



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 19 | Re'eh | Sichah 2

A Chosen and Sacred Place

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1.

VIRTUE OR CHOICE?

Our *parshah* says:¹ “It shall be that the place where Hashem² will choose (“the *Beis Habechirah*³ in Jerusalem”⁴)... there you shall bring... your *olos*⁵ and your sacrifices....” The wording, “where Hashem will **choose**,” implies that the significance of this location (the reason for “there you shall bring...”) is only that Hashem chose this specific place. But **prior** to Hashem choosing, another location could have been selected, as this place had no unique significance over other locations.

As our Sages teach: “Before Jerusalem was chosen, **the entire Land of Israel** was suitable for altars... before the Eternal House was chosen, all of Jerusalem was fit for {the dwelling of} the *Shechinah*...”⁶ Meaning, “before Jerusalem was chosen... for altars,” that location had no unique significance relating to the altar (or the *Beis Hamikdash*) relative to the rest of Israel. Similarly, the “Eternal House” {had no unique significance} relative to the rest of Jerusalem.

However, *Rambam* says in *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*: “The Altar’s location is most precise and may never be changed, as it says,⁷ “This is the Altar for the *olos* of Israel.””⁸ *Rambam* then goes on to list several qualities of this location **prior** to its being chosen — “It is where Avraham built the altar... Noach built {an altar} there... Kayin and Hevel offered sacrifices there. And Adam offered a sacrifice there... and at that very spot, he was created.”⁹ **Simply put**, this means that the reason this “location is most precise and may never be changed” is (**not** (only) because Hashem chose it,

¹ *Devarim* 12:11.

² {In the Hebrew original, “*Havayah Elokeichem*”; “the Eternal your L-rd.”}

³ {Lit, “the chosen house,” a common alternative term for the *Beis Hamikdash*. See end of sec. 3 in this *sichah* regarding the significance of the name choice.}

⁴ Rashi, ad. loc.

⁵ {An *olah* is a type of sacrifice that was completely burnt on the Altar.}

⁶ Opening ch. of *Mechilta*.

⁷ *Divrei Hayamim II* 22:1.

⁸ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*,” beg. of ch. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, par. 2.

but) because it is where Avraham, Noach, etc., had offered their sacrifices (all of which occurred earlier, prior to Hashem choosing the spot).

As later commentators¹⁰ opine, this is in fact a dispute between *Rambam* and *Sefer HaChinuch*:¹¹ According to *Sefer HaChinuch*,¹² “the location {itself} is not necessarily significant for the indwelling of the *Shechinah*”¹³ (i.e., the location is important just because Hashem chose it), while according to *Rambam*, Hashem chose the location because it was a significant location (**previously**).

We need to understand: The verse, “the place where Hashem will **choose**... there you shall bring...” implies that the significance of the location is (just) a result of it being the place where “Hashem will choose” — Hashem picking this location. But *Rambam* seems to imply that the location’s significance is (not a result of Hashem choosing it, but rather) because Adam, Avraham, etc., all offered their sacrifices there, an advantage associated with this place from the days of Adam, and why its “location is most precise and it may never be changed....”

2.

PASSING VS. INFLUENCING

Tzemach Tzedek in *Or HaTorah*¹⁴ cites a dispute between *Rishonim*¹⁵ regarding the place of the *Beis Hamikdash* after being chosen, whether the place becomes **chosen** for the indwelling of the *Shechinah* (with no changes to the place itself), or whether the *Shechinah* “**illuminates** and **rests** {on the place} within the confines of physical space.” He then offers an illustration for each of these two possibilities:

¹⁰ *Maasei Melech’s* commentary on *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*.

¹¹ {An 16th century anonymously published codification of the 613 *mitzvos*.}

¹² *Sefer HaChinuch*, *mitzvah* 95.

¹³ Inferred from the *Chinuch’s* wording by *Maasei Melech* above.

¹⁴ *Or HaTorah*, “*Vayeitzei*,” p. 178a.

¹⁵ {Lit., “the early ones,” *Rishonim* were the leading Rabbis who lived between 1000-1600 C.E.}

According to the first opinion — *Rambam* (in *Moreh Nevuchim*)¹⁶ — the indwelling of the *Shechinah* in the *Beis Hamikdash* is comparable to an intellectual concept written out by hand; the **concept** does not **illuminate nor dwell** within the hand, since a hand has no relation to **intellect**. Nevertheless, {only} fingers of the hand are used to write intellectual concepts, not toes. Similarly, while the *Shechinah* dwelled in the *Beis Hamikdash* specifically, the physical space still had no relationship to the indwelling of the *Shechinah*.

However, according to the second opinion — *Ramban*¹⁷ — the indwelling of the *Shechinah* in this physical space was similar to “intellect vested in the **brain**.” Although the brain is made up of physical matter, it is still associated with intellect, and the intellect is en clothed in the brain “by way of investment and immersion.”

Seemingly, these two disputes are interrelated: According to the opinion that the place of the *Beis Hamikdash* (and the Altar) is significant (in its own right) — the indwelling of the *Shechinah* is similar to “intellect vested in the brain.” And according to the opinion that it is (not an independently significant location, but) merely “the place where **Hashem will choose**” ({its} only {significance is} having been chosen by Hashem), the indwelling of the *Shechinah* there is similar to intellect {merely} passing through fingers of the hand.

With this in mind, we must clarify: How does *Rambam*’s opinion in *Hilchos Beis Habechirah* {that the *Beis Hamikdash*’s location is precise} correspond to his opinion in *Moreh Nevuchim* {that Hashem’s Presence is only manifest through the location but doesn’t affect it}?

¹⁶ See *Moreh Nevuchim {Guide for the Perplexed}*, part 1, ch. 25.

¹⁷ See *Or HaTorah*, “*Vayetzei*,” p. 178a ff.; Tzemach Tzedek’s *Biurei HaZohar*, “*Vayetzei*,” p. 103 ff.; *Sefer HaMaamarim 5630*, p. 63 ff.; *Ramban’s Torah Commentary*, end of *parshas Pekudei*; *Shaar HaGemul* on the topic of *Gan Eden HaTachton*.

3.

STRICTLY CHOSEN

Upon closer analysis, however, we can prove that also in *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*, *Rambam* maintains (as *Sefer HaChinuch* does) that the “location is most precise” (**not** as a result of sacrifices **previously** having been offered there, but rather,) merely due to **Hashem having chosen it**:

- a) As discussed, the wording **in several places** in the Torah is “{Hashem} **will choose**” (or something similar) — a true choice can be made only when both options (the chosen option and any others) fill all the desired prerequisites (and possess all the desired features).¹⁸
- b) Our Sages have said **explicitly**, as cited above, that “the entire Land of Israel was suitable for altars.”
- c) On this basis, we can better appreciate as to why *Rambam* lists all the above-mentioned advantages in a **separate halachah** (the second *halachah* of chapter 2), while in the first *halachah*, where he cites the law that “the Altar’s location is most precise and may never be changed...,” he {only} quotes the verse “This is the Altar for the *olot* of Israel,” which was said after the place was chosen.

This is the same verse that *Rambam* quotes at the beginning of *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*:

“When the *Beis Hamikdash* was built in Jerusalem, it became forbidden... in any other place. There is no sanctuary for all generations except in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah, as it says, ‘David

¹⁸ {In other words, in order for a choice to be completely unbiased, all options need to be fully equal, otherwise it isn’t really considered a choice, since one has an advantage over the others. So if one location had certain advantages, it would not have been considered a “choice,” since that place is already more significant.}

declared: This is the House of Hashem and this is the Altar for the olos of Israel.”¹⁹

And {in the first *halachah* of chapter 2} *Rambam* also quotes another verse in *Divrei Hayamim*: “Shlomo began building the House of Hashem in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where He had appeared to his father David. He established it in David’s place, in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.”²⁰

Meaning, the reason that the “location is most precise and may never be changed...” is (**not** because of the advantages he lists in the following *halachah*, but) because “**this** is the Altar for the olos of Israel,” and “Shlomo began...” — which refers to a time after Hashem choose {the location}.

[This also explains why *Rambam* includes the verse’s conclusion “(Shlomo began...) where He had appeared to his father David. He established it in David’s place, in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.” Since *Rambam*’s point is to prove that this location is “in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah,” he seemingly could have been content to just quote, “Shlomo began building the House of Hashem in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah.” How is the conclusion of the verse — “where He had appeared to his father David. He established it in David’s place, in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite” — relevant?

But based on the above, we can explain: *Rambam* {by also quoting the conclusion of the verse} alludes here to the fact that the law “may never be changed.” “Shlomo began building the House of Hashem in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah” because this was “where **He had appeared to his father David**” — it was chosen by Hashem. Prior to this selection, the location had no special advantages over other places; it was “**in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.**”²¹

¹⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*,” ch. 1, par. 3.

²⁰ *Divrei Hayamim* II 3:1.

²¹ {Implying that it was a regular parcel of land, no different than any other location.}

This also offers an insight as to why *Rambam* called these laws “*Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*” despite the wording in the Torah that he cites immediately {at the beginning of these laws} as a proof-text, “they shall make for me a *Mikdash*,”²² and stating just prior to this {in the introduction to these laws}, “they contain six *mitzvos*... {the first being} to build a *Beis HaMikdash*.” Additionally, the laws that immediately follow *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* are entitled “*Klei HaMikdash*”²³ and *Beis HaMikdash*.”²⁴

Rambam calls the laws “*Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*” because he maintains²⁵ that the only significance of the place of the *Beis Hamikdash* is that **Hashem chose** its location.

4.

LOCATION OF MAN'S CREATION

We can go even further and say that *Rambam* alludes to this point in the second *halachah*, too, where he lists the various advantages of this location:

After *Rambam* elaborates that “it is universally accepted that the place on which David built... is the location where Avraham... and Noach built {altars}... Kayin and Hevel {offered sacrifices}, and it was there that Adam offered a sacrifice; he was created at that very spot,” *Rambam* adds: “Our Sages said,²⁶ “Man was created from the place where he would receive atonement.”

This requires clarification: Why does *Rambam* cite proof for man being “created at that very spot,” unlike the previous points for which he does not cite proof from the Sages?

²² {A sanctuary.}

²³ {Laws regarding the sanctuary's utensils.}

²⁴ {Laws regarding entering the sanctuary.}

²⁵ {As alluded to in the title *Hilchos Beis Habechirah*.}

²⁶ *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 14, par. 8.

We can answer that *Rambam* quotes the Sages not as proof (of man being “created at that very spot”). Rather, *Rambam* is alluding to the fact that all of these (advantages and) events regarding the place of the Altar described in this *halachah* do not impugn the place’s only excellency. Namely, it is “the place where Hashem will choose (future tense).” Its superiority is only attributable to Hashem choosing it **later on**, as we will explain.

5.

PROPHETIC CHOICE

Adam and the others offered their sacrifices specifically in that location, i.e., their reason for selecting that location, was because they knew prophetically that this would be “the place where Hashem will choose” (**in the future**). In other words, Hashem chose that place not as a result of the sacrifices that were previously offered there (making the place a “virtuous location”), but **the opposite**: They offered sacrifices in that particular location because (of their prophetic knowledge that) Hashem would choose that place {in the future}.

However, this can really only be said regarding the sacrifices that were offered there. But man being “**created** at that very spot” is an **act of Hashem**. Even if we were to say that man being “created at that very spot” was based on Hashem’s knowledge that in the future, He would choose that location, nonetheless, that means that Hashem’s choice was already **executed** (the creation of man), consequently, **precluding it from being** any other way.²⁷

[This is especially so, based on the well-known explanation of the phrase,²⁸ “He does not **say** who will be righteous and wicked.”²⁹ Meaning, if Divine knowledge would be expressed through **speech**, man would then be

²⁷ {Once again making all other places unequal.}

²⁸ *Tanya*, ch. 1; see *Niddah* 16b.

²⁹ {A reference to man’s freedom of choice.}

compelled to behave according to Divine knowledge;³⁰ how much more so in our case, had Hashem's knowledge been expressed in a **Divine action.**]

Rambam therefore adds, “As our Sages said, “Man was created from the place **where he would receive atonement.**” Man was “created at that very spot” (unlike the previous events, such as the sacrifices that had been offered, etc., in that location because it would be “the place where Hashem will choose” in the future, but rather) because that is “**the place where he would receive atonement**” — the place where **Adam chose** to offer his sacrifice.

6.

NOT ALL SELECTIONS ARE PERMANENT

One point still remains unclear: Since also according to *Rambam*, the reason the “location is most precise” is (not because of the sacrifices, etc., offered there, but) because Hashem chose it, why was it necessary for *Rambam* to include in *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* an entire passage (in the second *halachah*) saying, “that is where Avraham built... Noach... created from the place where he would receive atonement”?

By including this passage, *Rambam* alludes to the reason that the site of the Altar “may never be changed.”

While true that it is “the place where Hashem will choose,” this verse is not (conclusive) proof that the placement of the *Beis Hamikdash* cannot change.

We find that Hashem chose King David and his sons after him — “the monarchy belongs to him and to his male descendents **forever**”³¹ — yet the law (according to *Rambam's* ruling) is that “if a prophet appoints a king from any other tribe of Israel... he is considered a king and all of the

³⁰ {Thus losing his ability to choose.}

³¹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 1, par. 7.

mitzvos associated with the monarchy apply to him....”³² (The only difference {between King David’s monarchy and a king from another tribe} is that “monarchy will eventually cease from his descendents.”)³³

With this in mind, we can ask regarding the location of the *Beis Hamikdash* — how do we know that all other places are **excluded**? This question is especially relevant regarding {the *Mishkan* in} Shiloh, which was also considered a place that was “**chosen** by Hashem,”³⁴ and the *Mishkan* indeed stood there for 369 years. This seemingly indicates that the verse, “**this** is Hashem’s house... **this** is the Altar...,” does not mean {they are} actually {the only possible locations}. The same applies to Mount Sinai, where Moshe erected the *Mishkan* for the first time, as *Rambam* clarifies in chapter 1 {that it was not permanent, despite wording implying otherwise}.

And {this could have been the case} here, too, which is why *Rambam* cites proof that in **this** instance, the selection was to the exclusion of all other locations, which is why Adam and the others built their altars at **this** spot: If Hashem’s selection {of this spot} had not excluded other locations, why did they specifically offer their sacrifices only at this particular location, on Mount Moriah?

Thus, we can conclude that by Hashem’s choosing this place, all other locations became excluded; therefore, sacrifices (in a place significant in the future) could only be offered in the “very precise” location, on Mount Moriah.

³² Ibid., ch. 1, par. 9.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Sifrei*, “*Re’eh*,” 14:25; “*Ki Savo*,” 26:2, et al.

7.

LIMITED HOLINESS

On a deeper level we can clarify this by prefacing with a past discussion³⁵ regarding the two concepts of “choosing” and “holiness” [which, as mentioned regarding the *Beis Hamikdash*, *Rambam* uses both descriptions: “*Hilchos Beis **Habechirah***” and “*Hilchos Klei **Hamikdash***,” “*Hilchos Beis **Hamikdash***,” and more] — that each has an advantage over the other:

Referring to something as “holy” indicates that the holiness has permeated it, and so the **object** is holy. However, since the holiness is tied to the object, which is finite, the holiness is also limited (subject to the object’s limitations). And the same applies to {physical} location.

Conversely, “choosing” is attributed (not to what is chosen, but rather) it) to the **chooser**, it being **his** choice. In the context of our discussion — “the place where Hashem will choose”: When Hashem chooses a location, it gains an advantage (and {a level of} holiness) that is infinite (since Hashem is infinite). At the same time, since its advantage and holiness are attributable to the One who chose it, it is not the personal accomplishment³⁶ of the person {who benefits from this unbounded holiness}; his own *avodah* is still required in order for the holiness {of this place} to completely permeate him.

This is what *Rambam* clarifies in these two *halachos* regarding the Altar’s location:

The first *halachah*, where *Rambam* says that “the Altar’s location is most precise and it may **never** be changed” — implying that the location is **eternal** (i.e., infinite) — refers to a dimension that cannot be attained by a person (or by the location {itself}); rather, it requires **Hashem’s choice**

³⁵ *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 18, p. 407.

³⁶ {“*Kav shelo*,” lit., “his own *kav*” (a volumetric measurement); a talmudic aphorism indicating that a person prefers a lesser quantity of his own produce rather than a larger quantity produced by someone else.}

from a level beyond measure and limitation. *Rambam* therefore quotes a verse {that was said} after the place was chosen, “This is the Altar for the *olot* of Israel.”

Then, in the following *halachah*, *Rambam* adds that (even prior to Hashem choosing) the location Hashem chose *did* contain a (limited) form of **holiness**, resulting from the sacrifices that Adam and the others offered there, and from it being the location of mankind’s creation.

Consequently, this location in fact contains **both** advantages.

This also resolves the contradiction between *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* and *Moreh Nevuchim*: From *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* we infer that the location of the *Beis Hamikdash* (and of the Altar) is a “significant place for the indwelling of the *Shechinah*,” refers only to its **limited** holiness (that which can be achieved through human action). In contrast, regarding **Hashem’s choice**, *Rambam* says (in *Moreh Nevuchim*) that physical location is not a “receptacle,” so holiness only “passes through” it, but does not **rest on** it nor **enclath** itself within it.

[*Ramban*, on the other hand, maintains that due to Hashem’s omnipotence, especially after having chosen {the location}, this unbounded holiness can also become **enclathed** in the {physical} location.]

8.

MAKING THE FINITE INFINITE

We can, however, add (even according to *Rambam*) that the limited holiness associated with the location {of the Temple and Altar} itself is also connected to Hashem’s choice.

After Avraham and the others built altars and offered sacrifices knowing (through their prophetic vision that) this spot would become “the place where Hashem will choose” (as discussed above in section 5), their

action (which had infused the **place with** a limited degree of holiness, as discussed) also became intertwined with Hashem's choice. In light of the above, we can better appreciate Avraham's prayer and its fulfillment— that “as it is said this day” — every day, **eternally** — “On the mountain, Hashem will be seen.”³⁷

Based on talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Matos-Masei* and
Devarim, 5740 (1980)

³⁷ *Bereishis* 22:14.