*) because it is the place where God, despite His exalted status, meets the people and speaks with them. It is also called

the *Mishkan* - which derives from the root *sh-kh-n* meaning "dwell" - because, despite the fact that God's glory fills all the earth, His Presence dwells uniquely within it. It is also called *mikdash* - meaning "holy place" - because God's Presence within it endows it with a unique holiness and sanctity. In other words, the Tent of Meeting was God's abode, as it were, on earth. Since it was placed in the midst of the people, it served as a constant reminder of God's immanence and accessibility. Furthermore, since it was a "tent", i.e., a temporary structure that was assembled and disassembled, it was an important reminder that God's Presence would accompany them in their long journey through the desert.

Now, in a situation in which the people lived and traveled together, there was no question where religious worship would take place: it would take place at the Tent of Meeting which was the both the symbolic and the physical center of religious life of the entire people. **The question is, what would happen once they settled in the Land?** On the one hand, the idea that God is uniquely present and religious worship is concentrated in one particular place could easily become a feature of life for a people living in one particular land. The Tent can be set up in one central location and it could continue to serve the same function as it did in the desert. On the other hand, although the people are settling in one land, they are not all camped in one geographic location as they were in the desert but they are spread throughout the various regions of the land. Thus, to what extent is it realistic and fair to expect that every time an individual a clan or an entire tribe seeks God they should have to travel far from home to the central religious shrine? Furthermore, if the idea of the Tent is that "they shall know that I the Lord am their God who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I might abide among them" as this text indicates, wouldn't it make sense to expand God's presence among them and to create holy sites wherever they may be? On the other hand, if permission is granted to set up local shrines for religious worship what will happen to the Tent which *God* sanctified with His presence? Will it continue to be viewed as His special abode on earth, *the* unique holy place in which God meets them and accepts their offerings? Furthermore, what will happen to the perception of God as an awe-inspiring and holy Presence if He can be found and worshiped on every street corner?

In the following texts we will see what was expected of the people and to what degree they lived up to these expectations.

Text 2 – A. Joshua 18:1 and B. 22:9-29 – The Tent of Meeting in Shiloh and Its Implications

What did the people do with the Tent of Meeting after they had completed the conquest of the Land? What was the significance of this action?

Text 2A informs us that "the whole community of the Israelite people" assembled in a place called Shiloh in the territory of Ephraim (map 71) and set up the Tent of Meeting there. In setting up the Tent

in a central location in the context of such a national assembly it would appear that the people were trying to establish a new religious center in the Land, paralleling the religious center that they had in the desert. Apparently, the people felt that there was simply no alternative to central worship. There was one land with one God and there should be only one place of religious worship. The problem, as we mentioned earlier, is that the Tent of Meeting would not be nearly as accessible in Shiloh as it had been in the desert. **Would all the people be able to make the journey to the Tent every time they sought God? And if not, how would they give expression to their religious yearnings and worship God in time of need?**

That is the subject of the story in our text. The people from the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh, who were assigned territory in Transjordan (see lesson 4), returned from the national assembly in Shiloh and built “a great conspicuous altar” by the Jordan River. Why did they do this? Why would they set up another altar just after the people set up a place for the Tent of Meeting and its altar in Shiloh? Could this altar be anything other than an act of open defiance and of rebellion against the restricting of religious worship to Shiloh and an attempt to establish an alternate site that was more convenient and accessible? It is this inevitable conclusion that aroused the wrath of the people and that led to their preparation for war. They accused them saying: “What is this treachery that you have committed against the God of Israel... building yourselves an altar and rebelling this day against the Lord... do not rebel against the Lord, and do not rebel against us by building for yourselves an altar other than the altar of the Lord our God”.

The tribes of the Transjordan were forced to respond quickly and to explain their actions. They proceeded to explain that, contrary to the initial impression of the people the altar was not a rebellion against them and their God but was an attempt to establish the unity of all the tribes and their shared loyalty to God. It was aimed at preventing the children of the larger community from accusing their children of “What have you to do with the Lord, the God of Israel?” and from telling them that they do not worship the same God. Their altar was not meant as an alternative to the altar at Shiloh but “as a witness between you and us and between the generations to come that we may perform the service of the Lord before Him” at the central shrine of Shiloh.

Thus, the tribes in Transjordan managed to turn the argument on its head; what was perceived as a threat and a challenge to centralized worship was presented as an affirmation of the absolute inviolability of such worship. The question is, **was this argument true? Did they, in fact, build this altar for the stated purpose and not for sacrificial worship as it had appeared?** Could it be that they initially built it as an alternate site for worship and came up with this clever defense once they were confronted by the opposition and the military threat of the people? Although it is clear that the text

wants us to believe in the genuineness of their position, there is no way of knowing their true intentions.

Now, the importance of this question cannot be underestimated. If we accept the story at face value then we have to conclude that centralized worship was widely accepted by the people and was never seriously challenged. If, however, we are willing to question the sincerity of their argument then we have evidence that at least some of the people were uncomfortable with centralized worship and sought to establish places of religious worship that were more convenient and accessible.

A careful examination of the biblical record will reveal that local worship was far from uncommon. Judges 17-18 tells the story of a man named Micah from the territory of Ephraim –where the city of Shiloh was located - who built a sculptured image and a molten image, and who had a house of God that included an ephod, teraphim and a priest. We are then told that members of the tribe of Dan stole Micah's religious objects, took his priest and set up the sculptured image and the priest in the city that they conquered and inhabited in the North. Now, although the story is reported pejoratively, it does not deny the fact that alternate sites were set up for religious worship (although the text does not say that they offered sacrifices it is highly unlikely that a "House of God" would be devoid of the central act of worship.) In Judges 20 the story is told of the battle of the tribes of Israel against the tribe of Benjamin at Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. After an initial devastating defeat at the hands of the Benjaminites, the people retreated to Bethel in the territory of Ephraim where they wept, fasted and presented sacrifices "before the Lord". The fact that sacrifices were offered, and that the sacrifices were offered "before the Lord", is a strong indication that Bethel was an established place of worship.

Furthermore, the discomfort of the biblical author with the existence of worship outside of the central sanctuary in Shiloh is clear from the bizarre and difficult editorial comment "for the Ark of God's covenant was there in those days..." (Judges 20:27) which flies in the face of other accounts, according to which, the Ark remained in Shiloh until it was removed by the people during their battle with the Philistines in the time of Samuel (see I Samuel 4). This editorial comment indicates that the author (or authors) wished to cover up the disturbing fact that the vision of Shiloh as the central sanctuary to the exclusion of all others was not reflected in the story.

Finally, there is biblical evidence that there were temples in Gilgal (I Samuel 7:16 and 11:14-15, 15:12-21), in Mizpah (Judges 20:1-3, 8-10; 21:1,5,8 and I Samuel 7:5-11,16) in Hebron (II Samuel 2:4, 5:3) and elsewhere (see Haran, pp. 26-42). Although sacrificial worship is not mentioned explicitly – probably reflecting the text's attempt to conceal this historical reality - the term "before the Lord" employed by the text would seem to support the suggestion that these were full-fledged temples.

Thus, we see that the vision of centralized worship upon entry into the Land was not completely borne out by the reality of the time, even according to the biblical account of events. This vision, however, was not the only vision that appears in the Bible. In the following texts we will see an alternate vision of centralized worship; one that does not begin with the entry into the Land but with another monumental event – the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Text 3 – A. I Kings 3:1-4 and B. I Kings 8:1-21 – The Temple in Jerusalem and Its Implications

What does this text tell us about worship in local shrines?

Unlike the previous text which tries to mask the existence of places of worship outside the central shrine in Shiloh, this text openly admits that “the people continued to offer sacrifices at the open shrines” and that even King Solomon “sacrificed and offered at the shrines” and “presented a thousand burnt offerings” at the largest shrine of Gibeon. Furthermore, the people who do so are neither frowned upon nor criticized. Why?

Conceivably local worship could have been permitted because the Tent of Meeting in Shiloh no longer existed as it was probably destroyed by the Philistines when the People removed the Ark in a failed effort to gain the upper hand against them in battle (see I Samuel 4). The problem is that this is not the argument presented in this text. Instead, the text says that local shrines were permitted because “no house had been built for the name of the Lord”, i.e., the Temple in Jerusalem had not yet been built.

Thus, we must conclude that our text offers a different vision; a vision that sees centralized worship as a function of the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem and not as a function of entry into the Land. But why would a people who are naturally inclined toward worship in local shrines and temples and who had been accustomed to it for 250 years (roughly the time from the entry into the Land in 1200 BCE until the building of the Temple in 950 BCE) now be expected to abandon it in favor of central worship? Because Solomon’s Temple was no ordinary temple.

What was unique about the Temple in Jerusalem?

The Temple in Jerusalem was a magnificent structure the scale of which was without parallel in Israel. It was a limestone structure overlaid with cedar wood and pure gold. Solomon expended extensive resources and every available skill in its construction and it was truly a sight to behold. But it wasn’t merely its physical magnificence and grandeur that made it so extraordinary; it was what it represented spiritually.

Unlike the earlier “tents” which served as shrines or temples, this is described repeatedly as a “House”, and not just a “House” but “the House of the Lord”, a “House for the Name of the Lord”. (Our analysis is based on Joshua 18 above which describes the shrine in Shiloh as a “tent” and on the distinction between the Temple in Jerusalem and all that preceded it, according to II Samuel 7:6. The inconsistency with I Samuel 1:7, 9 and 3:15 in which the shrine in Shiloh itself is described as a “house of God” is the subject of much discussion and debate among scholars and is beyond the scope of this lesson.) What is the difference between a “tent” and a “house”? A “tent” denotes mobility and transience whereas a “house” implies immobility and permanence. When God is said to dwell in a “tent” it means that God’s Presence is there but it may, or may not, remain there. When God is said to dwell in a “house”, however, the implication is that God is there at that moment and He is meant to stay there forever. It is not just a place in which God is a welcome guest but it is His home, as it were, on earth.

From the perspective of our text, as long as there was no “house for the name of the Lord”, i.e. no permanent and fixed structure, but merely “tents” or a “tabernacle”, God could be worshiped anywhere in the Land. Once a “house for the name of the Lord” was built, however, worship elsewhere became prohibited. There is a certain compelling logic in this concept when viewed in relation to the People in the Land. As long as the People were fighting their enemies, engaging in conquest and not yet settled in their Land, they had not yet reached the apex of their existence as an independent nation and were not in a position to fully realize the promise to Abraham “I will make of you a great nation”. Similarly, as long as God was mobile and not yet settled in a permanent place, He couldn’t express Himself fully as God on earth. Both the people and God needed to be permanent fixtures and not subject to the vicissitudes of a changing reality. And once they were to become permanently established in their respective homes they would each assume a fundamentally new character. The People would become bound to their home in the Land and God would be bound to His home in the Temple. Thus, to worship God in “tents” - conveniently set up in locations throughout the country - after His presence had already been established in His central “house” in Jerusalem, would be to relegate God to a God of convenience and to diminish from the awesomeness of His Presence in that “house”.

Indeed, it is this relationship between God and the People that may be the key to understanding why the building of the Temple was delayed until this point. The Temple – God’s permanent residence – could not be built until the people had completed their conquest and were settled in the Land – their permanent residence (see Deut. 12:8-11 and Sifrei 66). The vision was for the People and for God to remain in their permanent residence, bound to one another for eternity. Nevertheless, as we will soon see, this vision was very short-lived.

After the completion of the magnificent “house of God” in Jerusalem with all that it symbolized, would the people now be willing to abandon their local shrines and make the Temple the exclusive center of religious life?

Text 5 – A. I Kings 12:25-31 (see also I Kings 15:25-26, 16:1-3) and B. 14:21-24 (see also 15:9-15, 22:41-44) – The People and the Shrines

Despite Solomon’s valiant effort to make the Temple and Jerusalem the religious capital of the People, these texts tell us that his effort enjoyed very little success. After the death of Solomon and the People of Israel were divided into two kingdoms (see lesson 5), Jeroboam recognized the threat that the Temple in the Southern kingdom of Judah posed to the future of the Northern kingdom of Israel. He, therefore, reestablished the two competing centers in Dan and Bethel in the North (the meaning and significance of the two golden calves is beyond the scope of this lesson) which attracted the masses and which continued to attract the masses until the fall of the kingdom in 722 BCE. (The text repeatedly refers to the worship at these temples as “the sins of Jeroboam”.) However, not only did the tribes of the North worship outside the Temple in Jerusalem; even the tribes of the South in whose territory the Temple was situated “built for themselves shrines, pillars, and sacred posts on every high hill and under every leafy tree” and these shrines were not completely abolished until the reign of Josiah in 623 BCE - roughly 230 years later.

Thus, we see that the ideal of centralized worship, either as a function of entry into the Land or as a function of the Temple, did not take root among the people. It may be that the impulse to reach out to God, to seek His guidance and His comfort, was so overwhelming that it could not be deferred until an opportunity might arise for a trip to the central shrine. If the God of Israel were to play a meaningful role in the lives of the masses He would have to be accessible to them there, then, and whenever they might need Him. For most of the People, neither a central location nor a magnificent Temple, could serve as viable alternatives to the worship of God “on every high hill and under every leafy tree” (we will offer another reason for the appeal of shrines in the next lesson).

(It must be noted that, according to historians, the prohibition against local worship was neither a function of entry into the Land in 1200 BCE nor of the building of the Temple in 950 BCE but of the reforms introduced by Hezekiah in 705 BCE and then carried out fully by Josiah 628 BCE. Thus, the texts that suggest an earlier date for this prohibition - such as the ones we are studying - were written after the time of Josiah and were inspired by his reforms. By claiming that the reforms reflect a much earlier tradition the biblical authors wished to underscore their legitimacy. Our aim in this lesson and

throughout this course is to understand the drama as it unfolds according to the biblical text even if the accuracy of the text is called into question.)

IV. Suggested Lesson Plan

Step 1

It is recommended to begin by asking the students to talk about their local synagogues. Are they inspiring religiously? What might make them more inspiring? Would synagogue worship be more or less inspiring if there were one central synagogue where the entire community prayed? Do you think that when Jews are their own land they should be encouraged to set up local synagogues or should they to congregate in one central synagogue? What are the pros and cons of local and central worship?

Before proceeding to the texts of the lesson it is important to explain that sacrifices on shrines in biblical times are the rough equivalent of prayer in synagogues today as the central form of worship.

Step 2

Study and analyze text 1 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. Should the existence of a central Tent of Meeting for religious worship in the desert serve as a precedent for the People once they enter the Land?

Step 3

Study and analyze texts 2A-B guided by the questions that appear in bold print. To what extent was the vision of central worship in the Land realized by the people?

Step 4

Study and analyze texts 3A-B guided by the questions that appear in bold print. At this point it may be helpful to ask, do you like the idea of a central Temple in Jerusalem? Would you want the Temple to be the central place of worship to the exclusion of all others if you were living in the Land? How might the existence of a central Temple in Jerusalem affect you as a Jew living outside the Land?

Step 5

Study and analyze text 5A-B guided by the questions in bold print.

Step 6

Summary and questions for thought. The following are a few examples: In what way is the Temple in Jerusalem still the religious center of the Jews worldwide? Would you be willing to relinquish

sovereignty over the Temple and the Holy Mount in a peace deal with the Palestinians? Should there be one central authority over matters of religion in the Israel such as a chief rabbinate? Is Israel the center of Jewish life? If not, should it be? Do the Jewish people need a center? Does it matter whether we are dealing with religion or communal life?

V. Questions for Further Study

1. Compare Numbers 2:2, 3:38 and Exodus 40:35 to Exodus 19:12 and 24:15-16. What does this comparison teach us about the importance of the Tent of Meeting (the Tabernacle)? How might that explain the desire to set it up at the earliest possible opportunity after entering the Land?
2. Read I Kings 8:22-60. What are the various functions that Solomon envisions for the Temple? What is conspicuously missing from this list? Do verses 62-64 shed light on this question?

VI. Literature for Further Reading

Haran, M. (1985). *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel*, Indiana: Eisenbraus, pp. 13-57, 132-148.

Kaufmann, Y. (1963). *The Religion of Israel*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 258-260, 287-290, 301-304

Tigay, J. (1996). *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Philadelphia: JPS, Excursus 14, pp. 459-464.