

Parashat Yitro 5771, 2011:

The Greatness of Shalom

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The second-to-last *pasuk* (verse) of our *parasha* contains the prohibition of constructing an altar from carved-out stones: “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.” (*Sefer Shemot* 20:22, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

There are two other verses found in *Sefer Devarim* that are somewhat parallel to our *pasuk*:

And there, you shall build an altar to the L-rd, your G-d, an altar of stones. You shall not wield any iron upon them. You shall build the altar of the L-rd, your G-d, out of whole stones. And on it, you shall offer up burnt offerings to the L-rd, your G-d. (27:5-6)

A simple reading of these three *pasukim* (verses) reveals two essential details regarding the stone altar:

1. The stones used in the building of the altar must be whole and not hewn.
2. Iron utensils, such as a sword-like instrument of any kind, were proscribed in the quarrying process. Moreover, their use would desecrate the altar and render it ritually unfit as a platform upon which to offer *korbanot* (sacrifices).

The Mishnaic period halachic Midrash to *Sefer Shemot* entitled, “*Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*,” offers two interpretations of our *parasha*’s phrase: “lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it.” The first explanation is that of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, while the second are the words of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai:

Based upon this verse, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar explained: The altar was created to extend the years of a man's life, whereas iron was created to shorten the years of a man's life. Therefore, it is not permissible for that which shortens a man's life [i.e. iron] to be raised upon that which lengthens a man's life [i.e. the altar].

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said: The Torah states: "You shall build the altar of the L-rd, your G-d, out of whole stones," this refers to stones that will bring about peace. And is this not a clear instance wherein we can reason a fortiori (*kal v'chomer*)? Just as in the case of the stones of the altar that cannot see, hear, or speak yet are able to bring about peace between the Jewish people and their Father-in-Heaven, and as a result the Holy One blessed be He stated: "lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it," all the more so regarding a person who brings about peace between a man and his fellow, between a man and his wife, between one city and another, between one people and another, between one nation and another, and between one family and another – it will certainly be the case that evil should not befall him. (Translation my own)

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar's analysis is pragmatic and practical in nature. The *mizbe'ach* (altar) and iron – which can be used to create weapons of war – are polar opposites. Therefore, it would be a contradiction in terms to use any form of iron to fashion the stones to be used in the altar's construction. In contrast, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's explication is decidedly homiletic in nature. Moreover, it is a broad pronouncement and analysis regarding the fundamental importance of *shalom* in the Torah, and in Jewish life.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1240) helps us to further define the macroscopic import of *shalom* within Judaism via a seminal halachic/philosophical statement that appears as the final words of *Hilchot Megillah and Chanukah* (4:14) at the end of *Sefer Zemanim*. Therein, he discusses a situation of financial triage in which one has extremely limited funds. He presents two scenarios: One has money to purchase either Shabbat or Chanukah candles, and one has money to buy Shabbat candles or wine for Kiddush. What takes precedence? Maimonides is unequivocal in his response: "*Ner beito kodem meshum shalom beito*" ("Shabbat lights must be purchased prior [to either Chanukah candles or wine] because of the peace of his home"). We must remember that the Shabbat lights in

this context may very well have been the only lights in the home. Therefore, without this small amount of illumination, family members would trip over one another, arguments would ensue, and the Shabbat evening would become a dark and dreary time. In short, there would be a manifest diminution of peace in the home. As a result, in an effort to buttress the import of *shalom bayit* (marital harmony), Maimonides codifies the law that Shabbat candles take precedence over fulfilling either the mitzvah of Kiddush or Chanukah candles. Clearly, the value of *shalom bayit* trumps these other mitzvot. His concluding words, though few in number, speak volumes:

Behold, [one must remember] that the Divine Name itself was erased [in the Sotah process] in an effort to bring about peace (*shalom*, i.e. marital harmony) between a man and his wife. Great is the ultimate peace (*hashalom*), for the entire Torah was given to bring about peace in the world. As it states (*Sefer Mishle* 3:17): “Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” (Rambam translation my own)

May each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to live lives imbued with the ultimate Jewish value of *shalom*, and help bring peace to others. Most of all, may the Holy One blessed be He finally bring peace to the world and fulfill the fervent hope that is found in our *tefilot* (prayers): “He Who makes peace in His heights, may He, in His compassion, make peace upon us, and upon all Israel.” (*Artscroll Siddur*). May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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 at rdbe718@gmail.com.