

Today's Torah Portion: Ekev

Summary and Issues

Synopsis:

Moses continues his discourse, telling Israel that, by following all the rules established by God, they will experience great blessings - health, abundant produce, and fertility. All of their enemies will be vanquished and all signs of idolatry destroyed.

A second admonition to obey the laws is followed by a brief description of Israel's wanderings in the desert. Despite 40 years of hardship, their clothing did not wear out, nor did their feet swell. Moses reminds the people to give thanks to God and maintain faith, even after they've entered their bountiful land. The people should never assume that it is by their own hand alone that they enjoy the fruits of the land. All that they have is from God.

Moses reminds the people that by not following God's commandments, Israel will doom itself.

Issues:

1) Deuteronomy 8:10 lays the foundation for the Birkat Hamazon, the Grace after meals: "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to God for the good land which God has given you."

The Birkat Hamazon has three blessings, thanking God for: 1) feeding everyone; 2) for the Land and for food, and 3) for (in the future) rebuilding Jerusalem. Why do these blessings appear, and why in this particular order?

One possibility: Blessing #1 is a reminder of the manna which fed our ancestors in the wilderness (see 8:16); blessing #2 relates to 8:10, "Give thanks to the Lord for the land which He has given you (which the children of Israel are about to enter); and blessing #3 refers not only to the physical Jerusalem, but also the spiritual Jerusalem, the Jerusalem that will exist in the time of the Messiah. Therefore, the Grace links us to the past (#1 - manna), present (#2 - the Land of Israel) and future (#3). In this way each meal is transformed into a timeless, sacred experience.

What, to you, is the significance of blessing God after eating? Why do Jews have their main "Grace" after the meal, while Christians do theirs before? (Maybe we want to see how good the food is first...) Is it easier to be thankful on an empty or full stomach?

2) The popular expression that we not live by bread alone comes from Deuteronomy 8:3. This saying, however, eliminates the second half of the verse and completely changes the meaning. Compare the implications of the complete verse with the popular expression. Which do you

prefer?

Woodie Allen: "Man does not live on bread alone. At times there must be a beverage."

3) Looking at verse 8:18, how would this attitude toward the source of one's wealth influence the way a person lives? The way he gives? Is this attitude common nowadays? How would the world be different if it were more common?

4) The second paragraph of the Shma is found in this portion. Find it. Many people have trouble taking its words literally. It is perhaps helpful to recall that this message was intended for the entire nation, not individuals. In other words, if Joe Cohen eats a ham sandwich, it doesn't mean the rains will stop falling and there will be no wheat for Joe Cohen. However, if an entire nation falls into immoral behavior, mistreating its citizens, its guests, its animals and its ecology, eventually that nation will suffer.

How will it suffer? Think of all the "great" nations and empires in the history of the world. What brought about their decay? The second paragraph of the Shma is as important to us today as it was to the ancient Israelites.

5) In Ekev, people are commanded to befriend the stranger. (10:19) How does this community formally welcome new families or individuals into the area? How do you?

6) Moses tells the people that they are required to "fear" God. Yirah usually means fear. In the Shma we are commanded to love God "V'Ahavta..." How can such emotions be commanded? How does love or fear for a parent, for instance, originate? Do we need to fear in order to "behave"? How should fear be interpreted here - as "respect," or "follow the commandments of..." or "be afraid and run away from..."?

"He who truly fears a thing flees from it, but he who truly fears God flees unto Him"

"I fear God, and next to God I chiefly fear him who fears him not."

-- two sayings by medieval Moslem commentators

the land that He had promised them, and because He rejected them, that He brought them out to have them die in the wilderness.²⁹ Yet they are Your very own people, whom You freed with Your great might and Your outstretched arm."

אֲשֶׁר־דָּבַר לָהֶם וּמִשְׁנֵאתוֹ אוֹתָם הוֹצִיאָם
לְהַמָּתָם בְּמִדְבָּר: 29 וְהֵם עַמֶּךָ וְנַחֲלָתְךָ אֲשֶׁר
הוֹצֵאתָ בְּכַחֲךָ הַגָּדֹל וּבְיָרְעֶךָ הַנִּשְׁתָּוִיה:
פ רביעי

10 Thereupon the LORD said to me, "Carve out two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain; and make an ark of wood.²¹ I will inscribe on the

בָּעֵת הַהוּא אָמַר יְהוָה אֵלַי פֶּסֶל־לִי שְׁנֵי
לוּחֹת אֲבָנִים כְּרָאשֵׁימִים וְעֹלָה אֵלַי הָהָרָה וְעָשִׂיתָ
לָךְ אֲרוֹן עֹץ: 2 וְאָכַתְבִּי עַל־הַלּוּחֹת אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים

"ASCEND
TO
THE ARK"

knew that one of God's motives in His actions against Egypt was to show His incomparable power to the world,³² which is essential if the nations are to recognize Him voluntarily. Moses turns God's aim to Israel's advantage in arguing for pardon: if God should destroy Israel, He would appear powerless or diabolical and damage the stature that He had gained from the Exodus. Moses made the same appeal after the disastrous report of the scouts, and Joshua later made a similar one after Israel's defeat at Ai (Num. 14:15-16; Josh. 7:9).

The appeal to God to act for the sake of His name became a popular theme in prayers. In prophetic literature, the belief that He would do so became a source of hope for the end of the exile.³³

The invidious remarks of the Egyptians can be understood as separate alternatives or as complementary. If separate, the reasons are contradictory: either God wanted to bring them into Canaan but could not, or He was able but would not. In that case, the beginning of the second clause should be translated "or because He rejected them." If the reasons are complementary, the reasoning is: He knew all along that He would not be able to bring them into Canaan, but out of hatred (the literal meaning of "rejected") He took them out to die in the wilderness.³⁴

The accusation of divine hatred was also made by the Israelites after the scouts frightened them (1:27).

29. Yet In contrast to what the Egyptians might say: the Egyptians might accuse You of weakness and of rejecting Israel, when in fact Israel is Your own beloved people whose redemption showed that you *are* strong.³⁵

CHAPTER 10

The New Tablets: Reaffirmation of the Sinai Covenant (vv. 1-5)

By promising to replace the broken Tablets of the Covenant, God agrees not only to spare Israel, but also to restore the special relationship governed by the tablets, the covenant established at Horeb that had been undermined by the people's conduct. According to Exodus, God had first agreed to spare Israel and allow it to settle in the promised land (cf. 10:10-11 here), but He did not agree to accompany Israel there personally (Exod. 32:14,34; 33:1-5). For Moses this was not enough. He insisted on more than what had been promised to the patriarchs. He insisted that Israel was God's very own people, and continued to plead until God agreed to reinstate His personal relationship with Israel and reestablish the covenant of Sinai as the terms of that relationship (Exod. 33:14-17; 34:1-4,9-28).³⁶

1-2. Although God would inscribe the new tablets, they would be man-made, unlike the first ones, which were made by God (Exod. 32:16). Sforno infers from the difference that God did not forgive Israel completely.

ark That is, a chest. Documents were sometimes stored in chests and other types of containers in the ancient world, protecting them against damage or loss. In the case of a contractual document this would help protect the evidence of the agreement. Placing a document in a sanctuary enhanced its safety and brought the agreement under the sponsorship of the deity. For this reason the texts of treaties were deposited in temples, sometimes "at the feet" of a deity.³⁷ This corresponds to what we know about the Ark from Exodus. According to Exodus, it was

tablets the commandments that were on the first tablets that you smashed, and you shall deposit them in the ark."

³I made an ark of acacia wood and carved out two tablets of stone like the first; I took the two tablets with me and went up the mountain. ⁴The LORD inscribed on the tablets the same text as on the first, the Ten Commandments that He addressed to you on the mountain out of the fire on the day of the Assembly; and the LORD gave them to me. ⁵Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the ark that I had made, where they still are, as the LORD had commanded me.

⁶From Beeroth-bene-jaakan the Israelites marched to Moserah. Aaron died there and was buried there; and his son Eleazar became priest in his stead. ⁷From there they marched to Gudgod, and from Gudgod to Jotbath, a region of running brooks.

אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הַלְחָת הָרִאשִׁים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ
וּשְׂמָתָם בְּאָרוֹן:
וַאֲנִי עָשִׂיתִי אֲרוֹן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים וָאֶפְסַל שְׁנֵי־לְחָת
אֲבָנִים כְּרִאשֵׁינִים וָאָעַל הָהָרָה וּשְׁנֵי הַלְחָת
בִּידִי: ⁴וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל־הַלְחָת בְּמִכְתָּב הָרִאשׁוֹן
אֶת עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֵלַיְכֶם
בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ בְּיוֹם הַקֹּהֵל וַיִּתֶּנֶם יְהוָה אֵלַי:
⁵וָאֶפֶן וָאֵרַד מִן־הָהָר וָאָשֵׁם אֶת־הַלְחָת בְּאָרוֹן
אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי וַיְהִיו שָׁם בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוֵּנִי יְהוָה:
⁶וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נָסְעוּ מִבְּאֵרֶת בְּנֵי־יַעֲקֹב מוֹסֶרָה
שָׁם מֵת אַהֲרֹן וַיִּקְבְּר שָׁם וַיָּבֹהוּ אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ
תַּחְתָּיו: ⁷מִשָּׁם נָסְעוּ הַגִּדְגָּדָה וּמִן־הַגִּדְגָּדָה
יִשְׁבְּתָה אֶרֶץ נַחֲלֵי מַיִם:

covered by a lid adorned with two three-dimensional cherubs. It was kept in the Holy of Holies in the sanctuary and God would speak with Moses from above the cherubs. The Ark was regarded as God's footstool, and the cherubs were probably viewed as His throne. Placing the tablets in the Ark was thus to place them at God's feet and subject their contents to His enforcement. This conception of the Ark makes its mention in the context of the golden calf incident appropriate: as part of the sanctuary complex, the Ark, with its cherub cover, was a *legitimate* symbol of God's presence, in contrast to the calf.³⁸

Unlike Exodus, however, Deuteronomy does not mention that the Ark is a symbol of God's presence, but only that it contains the tablets (see also 31:26, where "the book of this Teaching" is placed beside the Ark). This may be due to the fact that Deuteronomy's subject matter does not call for this information. However, as noted above, in 1:33 and 42 Moses omits references to the Ark where accounts of the same events in Numbers reflect the conception of God traveling above the Ark. Critical theory sees all of these differences as representing Deuteronomy's attempt to downplay anthropomorphic conceptions that localize God's presence in specific objects, just as it insists that the Temple is not God's dwelling but the place where His name is present (see 12:5).³⁹

wood According to Exodus 25:11, the wood of the Ark was overlaid with gold.

3. In Exodus the Ark is built later, by Bezalel, along with the rest of the Tabernacle. Some commentators infer that there were two Arks and that the one built by Moses was used to house the tablets temporarily until Bezalel built the permanent one. Others hold that there was only the Ark built by Bezalel, and that Moses' "making" the Ark means that he *had* it made after he came down from the mountain. Critical theory assumes that the passage reflects a different tradition about the building of the Ark from that related in Exodus.⁴⁰

The Death of Aaron (vv. 6–7)

At this point in Moses' narrative about the aftermath of the golden calf incident the text digresses to mention Aaron's death. This is not part of Moses' narrative. Since it refers to Israel in the third person, instead of the first person plural or the second person that Moses uses in Deuteronomy, it must be by a different narrator.⁴¹ Since Aaron died forty years after the golden calf incident (Num. 33:37–39), the reason that his death is mentioned here must be to indicate that although he was spared at the time, he did not escape punishment for his role in Israel's idolatry.⁴² Like Moses, he died in the wilderness and never reached the promised land. The note was probably placed before verses 8–9 because Aaron was the High Priest and those verses deal with the priestly functions of the Levites.

None of the places mentioned in these verses has been identified with certainty. See Excursus 1.

Crafts, named after this first known artist of the Jewish People.

¹Exodus 31:3.

Signifies: ARTISTRY, INSPIRATION, KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM

Generic Categories: Personalities, Temple

See also: Ark, *Mishkan*, Priestly Cult

BIMAH — תִּבְנָה. The *bimah*, from the Hebrew word for "high place," is the platform upon which the prayer leader, cantor, or rabbi stands to conduct services and read from the *Torah scroll. Like a *mountain or *altar, it symbolizes access to the divine, the spiritual center of the *synagogue. Sephardi Jews call this platform the *tevah*, the biblical term used to refer to both Noah's *ark and *Moses's *basket, and in the Mishnah and Talmud, to the *Ark of the Covenant.

The position, function, and design of the *bimah* have changed greatly over the centuries. For most of Jewish history, the *bimah* has been located in the center of the sanctuary, or occasionally on or near the western wall, so that the prayer leader could be as close as possible to the largest number of worshippers. Sometimes the *bimah*, contrary to its name, has been constructed lower than the main floor of the sanctuary, either to symbolize the spiritual humility of the worshiper—"Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord"¹—or to add the illusion of height since Church regulations in the Middle Ages often restricted the height of synagogues. The *ark, on the other hand, has traditionally been located in the *eastern wall, oriented toward *Jerusalem. This architectural polarity between the *bimah* and the ark influenced synagogue design through the ages.

In the 19th century, the Reform Movement introduced into synagogue architecture the innovation of locating the *bimah* in front of the ark, a plan modeled on the church pulpit. This is now the dominant style in North America among liberal and many Orthodox congregations, though Sephardi and many traditional congregations maintain the central *bimah*.

Moving the *bimah* to the front of the sanctuary has had profound consequences for Jewish prayer. Because the *bimah* now

resembles a theater stage, the worshippers in the congregation tend to become spectators, watching the drama occurring in front of them, reminiscent of ancient Temple times. (It is interesting to note that the Israeli national theater is called *Habimah*.) In addition, the prayer leader, cantor, or rabbi usually stands with his or her back to the ark, contrary to the age-old custom of facing the ark as a sign of respect and of addressing prayers eastward toward Jerusalem. Some contemporary congregations and *havurot* have returned to earlier models of synagogue architecture by reorienting prayer toward the center of the worship space, or have omitted the *bimah* altogether as a way of making the entire prayer community the center of worship.

¹Psalms 130:1.

Signifies: ACCESS TO DIVINE, CENTER, HONOR, PRAYER

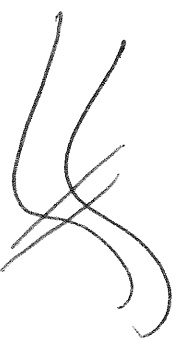
Generic Categories: Dwellings, Synagogue

See also: Altar, Ark, East, Jerusalem, Mountain, Synagogue

BIRD — תֵּיִס. In most cultures, birds symbolize freedom, because of their capacity to escape the fetters of gravity. They also suggest grace, because of their aerial acrobatics, and beauty, because of their colorful plumage, most notable in the peacock, a favorite motif in Jewish folk art. In Jewish folk art through the ages, birds have represented all these things.

But they also represent much more. Because they seem free of material constraint, they often symbolize the soul, which after death flies up to paradise. Associated with this notion of the soul's innocence, most often symbolized by the *dove, is the idea of its immortality. Birds were also thought to foretell the future by their cries and flight patterns. During the Hellenistic period when Jews were heavily influenced by foreign ideas, they often put images of birds on their tombs, probably borrowing motifs from pagan and early Christian art, where birds eating *grapes symbolized eternal life.

Jewish legend tells of several fabulous birds: the giant King of the Birds, *Ziz-Shaddai*, who protects weaker birds during the autumn month of *Tishrei* and whose

THE Bimah?
WHAT,
WHERE
+
WHO?


In [the synagogue], a *heichal*, where the Torah scroll is placed, should be constructed. The *heichal* should be constructed in the direction to which the people pray in that city, so that they will face the *heichal* when they stand to pray.

3. A platform is placed in the center of the hall, so that the one who reads the Torah or one who gives a sermon can stand on it, so that all the others will hear him.

When one positions the *tevah* which contains the Torah scroll, one should position it in the center of the hall, in the direction of the *heichal* and facing the people.

4. How do the people sit in the synagogue? The elders sit facing the people with their backs toward the *heichal*. All the people sit row after row, each row facing the back of the row before it. Thus, all the people face the sanctuary, the elders, and the *tevah*.

would be opposite the ark. However, since the Rambam mentions the possibility of the *heichal* being built on different walls, but mentions only one position for the entrance, it appears that he requires the entrance to be placed at the east at all times.

In [the synagogue], a *heichal*, where the Torah scroll is placed, should be constructed. - This refers to a fixed structure like the ark (*Aron HaKodesh*) which is found in contemporary synagogues. In addition, as explained in the following halachah, the custom was to have a *tevah*, a smaller ark, positioned next to the place where the *chazan* would stand.

The *heichal* should be constructed in the direction to which the people pray in that city - As mentioned in Chapter 5, Halachah 3, one should always pray facing the direction of the Temple. Thus, if the synagogue is located to the west of Jerusalem, the *heichal* should be built into the eastern wall.

so that they will face the *heichal* when they stand to pray. - It is apparent from the Rambam's statements that, if for some reason, the *heichal* of a synagogue was not positioned in the direction of Jerusalem, one should pray facing Jerusalem and not facing the *heichal*.

Commentary, Halachah 3

A platform is placed in the center of the hall - both lengthwise and widthwise. (See the Jerusalem Talmud, *Sukkah* 5:1.)

so that the one who reads the Torah - as described in the following chapter or one who gives a sermon - The Mishnah (*Ta'anit* 2:1) explains that on fast days, one of the elders of the congregation would speak and call the people to repent.

ובוֹיֵן בּוֹ הֵיכַל, שְׁמִינִיחָן בּוֹ סִפְר־תּוֹרָה.

ובוֹיֵן הֵיכַל זֶה בְּרוּחַ שְׁמִתְפַּלְלִין כְּנֻדוֹ בְּאוֹתָהּ הָעִיר, כְּדִי שִׂידֵיו פְּנִיָּהם אֶל מוֹל הַהֵיכַל כְּשִׁיעָמָדוֹ לְהַפְלָה.

ג וּמַעֲמִידִין בִּימָה בְּאַמְצַע הַבֵּית, כְּדִי שִׁיעֲלָה עָלֶיהָ הַקּוֹרָא בְּתוֹרָה, אוֹ מִי אֲשֶׁר אוֹמֵר לָעָם דְּבָרֵי כְבוֹשֵׁן, כְּדִי שִׁישְׁמָעוּ כָּלָם.

וּכְשִׁמְעִמִּידִין הַתֵּבָה שִׁישְׁבָּהּ סִפְר־תּוֹרָה, מַעֲמִידִין אוֹתָהּ בְּאַמְצַע, וְאַחֲרֵי הַתֵּבָה כְּלָפֵי הַהֵיכַל וּפְנֵיהָ כְּלָפֵי הָעָם.

ד כִּיצַד הָעָם יוֹשְׁבִין בְּכַתִּיבָנִסִּיחֹת?

הַזְקָנִים יוֹשְׁבִין וּפְנֵיהֶם כְּלָפֵי הָעָם, וְאַחֲרֵיהֶם כְּלָפֵי הַהֵיכַל;

וְכָל הָעָם יוֹשְׁבִין שׁוֹרָה לִפְנֵי שׁוֹרָה, וּפְנֵי הַשׁוֹרָה לְאַחֲרֵי הַשׁוֹרָה שְׁלִפְנֵיהָ, עַד שִׂידֵיו פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם כְּלָפֵי הַקֶּדֶשׁ וּכְלָפֵי הַזְקָנִים וּכְלָפֵי הַתֵּבָה.

Similarly, the Talmud mentions that some of the leading Sages would visit distant communities and address the people in the synagogue.

can stand on it, so that all the others will hear him.

When one positions the *tevah* which contains the Torah scroll - In contrast to the *heichal* whose position is fixed, the *tevah* is a movable ark, in which the Torah scrolls used for the public reading of the Torah were kept. (See the responsa of the Radbaz, Vol. II, 157.)

one should position it in the center of the hall - widthwise

in the direction of the *heichal* - i.e., close to the wall on which the *heichal* is constructed

and facing the people.

Commentary, Halachah 4

How do the people sit in the synagogue? The elders sit facing the people with their backs toward the *heichal*. - The Ramah (*Orach Chayim* 150:5) quotes this halachah, but does not mention that the elders sit with their backs to the *heichal*. The commentaries note that in many Sephardic communities the elders would sit with their backs to the ark, while in Ashkenazic communities, the custom is for them to sit on either side of the ark.

All the people sit row after row, each row facing the back of the row before it. Thus, all the people face the sanctuary - the *heichal*

the elders, and the *tevah*. - which should all be positioned in the direction of Jerusalem

When the leader of the congregation stands to pray, he stands on the ground, before the *tevah*, facing the sanctuary like the others.

5. Synagogues and houses of study should be treated with respect. They should be swept clean and mopped.

All the Jews in Spain, the west, Babylonia, and *Eretz Yisrael*, are accustomed to light lamps in the synagogue and spread mats over the floor to sit on. In European communities, they sit on chairs.

6. No lightheadedness - i.e., jests, frivolity, and idle conversation -

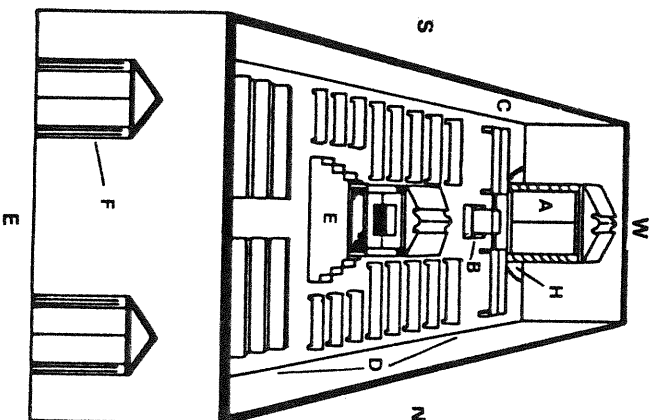
When the leader of the congregation stands to pray, he stands on the ground - praying from a low place, as implied by Psalms 130:1: "From the depths, I called out to You, O God" (*Berachot* 10b).

before the *tevah* - Hence, the expression, *חדד לפני התיבה* (literally, "descend before the ark") is often used to refer to leading communal prayer, because the *chazan* would pray "on the ground, before the *tevah*."

facing the sanctuary - the *heichel* like the others - i.e., facing the same direction as the other congregants.

Commentary, Halachah 5

Synagogues and houses of study should be treated with respect. - The *Mishneh*



An Overview Of A Synagogue

- A) The Heichel (the permanent ark)
- B) The *Tevah* (the movable ark)
- C) Seats For The Elders
- D) Seats For The Community
- E) The Bimah (the Platform on which the Torah is read)
- F) The Entrance
- H) Duchan

וְכַעַתָּה שְׁשִׁלִּית-צְבוּר עֹמֵד לְחֻפְלָהּ, עֹמֵד בְּאַרְץ לִפְנֵי הַתֵּבָה, וּפָרִיז לִפְנֵי הַקֶּדֶשׁ פְּשָׁאָה הָעָם.

הַ פְּתִיר-כְּנָסִיּוֹת וּפְתִיר-מִדְרָגְיוֹת, נוֹהֲגִין בְּהֵן כְּבוֹד, וּמְכַבְּדִים אוֹתָן וּמְרַבְּרִיעִין אוֹתָן.

וְנוֹהֲגִין כֹּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּסִפְפֹּר וּבְמַעֲרָב וּבְשׁוּנֵי וּבְאַרְץ הַצִּיָּה לְהַדְלִיק עֲשָׂשִׂיּוֹת בְּבִתְּי-כְּנָסִיּוֹת, וְלִהְיוּעַ בְּקִרְקָעוֹ מִהַצְלָאוֹת בְּרִי לִישָׁב עֲלֵיהֶם.

וּבְעִיר אֲדוֹם יִשְׁכְּבוּן בֵּה עַל הַכִּסֵּאוֹת.

וּ בְּבִתְּי-כְּנָסִיּוֹת וּבְבִתְּי-מִדְרָגְיוֹת, אֵין נוֹהֲגִין בְּהֵן קְלוּת-רֹאשׁ, כְּגוֹן שְׂחוּק וְהִמְתָּה וְשִׁחְתָּה כְּטֵלָה;

Berachot (151:1) notes that *Megillah* 29a quotes Ezekiel 11:16: "I have been a sanctuary in microcosm to them in the countries where they have come" to describe the synagogues in the Diaspora. This association allows one to infer that the obligation to honor a synagogue is related to the mitzvah (*Sefer Hamitzvot*, Positive Commandment 21) to revere the Temple.

The *S'dei Chemed* cites *Sefer Hamitzvot* (Negative Commandment 65) which mentions the prohibition against "destroying the houses where God is worshiped," indicating that the obligation to honor the synagogues has its source in a Torah commandment. (Note the commentary on Halachah 12.)

They should be swept clean - *Sefer Chasidim* 128 relates that Rabbi Ya'akov bar Yakar, Rashi's teacher, would polish the floor before the ark with his beard.

and mopped. - Their synagogues often had dirt floors. Thus, mopping them would also keep the dust from rising (*Megillah* 28b).

All the Jews in Spain, the west - i.e., North Africa, Babylonia, - The translation is based on *Targum Onkelos* to Genesis 19:1.

and *Eretz Yisrael* - The term *ארץ רצף* is applied to *Eretz Yisrael*, based on Jeremiah 3:19: "I will give you a delightful land (ארץ נחמ) the finest heritage of a host of nations."

(See also Daniel 8:9, *Gittin* 57a.)

are accustomed to light lamps in the synagogue - The Rambam appears to imply that in addition to lighting lamps at night, when their light would be necessary, lamps were lit during the day as a mark of respect.

and spread mats over the floor to sit on. In European communities - literally, "in the cities of Edom (i.e., Rome)."

they sit on chairs.

Commentary, Halachah 6

No lightheadedness - Rashi, *Megillah* 28a, explains that *ראש* also connotes irreverence. These activities...

i.e., jests, frivolity, and idle conversation - cheapen the respect and awe one has for

God's Clubhouse

Joshua Hammerman, The Jewish Week, June 20, 2002

As I sat in my ritual committee meeting last week, and all I could think about was a Berenstain Bears story that I used to read to my kids at bedtime. It was the one where Brother Bear decides to build a clubhouse up in a tree to get away from his tag-along younger sister. Sister takes a walk into the woods looking for Brother and is shocked to see the big sign out front of his hut, "NO GIRLS ALLOWED." A big to-do ensues, with Mama and Papa Bear eventually helping Sister to build her own girls-only clubhouse, fully stocked with a smorgasbord of honeycomb and salmon. This attracts Brother, who is invited up for a snack and recognizes the errors of his ways.

The Berenstains would have appreciated the committee meeting, because Topic A was that elevated piece of real estate that seems to cause more controversy among Jews than any other property this side of the Green Line: the Bimah. Not that this is anything new. God's Clubhouse has been a hot topic for thousands of years. Ever since the days of King Josiah, who destroyed lofty holy sites as often as Barry Bonds destroys fastballs, Jews have been obsessed with the architecture of worship, alternately building up and knocking down these high places, while consuming oodles of energy trying to figure out who belongs up there and who does not.

For my congregation the issue was finding appropriate ways of involving non-Jewish parents of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah on the pulpit. For other synagogues the issue might be the presence on the Bimah of women, non-Jewish clergy, animals, mini-skirts, Republicans, ex-presidents, board members who've been indicted, husbands who haven't given their divorced wives a proper "get," or Bibi Netanyahu. Rabbis have been fired over whom they've invited onto the Bimah. Congregations have split over it. No doubt even Stan and Jan Berenstain have been burned by a Bimah snub at some point.

I tend to take an inclusive view when it comes to these things; but more and more I've come to realize that the question shouldn't be who gets to go on the Bimah, but rather why we need to have a Bimah at all. I love the symbolism of seeking God in high places, but if God is everywhere, why not low ones as well? While Psalm 121 speaks of how we "turn our eyes toward the mountains, from where my help will come," Psalm 130 suggests a more humble approach: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." This latter verse has inspired the construction of some Bimahs below the level of the sanctuary floor, sort of like an orchestra pit.

For most of Jewish history, the reader's pulpit was located primarily in the center of the sanctuary and not where the ark and Torah scrolls were found. That changed in the 19th century, when the Reform movement located both the Bimah and ark in the front of the sanctuary, modeling itself after European church architecture. This innovation was vigorously protested, leading to proclamation by 100 Orthodox rabbis prohibiting worship in a synagogue that does not have a Bimah in the center.

If these rabbis were concerned that the frontal Bimah would lead to a more theatrical, less

participatory service, they were right. The liberal movements have been paying the price for that innovation ever since, and many congregations have lowered their nosebleed pulpits in recent years. But I wonder how many of the Reform originators of the modern pulpit had any idea that it would eventually become a vehicle for arbitrary discrimination. If the stifling lack of participation weren't enough reason to cut it down, the fact that it has become a weapon for pettiness and unnecessary exclusion should be.

Maimonides understood this nine centuries ago. In the design favored in his Mishnah Torah, the entire congregation sits in rows facing a fixed platform up front where the ark and Torah scroll are placed. Most have their backs to the Bimah, which is located in the center. But the Bimah is where almost all of the service takes place, including the sermon and reading of the Torah. (This configuration differs from many contemporary synagogues and Havurot, where congregants sit in a semi-circle facing the Bimah in the center, with all eyes on the leader.) In Maimonides' scheme, the service leader is meant to be heard, not seen; humility is emphasized, so that nothing might distract us from contemplating the divine. In the 17th-century Altneuschul in Prague, this concept is brought to an extreme: the Bimah is enclosed in a wrought iron cage (a great idea for tag-team wrestling, but please do not try this on your local clergy).

Appropriately, the focus of Halachic sources is not on who stands where, but on who is qualified to represent the community in leading the service. While I do not agree with some of the traditional restrictions (excluding unbearded men, for instance, or a person who pronounces an aleph as an ayin, or one suspected of being a "freethinker;" oh yes, and women) at least it gets us beyond who has the right to stand in the front of the room and eliminates the possibility of Bimah-envy.

There is much to be said for abolishing the frontal Bimah. At my synagogue, we hold many Bimah-free services outside the main sanctuary, and even in the "big room," I now spend most of the service off the pulpit. The primary result is that we're less preoccupied with who's been invited to God's Clubhouse. Board members now get to sit with their families or be warm and welcoming in the back. Seeking God has become less a matter of who belongs up there and more of what's going on down here. Liberated from the distractions, I've actually caught myself praying from time to time. Perhaps even God has relished this release from wrought iron captivity. The mountain has become a molehill and we've discovered that at its peak there's room enough for us all.