

YISRO (EXODUS 18:1-20:23)

The Sword and the Stone

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

How do you build an altar? Should it be decorated? Should it be fancy? After all, there is a concept called "*Hiddur Mitzvah* – Beautifying a Mitzvah." The Talmud says that one should have a beautiful Torah Scroll, written with a beautiful pen, etc. People buy silver Chanukah Menorahs and olive wood Esrog boxes. People spend hundreds of dollars for handmade, intricately decorated Mezuzah cases. We are supposed to demonstrate our love for G-d's Commandments by investing them with beauty and splendor.

Based on the above, it would seem that we should follow the same procedure in building the furniture and vessels for G-d's House. Indeed, we learn that the vessels in the Temple were made from the finest silver, gold, and copper. No expense was spared to make the Temple into a place of physical beauty. Certainly the Altar, which was the center of activity in the Temple, should be a work of art and creativity. It should have elaborate decorations engraved on it.

G-d, however, had other ideas.

In the desert, a temporary, portable Altar was to be used: *Make an Altar of earth for Me. You can offer your burnt offerings, your peace offerings, your sheep, and your cattle on it . . . I will come to you and bless you.* (Exodus, 20:21) The Altar was to be the special, holy place where Israel and G-d became close through the offerings to be brought there. (For a discussion of sacrifices, see "Where's the Beef?")

That was the temporary Altar in the desert. In Jerusalem: *When you will make a stone altar for Me, do not make it out of cut stone . . .* (Ibid, v. 22) The Torah is telling us that we should take plain, unfinished stones and pile them up to make an Altar. Nothing fancy. No smooth granite slabs, and no ornate, carved marble. Just plain, uncut, generic rocks. Why? What's wrong with a little beauty to accompany our offerings to G-d?

Let us read the rest of the verse: *... because your sword will be lifted against it, and you will defile it.*

By taking a sharp metal instrument (a chisel) and chipping away pieces of rock, you are figuratively "*lifting a sword against*" the Altar. The Altar, says the Talmud, (Midos 3:4) was created to lengthen the life of Man, while iron was created to shorten the life of man. It is not appropriate for that which shortens life to be placed over that which lengthens life.

Rashi gives a second explanation: The Altar brings peace between Israel and their Father in Heaven. That which cuts and injures should not come in contact with it.

This prohibition goes further than banning the cutting of stone for the Altar. It forbids any contact at all with iron. The Altar was plastered twice a year; the plaster had to be applied with a nonmetallic applicator. If a piece of iron so much as TOUCHED the Altar, it invalidated the Altar, and the stone needed to be replaced.

Isn't this a bit much? If you want to establish a symbolic link between a chisel cutting a stone and a sword cutting a person, that is understandable. But a piece of iron TOUCHING the Altar?! If a carpenter was doing repairs in the Temple, and his hammer accidentally brushed against the side of the Altar, why should the stones need to be replaced?

The Torah is telling us that there are certain absolutes in life. The Altar is a life-lengthener. Iron is a life shortener. It is true that people have died in the service of G-d. Lives have been saved and improved with the use of iron tools. But that does not change the underlying identification of what the Altar is about, and what iron is.

Let me share with you two similar examples. King David devoted his life to the service of G-d. He wanted nothing more than to build the Temple in Jerusalem. However, this was not to be. G-d told David that since he was a warrior, he would not be permitted to build G-d's House of Peace. That was an assignment that would be left to his son Solomon to complete.

Now David was more than a warrior. True, his rise to prominence began with his killing of Goliath. Yes, David knew how to use a sword. But King David was much more than a warrior. He was a man deeply devoted to his Creator. Only a man whose spirit was infused with G-dliness could have composed the Psalms that he wrote. Everyone is familiar with the 23rd Psalm: ... *G-d is my Shepherd, I shall not want* . . . The problem is that they usually skip the beginning: *A SONG OF DAVID; G-d is my Shepherd* . . . King David was a holy prophet who lived only to fulfill G-d's word. Yet, he was a warrior. It would be improper for him to build the Temple.

The Temple was administered by the descendants of Aaron. The *Kohanim* -- *Priests* conducted the various aspects of the Temple Service. One of their most important responsibilities, a task that continues today, is that of blessing the People of Israel. Although the Temple currently lies in ruins, the Temple Priests still stand in front of the congregation with outstretched hands and recite: "*May G-d bless you and keep you; may G-d shine His face upon you and grant you grace; may G-d direct His face toward you and grant you peace.*" (Numbers, 6:24-26)

It's relatively easy to become a Priest. The son of a *Kohain* is a *Kohain*. REMAINING a Priest is a bit more challenging. There are things that can disqualify a *Kohain*. One of the disqualifiers is having killed someone. If a *Kohain* kills another person, he can no longer conduct the Temple Service. It could be an accident. It could be in self-defense. It doesn't matter. It is not appropriate for a killer to raise his hands toward the People to bless them with peace when those hands are stained with human blood.

A person cannot compartmentalize his life. The old idea of "being a German outside and a Jew at home" doesn't work. There is nothing that we do in life that doesn't affect us. As devoted as King David was to G-d, as sublime and inspiring as his Psalms were, there was no getting away from the fact that a major part of his "career" involved fighting wars. Good wars. Just wars. It didn't matter that David HAD TO fight those wars. It ingrained in him a negative side that disqualified him from building the Temple.

Yes, iron can do many constructive things. It builds homes and, in trace amounts, even keeps us healthy! But the defining purpose of iron is as an instrument of war. War is sometimes appropriate. But war is war. It is, at best, a necessary evil. Something that is used for evil cannot be used in the construction of the Altar, which is built as an instrument of Peace.

The mouth with which we speak is the mouth with which we pray. Shouldn't we make sure that the words that come out of our mouths are words that don't defile them? The hands with which we work are the hands with which we give charity. Shouldn't we see to it that the work we do is done with integrity and honesty?

Eyes with which we see the world are the eyes with which we read prayers and words of Torah . . .

Maybe it's time to finally throw out the TV!!! (BEFORE the Super Bowl commercials!)

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz