

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parashat Hashavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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This parasha series is dedicated  
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.

## PARASHAT RE'EH

This shiur is dedicated in memory of  
Dr. William Major z"l.

### The Prohibition of Erasing God's Name

By Rav Yehuda Rock

*Chazal* derive from our *parasha* the prohibition of erasing the written Name of God. Yet, a simple reading of the text points to a sizeable gap between the plain meaning of the verses and *Chazal's* interpretation of them.

In our *parasha* we read:

These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall observe to perform in the land which the Lord God of your forefathers has given you to possess it, all the days that you live upon the earth.

You shall utterly destroy all of the places where the nations whom you dispossess worshipped their gods, upon the high mountains and upon the hills and under every leafy tree,

And you shall shatter their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their *asherim* with fire, and cut down the statues of their gods, and destroy their name from that place.

You shall not do thus to the Lord your God;

But the place which the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes, to place His Name there – you shall seek His dwelling there and you shall come there,

And you shall bring to there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices and your tithes and the offerings of your hand, and your vow offerings and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and your flocks,

And you shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all of your endeavors – you and your households, with which the Lord your God has blessed you.

(*Devarim* 12:1-7)

*Chazal* expound the following (*Sifri Devarim piska* 61, and similarly in *Tosefta Makkot* 5, 8-9):

From where do we know that one who shatters a single stone of the Sanctuary or of the altar or of the (Temple) courtyards, transgresses a negative commandment? As it is written: “You shall shatter their altars and break down their pillars... You shall not do thus to the Lord your God.”

Rabbi Yishmael said: From where do we know that one who erases one letter of God’s Name transgresses a negative commandment? As it is written, “You shall destroy their name... You shall not do thus to the Lord your God.”

The Gemara (*Makkot* 22a) adds the prohibition of burning the wood set aside for sacrifices, from the words, “You shall burn their *asherim* with fire... You shall not do thus to the Lord your God,” and seems to suggest that a transgressor is punished on both counts – erasing God’s Name and destruction of sacred materials. The Rambam formulates the halakha accordingly (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, negative commandment 65; *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 6:1,7). Thus, the two *derashot* derived in the *Sifri* are not a controversy between Tannaim (as Rambam comments ad loc; we shall examine his commentary below), but rather two different categories of negative commandment that are based on the same verse.

The first teaching in the *Sifri* is based on a reading of the word “*khen*” (“thus”), in the verse, “You shall not do thus to the Lord your God,” as referring to destruction of the idolatry that is described two verses previously: Destroy places and artifacts of idolatry, but do not do so to God – i.e., do not destroy the place of the Sanctuary or other sacred objects.

The second teaching in the *Sifri* adopts a reading of the same word as applying to the command, “You shall destroy their name” in the previous verse, based on a literal interpretation of the expression “their name”: Destroy the names of the pagan gods, but do not do so to the Lord your God.

Somehow, in practice, both categories are rolled into the same negative command.

As noted, the plain meaning of the verses appears far removed from the teachings that *Chazal* deduce from them. Firstly, the expression “their name” (*shemam*) is certainly not meant in the sense of their actual name; rather, the verse is telling us that by destroying the places of idol worship and its accoutrements, the “name” of idolatry – its lasting effect, impression and fame – will also disappear.

We may understand that the prohibition is dependent upon the common denominator of names and sanctified objects. This, apparently, is the way in which the Rambam understood the connection. He formulates the negative commandment as follows (introduction 8 to *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*): “Not to destroy things that have His [God’s] Name called upon them.” Rambam apparently understood *Chazal*’s interpretation of the verse as being literal in only one

sense: the reading according to which “thus” refers to the destruction of idolatry. Accordingly, only the prohibition of destruction of the Sanctuary and/or of its sanctified objects arises directly from the verse. The Oral Law interprets the existential nature of the prohibition as arising from the fact that God’s Name is attached to the Sanctuary and its artifacts, and thus applies the prohibition literally, to the Name of God, as well. According to this interpretation, Rabbi Yishmael’s teaching in the *Sifri* does not pretend to provide a reading of the plain meaning of the verse, but rather uses the verse as the basis for expanded halakhic application of its primary reading.

This expanded concept of “God’s Name” that is common to both the Sanctuary and its artifacts and actual instances of God’s Name, requires some clarification; we shall return to it later on.

It is possible that Ramban, too, adopted a similar interpretation to the one that we have built on Rambam’s teaching. While the literal interpretation that he supplies for the verse regards the expression “thus” as referring to both actions (shattering of the altars and destroying their name), from his words it is clear that the essence of the prohibition concerns the breaking of the altars; the destroying of their name is included in the prohibition because of the common denominator that it shares with the breaking of the altars. He explains as follows:

The words of Rabbi Yishmael are not submitted as debate, but rather as clarification, for one who erases God’s Name is like one who shatters a stone from the altar. Hence, the meaning of the verse is: “You shall shatter their altars and destroy their name from that place. But you shall not do thus to the Lord your God, to shatter His alter and to destroy His Name....”

The interpretation that we have built on Rambam’s words, according to which the literal meaning of the word “thus” in the verse actually refers only to the destruction of idolatry, sits well with the reading of the verses – up to verse 4. But verses 5-7 do not stand alone; rather, they are a direct continuation from verse 4. The expression “*ki im*” (“but”) in verse 5 is a direct continuation that expresses the inverse of verse 4 – the prohibition of doing “thus” to the Lord your God. Towards God we are obligated to act differently. Thus, we may deduce from verse 5 a lesson concerning verse 4, since they are the inverse of one another.

Let us now examine verse 5. We shall cite verses 4-5 again, together with verses 6-7, which clearly represent a direct continuation of verse 5:

You shall not do thus to the Lord your God,  
But the place which the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes, to place His Name there – you shall seek His dwelling there and you shall come there,  
And you shall bring to there your burnt offerings and your sacrifices and your tithes and the offerings of your hand, and your vow offerings and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and your flocks,  
And you shall eat there before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice in all of your endeavors – you and your households, with which the Lord your God has blessed you.

If the meaning of the words, “you shall not do thus” is not to destroy God’s holy place, then the opposite is proper activity in the holy place. We are not to destroy the holy place, but rather the opposite – to sanctify it and to serve God in it. This seemingly would explain verses 5-7 as a description of the activity that is appropriate in relation to the Sanctuary.

But a closer look at the activities that are described in these verses, in light of the interpretation suggested above, reveals some major omissions. How is it that the description of the activity that is appropriate to the Sanctuary makes no mention of the daily sacrifices or the additional sacrifices for holidays? Where are the meal offerings, the sin offerings, and the guilt offerings? And what about the routine service of the incense and kindling the lights of the *menora*?

Verses 5-7 mention only the Divine service of the individual, with an emphasis on tithes and freewill offerings; “burnt offerings and sacrifices,” with no qualifying definitions, refer to freewill offerings – “the offerings of your hand,” “your vow offerings and freewill offerings,” etc. We may understand the significance of this in light of the verses that immediately follow, and whose meaning is clearer in their context:

You shall not do as all that we do here today – each man [doing] all that is proper in his eyes; For you have not yet come to the rest and to the inheritance which the Lord your God gives you.

For when you cross the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, and when He gives you rest from all of your enemies around you, and you dwell safely,

Then the place which the Lord your God will choose, to cause His Name to dwell there – to there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contributions of your hand, and all of your choice vows which you will vow to God,

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God – you and your sons and your daughters, and your menservants and your maidservants, and the Levi who is within your gates.... (*Devarim* 12:8-12)

Verses 11-12 correspond perfectly to verses 5-7, in both language and content. And in verses 8-12 the meaning is quite clear: from the time when the site of the Sanctuary in the land is chosen, it becomes prohibited to offer sacrifices on the *bamot* (“high places,” temporary altars); all sacrifices must be brought to the central altar that is the courtyard of the Temple. Now it becomes clear why the Torah emphasizes the sacrifices brought by individuals: it is these that we may have thought would be permitted to be offered on the *bamot*, each person bringing his offerings in his own city. This would not apply to obligatory sacrifices – and certainly not communal sacrifices, which would clearly have to be brought in the Temple. The Torah therefore emphasizes that even individual sacrifices – vow offerings and freewill offerings – must be brought to the Temple.

Now the significance of verses 4-7 becomes clearer. The word “thus” refers back to the words (in verse 2), “Where the nations worshipped... their gods, upon the high mountains and upon the hills and under every leafy tree.” In other words, the nations worshipped their gods

anywhere and everywhere, each person wherever he saw fit. But you shall not do thus to the Lord your God: you shall seek Him and serve Him only at the place that God will choose.

Most of the commentators adopt this interpretation of the verses. Even Rashi, who often draws his understanding of a verse from teachings of *Chazal*, here quotes *Chazal's* teaching only as a secondary alternative. He starts by interpreting the verses according to their plain meaning:

“You shall not do thus” – offering incense to the heavens in every place, but rather [only] in the place that [God] will choose.

Rashbam:

“You shall not do thus to the Lord your God” – offering sacrifices to God in every place.

Ibn Ezra:

“You shall not do thus” – meaning, you shall not offer sacrifices upon the hills and the mountains; only at the place where He will place His Name.

Seemingly, the cantillation (*te'amim*) of the verses, indicating a break at the end of verse 4, is meant to express the teaching of *Chazal*, which severs the command “You shall not do thus” from the context of “But the place...” But the plain meaning of the verses is far removed not only from the midrashic reading, but even from the halakhic rules that arise from the Midrash. While the plain meaning of the verses is that the Torah is discussing here a focused site for Divine service, to the exclusion of *bamot*, *Chazal* understand the verses as prohibiting destruction of the Sanctuary and of God's Name.

Let us now consider the meaning of the word “*shem*” (“name”) in the Torah in general, and in our context in particular. We addressed this issue in the past, in our *shiur* on *Parashat Lekh-lekha*, so we shall repeat just the crux of the discussion here.

In verse 5, as in *Sefer Devarim* as a whole, the place of the Sanctuary is referred to by a fixed title, with only slight variations. This title is, “the place which the Lord your God will choose to cause His Name to rest there” (12:11 and elsewhere). God's “Name” is that which God “causes to rest” there – i.e., the Divine Presence. The noun “*Shekhina*” (“Divine Presence”) is an appellation that has its source in rabbinic writings; it appears nowhere in *Tanakh*. The term that is usually used in *Tanakh* for God's Presence is His “Name.”

The word “Name,” then, in addition to its primary meaning as well as the borrowed meaning of “fame” or “renown” (as in “in praise and in name and in honor” – *Devarim* 26:19), also has the specific meaning, also borrowed, of the Divine Presence, its glory and its greatness. The explanation of this use of the term is that the significance of the Divine Presence is a place where God's will finds expression; hence, the place of revelation and publicizing of God's will and His glory is the place from which His Name emerges.

The use of the word “Name” in this sense appears in a different context, too – that of the building of the altar and the offering of sacrifices. In *Shemot* 20:20 we read: “You shall make for Me an earthen altar, and you shall offer upon it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings and your sheep and your cattle. In every place where I cause My Name to be pronounced I shall come to you and bless you.” The dwelling of the Divine Presence and the blessing that are described in the second part of this verse are the result of the building of the altar and the offering of the sacrifices as described in the first part. Indeed, *Chazal* offer the same interpretation in *Bereishit Rabba* (82, 2): “... Since they have built an altar for My Name, therefore I shall be revealed upon it and shall bless them...” Thus, the place of the altar and of the sacrifices is referred to as the “place where God’s Name is pronounced” – i.e., the place of the Divine Presence. We deduce, then, that the building of the altar and the offering of the sacrifices actually represent the establishment of the place of the Divine Presence – the place where God’s will is performed and where His Name is publicized and given honor.

This meaning of the word “Name” was known to *Chazal*. Concerning the generation which, in building their city and their tower, declared, “We shall make for ourselves a name,” they comment:

Rabbi Yishmael taught: The word “name” always implies idolatry (*Bereishit Rabba* 38,8). “They said: It is not for [God] to choose for Himself the upper worlds and to give us [only] the lower world. Let us make for ourselves a tower, and we shall create an idol at the top of it, and place a sword in its hand, and it will appear as though it wages war against Him” (ibid. 6).

*Chazal* understood that the word “name” in general signifies Divine Presence. In the case of God’s Name, the reference is to the *Shekhina*; in other cases, the reference is to the presence of pagan deities. Accordingly, *Chazal* explain that the tower that was meant to “make a name” was actually a temple to idolatry, to the worship of themselves – worship of the national power of Bavel. Ramban, too, notes the special significance of the “name” in connection with the Tower of Bavel: “But one who knows the meaning of [the word] ‘name’ will understand their intention from their words, ‘We shall make for ourselves a name,’ and will know the measure of what they tried to do with the tower, and will understand the entire matter, that their thought was evil...”

Returning to our discussion: we now understand that the term “name” includes the concept of the place of worship as the place of the Divine Presence, as well as the concept of the impression and publicizing, and that these two concepts are closely intertwined. The presence of the Deity in the world – whether in the form of idolatry or, *le-havdil*, God’s Presence – is the result of worship and the establishment of the place of worship, and its value is measured according to the impression and effects that it creates in the world. Hence, when the Torah commands the destruction of idolatry, its places and its accoutrements, and describes the value of such activity as “destruction of their name,” what it means is that the Torah is commanding the destruction of idolatry not just as an expression of Israel’s rejection of idolatry, but as the erasing of the presence of the pagan deities from the world.

We can now understand the verses from the perspective of *Chazal's* interpretation, and the subsequent verses also fall into place in accord with it. "You shall not do thus to the Lord your God" – in other words, you shall not allow the Presence of God in the world – the *Shekhina* – to be destroyed from the world. On the contrary, we are commanded to amplify and strengthen not only the Divine service in the Temple, but also the seeking and flow of all of Israel towards the Temple, so that the Divine service in the Temple will create an impression and an effect on the world. In order for God's Name to dwell in the Temple, and in order for His Name (His Presence) to be seen and publicized, the Divine service in the Temple cannot be limited to the internal activity that goes on inside. There must be ongoing activity around the Temple – activity that may be discerned outwardly, too. And in order to achieve this aim, the Torah stipulates that even individual sacrifices – vow offerings, freewill offerings, firstlings and tithes of animals – must all be brought to God's House, such that at all times there will be groups of Jews coming to eat before God and to behold His Presence.

Thus, the prohibition of offering on *bamot*, and the establishment of the place of the Sanctuary as the sole place of Divine service, even for individual sacrifices such as vow offerings and freewill offerings, is meant, in these verses, to serve the purpose of the revelation of the Divine Presence – the glorification of God's Name in His Temple. The prohibition of *bamot* is the opposite of "destroying the Name." The meaning of the verses is that the Torah is commanding that we destroy the "name" of idolatry, but not to destroy the "Name of God" – rather, on the contrary, to seek out the Sanctuary, to come there, and to offer sacrifices only there, and not on the *bamot*. The essence of this "destruction of the name," which is prohibited concerning God, is the destruction of the place of the Sanctuary. Other applications of "destruction of the name," according to the Oral Law, include destruction of other expressions of God's will and His Presence in the world in the form of His written Name, in holy writings, and in the wood for sacrifices. As the Rambam explains, the prohibition include all the things which "God's Name is called upon them."

The above view would seem to explain also the Ramban's words, which we now cite in full:

Rabbi Yishmael's words are not meant as debate, but rather as clarification, since one who erases God's Name is like one who shatters a stone from the altar. This being so, the verse means: "You shall shatter their altars and destroy their name from that place. But you shall not do thus to the Lord your God – to shatter His altar and to destroy His Name. Rather, give honor to His Name and to His altar, and the place which He will choose to place an altar there – you shall seek His Name and bring your burnt offerings before Him."

Translated by Kaeren Fish

