

Parashat Yitro 5776, 2016

*Steps in the Right Direction*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The final verses of our *parasha* focus upon the *mitzvah* of building a stone altar for the purpose of bringing *korbanot* (offerings) in the service of Hashem:

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. (*Sefer Shemot* 20:22-23, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The first *pasuk* (verse) contains the prohibition of using metal-hewed stones to build the *mizbeach* (altar), since metal symbolically represents war and destruction – the polar opposites of the altar’s purpose. The second verse forbids the use of steps leading to the *mizbeach*, so that the *Kohanim*’s “nakedness shall not be exposed upon it” when they ascend to perform the *avodah* (service). Rashi (1040-1105), based upon the *Mechilta*, clarifies the halachically acceptable mode of the *mizbeach*’s construction: “**And you shall not ascend with steps**: When you build a ramp for the altar, do not make it with steps, *eschalons* in Old French, but it must be smooth and slanting.”

There is a logical problem with the phrase, “so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it,” however, that must be addressed. In point of fact, based upon *Sefer Shemot* 28:42, this issue could never arise: “And make for them linen pants to cover the flesh of

[their] nakedness; they shall reach from the waist down to the thighs.” In other words, all the *Kohanim* wore linen undergarments beneath their mandated priestly clothes in order to guarantee that they would remain covered at all times while serving in the *Mishkan* and the *Beit Hamikdash*. If that is the case, why does the Torah stipulate, “And you shall not ascend with steps upon My altar, so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it?” Rashi, once again based upon the *Mechilta*, formulates this issue in the following fashion:

**So that your nakedness shall not be exposed:** Because due to the steps, you must widen your stride, although it would not be an actual exposure of nakedness, for it is written: “And make them linen pants.” Nevertheless, widening the strides is close to exposing the nakedness [of the one ascending the steps], and you behave toward them [the stones] in a humiliating manner. (Underlining my own)

On a certain level, Rashi’s observation is nothing less than amazing, and forces us to ask, “How sensitive must we be, as a nation and as individuals, to the world and everything therein?” Sensitive enough, it appears, that we are forbidden from “embarrassing” even the stones that are associated with the *mizbeach*! Upon due reflection, we instinctively feel that Rashi’s gloss contains a crucial life lesson that is waiting to be revealed. As always, the most renowned of all Torah commentators does not disappoint:

Now these matters are a *kal vachomer* [*a fortiori*] form of reasoning. This means that if in regard to the stones that have no intelligence to object to their humiliation, the Torah nonetheless stated ... that you shall not behave toward them in a humiliating manner, all the more so in the case of your friend, who is [created] in the likeness of your Creator and who does object to being humiliated, [is it forbidden to behave toward him in a humiliating and deprecatory manner]. (Emendations and underlining my own)

By what star, then, should we set our moral compass so that we avoid the deep pitfalls of negative and embarrassing behavior toward our fellow man? I believe an answer to this “questions of questions” was formulated long ago in the thought of the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204):

It is a positive Rabbinic Commandment to visit the sick, to comfort the mourners, to “bring out” (*l’hotzi*) the deceased, to provide for the needs of the bride, and to escort guests. [In addition, one] must involve himself in all aspects of the burial and carry the deceased on his shoulder, walk before him, eulogize him, dig his grave, and bury him. So, too, [one is obligated] to rejoice with the bride and groom, and to provide for all their needs [at the festive meal.] All of the aforementioned are in the category of physically demonstrated acts of kindness (*gemilut chasadim she’b’gufo*) and, as such, have no upward limit. Even though all of these *mitzvot* are Rabbinic in nature, they are in the category of “...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (“*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocho*”) ...” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Aveilut 14:1*)

*V’ahavta l’reiecha kamocho* thereby emerges, in Judaism in general and for the Rambam in particular, as the key to positive, sensitive and caring treatment of all mankind. Indeed, if we dedicate our lives to the pursuit of this *mitzvah*, we will be well along the path forged by *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) so long ago: “Distance yourself from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.” (*Sefer Tehillim 34:15*, with my emendations) With Hashem’s blessing and our fervent desire, may this be so. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.