

RESPECTED STONES AND OTHERS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

When you make an altar of stones for me, do not build them of hewn stones. For you have raised your sword over it and desecrated it. Do not ascend to my altar with steps, so that your nakedness will not be uncovered on it.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: The Mechilta offers a number of insights into our pesukim, all of which treat the stones of the altar and ramp as if they were sentient beings. Because the altar lengthens man's days by lifting from him his burden of sin, it is inappropriate to use iron implements on its stones. Iron weapons commonly abbreviate men's lives; as a symbol, they grate on the life-affirmation of the altar.

The Mechilta continues with a different perspective. The stones of the altar, which do not think or feel, or react, create peace between man and G-d. Nonetheless, they are spared the sight of a sword poised over them. All the more so will those who create peace between feuding families, or sparring husbands and wives, be spared the scourge of the sword - and even its sight.

More: we treat unfeeling, uncomprehending stones with dignity since we make use of them. We approach the altar through a ramp, rather than steps. This allows for taking smaller strides, ensuring that those who walk upon the stones do not expose themselves degradingly to them.

While all these thoughts are redolent with profound sensitivity, the fact remains that stones do not feel and do not comprehend. Rather than view the laws of these pesukim as indications of how we are to act towards human beings, wouldn't it make more sense to see them simply as reflections of the holiness of the site? In other words, perhaps the Torah insists that metal implements and undignified strides ought to be banished from the Temple mount because of its enormous kedushah, and not because of any lesson about how we are supposed to treat people.

Why did Chazal approach the pesukim differently from what we would have expected? Because they understood that the alternative suggestion simply doesn't work. If these laws were a function of the holiness of the Temple, they should apply throughout the Temple site. The Mechilta itself observes that this is not true. The prohibition of using hewn stones applies to the outer altar - but not in the Heichal and not in the even holier Kodesh Kodoshim. The kohen is forbidden to take long strides on the approach to the top of the altar - but, again, not in the Heichal and Kodesh Kodoshim.

Chazal therefore understood that the prohibitions were specific to the altar itself, because of its

special roles in extending Man's life, and in building peace between people. Since the altar was so vital to human interests, since it offered people so much benefit, it is accorded a greater measure of respect. The lesson to be derived is now quite obvious. If we are to respect mere objects because of their usefulness to humankind, all the more so must we show the utmost respect to humans themselves.

The Torah hints at this in speaking of "my altar" rather than "the altar." A midrash² relates that the earth that Hashem scooped up with which to create Adam came from the place of the future mizbeach in Yerushalayim. This creates an identity between the altar and Man himself. "My altar" thus becomes a substitute for Man; the altar of stones - filled with earth - is none other than Man. He is G-d's altar, because Man is created in His image. Treating Man disparagingly is a slight against Hashem's honor. Even when there is no willful attempt to disgrace Man, Hashem is dishonored when we are placed people - His altar - on a high enough pedestal. Thus, the Torah warns against even the casual and unintended disrespect in exposing the approach to the altar to something unseemly, and therefore demands a ramp rather than steps.

Moreover, the kohanim approach the altar with the full weight of the avodah upon them. This Divine service is performed with great concentration, intensity and focus. We could easily anticipate that in the fervor to perform this great mitzvah, other areas of concern fall out of the range of the kohen's vision. In the rush to perform a mitzvah, it is too easy to run over bystanders. Precisely for this reason, the Torah demands that in the enthusiasm of mitzvah performance we need to be mindful of the respect we owe to the Tzelem Elokim.

We should take notice of one more layer of meaning in these pesukim. The very stones whose "honor" we respect are not ordinary stones. They were set into place for a function. They form a walkway; they are there to be walked upon! We might see them as beyond respect, given this lowly function.

The Torah sees things differently. Be it as it may, the stones play an important role in serving the needs of Man, and therefore should not be taken for granted. This explains the connection between our pesukim and the beginning of next week's parshah. The servant is also designated for labor, including menial labor. Yet the Torah cautions that his dignity must be scrupulously preserved. The Torah provides that he be treated the same way as the master himself in many regards. There is ordinarily a limit to the length of his service. He should not be worked too hard, like a slave.³

Here again, the Torah teaches that if you take HKBH seriously, you have to take the tzelem Elokim seriously as well.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Shemos 20:22-23
2. Bereishis Rabbah 14:8, cited by Rashi Bereishis 2:7

3. Vayikra 25:39
