

# OUT OF ONE, MANY

by Nechama Stampler

## Out of One, Many <sup>1</sup>

*Hashem chanced upon Bilam and he said to Him, "I have arranged the seven altars and brought up a bull and a ram on each."*

Rashi: The verse does not say "I arranged seven altars." Rather, the Hebrew places a definite article in front of the word "altars." It speaks of seven of "the" altars, as of some well-known group of altars. Bilam said to Hashem, "The forefathers of these Jews built seven altars before You. I have prepared altars equivalent to all of them combined." Avraham built four; Yitzchok built one; Yaakov built two.

Gur Aryeh: What was Bilam thinking? Certainly he was not shallow enough to believe that there was any significance at all in a larger number of mizbechos. Anyone can erect multiple altars.

Know that we all relate to HKBH in different ways. Everything we have, we receive from Him. We relate to Him according to the aspects of Him through which He has given to us. Because we all receive differently, we all in effect relate to Him differently.

The Avos, however, built a total of seven altars, because seven is a number that implies the totality of all directions. "Seven times will the tzadik fall and rise up again." <sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the tzadik rebounds up to seven times. Rather, it means that he can fail in every which way, and still pull himself back up. The seven altars imply that the Avos related to Hashem in every aspect, in every one of His midos.

We ordinarily stress the oneness of Klal Yisrael in every manner. We might think that there is therefore a single midah that is the exclusive point of contact between Hashem and His people. This is not so. This unique, singular people possesses all the spiritual gifts available. Within its oneness lies the totality of everything. The Avos, as a group representing the entirety of the Jewish people, possessed all that was worthwhile.

We stress that they possessed everything between them, not individually. The connection, commonality and bond between the Avos turned multiple individuals into a single unit. This unity was appropriate for those who would father a single nation whose mission statement would be the service of the One G-d. Seen from our human vantage point, Hashem shows both Oneness and multiplicity. In His essence, He is One; thereby He also encompasses everything. All the difference and diversity we observe are all within Him. Another way of expressing this is that He is One in

actuality, but many in His potential. Within that One is the ability to generate many/all things and appear in many different ways.

The Avos mirrored this. They were also one - a single unit - in essence, but possessed between them the many different attributes. The seven altars, representing the totality of attributes, thus belonged to them only as a group, not individually.

The division of the seven between them is intriguing. Each one of the Avos built a number of mizbechos corresponding to his special midah.

Yitzchok specialized in din, judgment. The law is monolithic. It does not favor one party or one group. It does not make situational exceptions. It is predictable and unwavering. The number that best represents this package of attributes and values is one. "One" calls to mind a single point, not leaning to any one side. Yitzchok built a single, solitary altar.

Yaakov built two. He clung to the midah of rachamim, of compassion. Rachamim is a midpoint, as it were, between the single, unflinching din and chesed, which is far more embracing. Unlike din, rachamim knows multiple applications. Each is a refraction of rachamim, but shown to very different recipients. Rachamim can be applied to both the tzadik and the evildoer. We might identify far more with the tzadik, but when we witness someone in pain, we react with compassion even towards those we do not like. While din makes equal sense applied to the tzadik and the rasha, the assistance we provide to someone in need does not make equal sense. Yet, we provide it anyway.

Avraham doubled that flexibility. As the one who personified chesed, he was able to ramify his midah in even more directions. While rachamim is only appropriate to someone needy and in pain, chesed can be shown to those who need, and those who don't; in each case, to the tzadik and to the rasha alike. There are a total of four combinations, corresponding to the number of mizbechos that Avraham built.

Bilam apparently convinced himself that he could outdo the Avos. He could relate through his seven altars to the totality of aspects Hashem shows to Man. He missed the crucial point (as he missed so many other points) that relating to those aspects comes about specifically through a unity that somehow mirrors Hashem's oneness. Such a relating to the One was unknown to him.

Sources:

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 23:4; Nesiv HaAvodah chap. 1; Gevuros Hashem chap. 69*
  2. *Mishlei 24:16*
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