

A View From the Altar

Parashat Yitro - Rav Benjy Myers

This week's *parasha* describes for us in vivid details the greatest Divine revelation of all time. The shofar was sounding, and getting louder and louder. Thunder reverberated and lightning flashed. The people had prepared themselves for three days in eager anticipation of the event. The mountain itself was imbued with a holiness that necessitated its being bordered lest man or animal attempt to go up the mountain and die. Smoke encompassed the mountain and both mountain and people quaked in awe. And then came the famous words, heard by all people throughout all generations: "I am the Lord!"

What followed was a list of commandments that commentators throughout the ages have seen as the embodiment of all other mitzvot. Wow.

Prior to this revelation, God had told the Israelites that they would be a *mamlechet kohanim*. Literally this means a kingdom of priests. However, *kohanim* in this instance is not to be understood in the usual sense. Rather, it means a person who is in the service of a Higher Being. Each and every member of the Jewish people should see himself and herself as a servant of God.

Such incredible heights! I am a servant of God. He wants me!

If all this is true, the anticlimax is almost as great if not greater than the climax. Immediately after the Ten Commandments are given, and the people are literally moved in fear and trepidation, the Torah lists some laws relevant to the construction and use of an altar:

And when you make for Me an altar of stones, you shall not build them of hewn stones, lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it. And you shall not ascend with steps upon My altar, so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it.' " (Shmot 20:22-23).



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What is the connection between the heights of revelation to the architecture, construction and operation of an altar? This is not even the altar used in the Mishkan, rather, the instructions are relevant to anyone who would like to build their own altar. Could the Torah not find anything else with which to let us down from the pinnacle of Divine and human interaction? If the Torah insists on giving us details on DIY projects, could it not instead have explained the laws of the Mishkan - God's earthly abode?

In two comments, Rashi offers us an insight into the meaning of these commands:

Thus you have learned that if you wield iron upon it, you have desecrated it, for the altar was created to lengthen man's days, and iron was created to shorten man's days. It is improper that the "lengthener" be wielded over the "shortener" (v. 22).

Because due to the steps, you must widen your stride, although it would not be an actual exposure of nakedness...you behave toward them in a humiliating manner (v. 23).

Our behavior in relation to earth and stones, according to Rashi, could lead to the humiliation of those stones. Really? Surely stones are inanimate objects! How could they possibly be offended? Does this now mean that we should avoid walking on earth and rocks in case we are too heavy and cause the ground below us to call out in pain?

Rather, Rashi In both instances continues to explain that it is a *kal vachomer* [*a fortiori*]. If we run the risk of causing suffering to stones and earth, how much more so should we be careful in our behavior toward other people!

The Torah realizes that after the Revelation, the connection between man and God is immense. God wants me! Only me! No one else matters. After all, I am His *kohen*, His servant. I am going to build an altar to Him and offer up a plethora of burnt offerings and peace offerings. No one else matters.



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Therefore, while describing in detail how to build the altar, the Torah is also teaching us that even in this state of heightened connection to God, and maybe especially because of this heightened state, we must be exceedingly careful in our approach to those around us - relatives and friends alike. Our service of God should reflect our treatment of man. Do we do it wholeheartedly? We surely love God and He surely loves us, but do we truly love our spouses, children, parents, friends and neighbors as we love ourselves?



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