

AN ALTAR IN ERETZ YISRAEL

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Yisro

An Altar in Eretz Yisrael

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Sponsored by Irving and Arline Katz on the yahrzeits of her mother Fradel bat Yaakov Shulim a"h (19 Shevat) and his father Chaim Eliezer ben Avigdor Moshe Hakohen a"h (21 Shevat)

The Marwick family in memory of Samuel and Reba Sklaroff a"h

The Edeson and Stern families on the yahrzeit of Esther's mother, Hannah Salisbury

Today's Learning:

Tanach: Yirmiyah 11-12

Mishnah: Terumot 7:7-8:1

Halachah: O.C. 613:7-9

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Zevachim 73

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Orlah 13

In the Aseret Ha'dibrot in this week's parashah (Shmot 20:6), Hashem is described as one "Who shows kindness for thousands [of generations] to those who love Me and observe My commandments." The midrash Mechilta states: Rabbi Natan says, "Those who love Me and observe My commandments"--This refers to Jews who live in Eretz Yisrael and give their lives for the mitzvot. [For example, when one Jew would see another Jew being taken out to be executed, he would ask him:] 'Why are you being taken to be killed?' [The second Jew would answer:] Because I circumcised my son as a Jew.' 'Why are you being taken to be burned?' 'Because I studied Torah.' 'Why are you being taken to be crucified?' 'Because I ate matzah.' 'Why are you being flogged?' 'Because I lifted a lulav.' Regarding this we read (Zechariah 13:6), 'If someone will say to him, "What are these scars between your arms?" He will say, "It is from when I was beaten in the house of those who loved me".' These beatings caused me to be beloved to my Father in Heaven." [Until here from the midrash]

This midrash requires explanation: Is it only in Eretz Yisrael that Jews have died for observing mitzvot? Obviously that is not the case. R' Avraham Abele Gombiner z"l (1634-1682; Poland; best known for his influential halachic work Magen Avraham) explains: When a Jew is persecuted in one of the lands of the Diaspora, he is obligated to flee to another land to save his life. Only in Eretz Yisrael is it justifiable to stay put despite any danger to one's life. Thus, those who died for their faith in Eretz Yisrael are praiseworthy, while those who died in the diaspora are not to be lauded if they could have escaped. (Zayit Ra'anan)

R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (1817-1893; rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Volozhin, Russia; known as the Netziv) comments on this midrash: One who wants to enhance his love for Hashem will live in Eretz Yisrael, which is conducive to developing that trait. (Birkat Ha'Netziv)

"Moshe would speak and G-d would respond to him with a voice." (19:19)

R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (Rambam; 1135-1204) writes: It appears to me that, at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael did not experience all that Moshe experienced. That is why the Aseret Ha'dibrot are expressed in the singular form (i.e., because Hashem spoke to Moshe alone). Then, Moshe went down from the mountain and reported on what he had heard. This, writes Rambam, is alluded to in our verse and also in the verse (19:9), "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Behold! I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you'," which implies that only Moshe heard Hashem's words, while Bnei Yisrael heard powerful sounds (but no words). This, writes Rambam, seems to be the straightforward reading of the Torah as well as the view of the majority of our Sages.

Nevertheless, Rambam adds, there are some midrashim, as well as the Gemara (Makkot 24a), that state that the first two commandments were heard by Bnei Yisrael directly from the "mouth" of G-d. The reason is that these first two commandments--the existence of G-d and the fact that He is One--need to be experienced, not known second-hand. Thus the Torah says (Devarim 4:35), "You have been shown in order to know that Hashem, He is the Elokim! There is none beside Him." The other commandments do not need to be grasped intellectually; it is sufficient for man to receive them through tradition. (Moreh Nevochim II ch.33)

Rabbeinu Nissim z"l (the Ran; Spain; 1290-1380) disagrees with Rambam's explanation of the distinction between the first two commandments and the remaining commandments. Instead, he explains: Bnei Yisrael were not on a level to experience prophecy like Moshe's. Nevertheless, they needed to hear some of what Moshe heard in order to confirm the legitimacy of Moshe's teachings. Why were the first two commandments singled out for this purpose? Because they are foundations of our faith. (Derashot Ha'Ran: Ha'drush Ha'chamishi - Nusach Bet)

R' Asher ben Avraham ibn Crescas z"l (12th century; Provence, France) argues with Rambam on

another point, based on the verse (20:16), "They said to Moshe, 'You speak to us and we shall hear; let G-d not speak to us lest we die'." This verse does not appear until after the Aseret Ha'dibrot. Likewise we read (Devarim 5:19), "These words Hashem spoke to your entire congregation on the mountain, from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick cloud -- a great voice, never to be repeated -- and He inscribed them on two stone Tablets and gave them to me." The straightforward reading of these verses indicates that Bnei Yisrael heard all of the Aseret Ha'dibrot directly from Hashem. It was only the remainder of the Torah that they heard from Moshe and not from Hashem. (Be'ur Al Moreh Nevochim)

"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be lengthened upon the land that Hashem, your Elokim, gives you." (20:12)

R' Eliyahu Capsali z"l (rabbi of Candia, Crete; died 1555) notes that this commandment, like the four before it, contains Hashem's Name. In contrast, the five commandments after this one do not contain Hashem's Name. He explains:

The second set of five commandments ("Do not murder," "Do not steal," etc.) are entirely interpersonal matters. The first five commandments, on the other hand--including "Honor your father and your mother"--involve our relationship with G-d.

What is the connection between honoring our parents and our relationship with Hashem? We read (Devarim 5:16), "Honor your father and your mother, as Hashem, your Elokim, has commanded you." This implies that He commanded this previously. Where? R' Capsali explains: The prior commandment that is alluded to here is "I am Hashem, your Elokim, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery." Our obligations toward G-d, as the One Who has done immeasurable kindness for us, teach us our obligations to our parents as well.

For example, we read (Devarim 6:5), "You shall love Hashem, your Elokim, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources." This teaches that one must love Hashem even if He takes away all of one's money. Similarly, the Gemara (Kiddushin 32a) teaches that one must honor even a parent who takes the son's wallet and throws it into the sea. [However, whether one must spend his own money on the mitzvah of honoring parents is disputed in the Gemara and among halachic authorities.]

R' Capsali adds: The relationship between honoring parents and honoring Hashem is a two-way street. Not only do we learn from honoring Hashem how to honor parents, but one who honors his parents and is in awe of them will honor and feel awe of G-d as well. On the other hand, one who does not honor or feel awe of his parents will not practice those traits toward Hashem either. (Me'ah She'arim p.39)

Netziv (see above) writes: Our verse implies that long life as a reward for honoring parents is given only in Eretz Yisrael. Can this be true? There is another mitzvah for which the reward is long life -- shiluach ha'kain / sending away a mother bird before taking her offspring. Regarding that mitzvah, the Torah says (Devarim 22:7), "It will be good for you and will prolong your days." Shiluach ha'kain is a far easier mitzvah than honoring parents, and the reward for that mitzvah is not limited to those living in Eretz Yisrael!

In fact, Netziv explains, those who honor their parents are rewarded in the diaspora no differently than in Eretz Yisrael. The reference in our verse to "the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you" is teaching a different lesson. R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270) writes that although there is a special category of mitzvot that apply only in Eretz Yisrael, primarily agricultural mitzvot, all mitzvot have a different spiritual quality when performed in the Holy Land. Our verse, writes Netziv, is teaching that this is true as well of the mitzvah of honoring one's parents. We might have thought that Ramban's principle applies only to mitzvot bain adam la'Makom / man's obligations to G-d, but not to mitzvot bain adam la'chavero / man's obligations to other people, such as one's parents. Therefore, our verse teaches that even the latter type of mitzvah is more special if performed in Eretz Yisrael. (Ha'emek Davar)

An Altar in Eretz Yisrael

"An altar of earth you shall make for Me . . . And, if you make an altar of stones for Me, do not build them hewn, for you will have raised your sword over it and desecrated it." (20:21-22)

R' Moshe Odes shlita (rabbi of Tzofim, Israel) notes that Rambam z"l interpreted these verses differently on different occasions. In Moreh Nevochim (part III, ch.45) Rambam writes: Preferably, the altar should be made of earth. If it becomes necessary to make the altar of stones, it should not be made of hewn stones."

However, in his halachic code, Mishneh Torah (Hil. Bet Ha'bechirah 1:13), Rambam writes: The altar may be made only of stones. As for that which the Torah wrote, "An altar of earth you shall make for Me," this teaches that it should be connected to the earth.

R' Odes writes: The resolution to these contradictory statements may be found in a third work by Rambam, his Sefer Ha'mitzvot. There Rambam writes: That which it says, "An altar of earth you shall make for Me"-- this means that the altar should be connected to the earth, not portable, as the altar was in the desert. As the midrash Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael states regarding this verse, "When you enter the Land, make Me an altar connected to the ground." It emerges, R' Odes explains, that the mitzvah to make a stone altar applies only to an altar in Eretz Yisrael. Before Bnei Yisrael entered the Land, an altar of earth was preferred.

R' Odes notes that R' Avraham ibn Ezra z"l (11th century) expresses this same idea very succinctly. He

interprets our verses: For now, make an altar of earth, but if you ever merit to enter the land, then make a stone altar. (B'levavi Mishkan Evneh p. 506)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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