

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Yitro

This week's Torah portion is central to the theology of the Jewish people. The Ten Commandments are universally known as the basis for our Western values. The revelation that takes place at Mount Sinai is a unique experience that distinguishes the Jewish people from all others. In fact, Moses himself challenges us in Deuteronomy (4:33-34) to "ask of the days before you and from one end of heaven to the other end of heaven, has there ever been a thing as great as this, or has anything like it been heard? Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have, and lived?" Even Moses himself states that this a unique claim of the Jewish people.

The description of the experience is something that transcends our normal senses. The Talmud states that we were there as one man with one heart (Shabbat 86b). There was incredible unity and clarity for the entire people. The Sinai experience is something that is so central to our theology that we are all supposed to see ourselves as if we were actually there. At the end of the Parsha, there is an epilogue that is intriguing. G-d tells Moses to tell the people that now that they have seen that He has spoken to them from the heavens, they must not make any images of gods of silver and gold. They should make an altar filled with earth upon which to bring offerings. When they are to build an altar of stones, they cannot build them hewn, lest they wave their sword over it and desecrate it. The final commandment is not to ascend to the altar using steps so that one's nakedness is not uncovered (see Exodus 20:19-23).

All of the commandments or Mitzvot in the Torah are important, but it is certainly curious that these would follow such a dramatic event as the national revelation. At the very least, in the Ten Commandments themselves we are told that we should not make graven images. Why would it need to be repeated immediately following the great event? Perhaps in our contemporary world we have an easy way to relate to what might be concerning G-d at this very moment. When something exciting happens to us today, we are all very fast to capture it with our cell phones. We all have cameras on us and we are quick to try to make sure that we can preserve, or at least share, the memory. Making an image of silver or gold was the way that the Jewish people could preserve the experience. The danger, however, was those images could become so important that they could end up replacing the actual relationship that they all had with G-d Himself. Seems like a poignant lesson for us today as well.

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The altar of earth reminds us that even though we are trying to reach spiritual heights through offerings to G-d, we have to make sure that we are grounded at the same time. The prohibition against hewn stone also sends us a powerful message. The way that we serve G-d should not be one of war and weapons. A sword should not be used in building an altar. At the most intense and intimate moment between G-d and the Jewish people, these mitzvot remind us to maintain a proper perspective.

Finally, we come to the forbidden steps. The altar that is instructed to be built in the coming week's Parsha is accompanied by a ramp. In a world before the American Disabilities Act, why would it be so important to make sure that we have a ramp and not steps? There was a visiting student from Yeshiva University that came to speak at Congregation Emek Beracha who pointed out that there are some clear differences between steps and a ramp that might shed light on this passage. In order to climb steps, one must first reach his/her leg to at least the height of the next step. With a ramp, any incremental step upwards can move someone forward. With steps, one can stop and stand still for a long time because each step is a flat surface. The same is not true with a ramp. If one stops to stand, their ankles will give out. They have to keep moving forward. When it comes to one's spiritual growth, we try to emulate the messages of the ramp. Keep moving forward, even in slight increments. If one tries to stop because they feel they have achieved their own personal spiritual goals, they should be warned that they are destined to slide backwards.

It is at the very moment when the Jewish people reach their apex of spirituality that the Torah needs to remind them of the subtleties of achieving proper spiritual growth. Enjoy the moment without the need to capture it with images. Stay grounded and avoid using weapons in the name of service to G-d. Finally, make sure that you are constantly moving forward and upwards, regardless of how small your steps may be.

Shabbat Shalom
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