

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Shoftim)

During the Holocaust, the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabi Yekutiel Halberstam, passed through the gates of hell many times. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the work camps and death marches and the final unspeakable horror, Auschwitz, the Rebbe lost his wife and their eleven children in less than a year, yet never sat shiva, (the seven days of mourning), refusing to take the time to mourn for his own children, while so many thousands were being lost every day.

Throughout his harrowing experiences, he vowed that if he survived, he would build a monument to chesed (loving-kindness) that would be his response to the inhumanity he had witnessed. Today, Laniado hospital in Netanya, Israel is that monument.

It took the Rebbe fifteen years to raise the funds to build Laniado hospital. He was determined to show the world the light of Judaism's model for human behavior, after so many years of darkness. At the hospital's dedication, asked why a rabbi had chosen to build a hospital instead of a Torah institution, his response was that every hospital is and should be a Torah institution.

Determined to imbue the hospital staff with the Torah's attitude towards healing, in his dedication speech he explained that the most important factor in healing the sick was a "warm Jewish heart".

One Rosh Hashanah, a woman began to hemorrhage badly during childbirth. She desperately needed a massive transfusion of an extremely rare blood type. An order went out that every student in the adjacent yeshiva should immediately rush to the hospital to have their blood type tested. Prayers were stopped in the middle of Mussaf on Rosh Hashanah, and one of the yeshiva students, himself a nurse, labeled the vials of blood to assist the overwhelmed skeleton nursing staff.

The woman's sister, herself a nurse, wondered if her sister would be alive today in any other hospital...

The Rebbe once explained why there have never been any demonstrations in this 'Ultra-Orthodox' neighborhood, and why he decided to build a hospital as his monument to the six million, including his own family, lost in the Holocaust:

"When you come to a place of darkness, you do not chase away the darkness with a broom; you light a candle."

What does it mean to build a monument? This week's portion, Shoftim, offers an interesting point to consider in regards to this topic:

"Ve'lo' takim lecha' matzeva asher saneh' Hashem Elokecha'."

"And you shall not erect for yourselves a monument (pillar) which Hashem, your G-d, hates." (Vayikra (Leviticus) 16:22)

Apparently, it is forbidden to erect a “*matzeva*” or monument, because this is something that G-d Himself hates. As this commandment follows the prohibition to plant (and worship) trees as idolatry (a practice of the ancient Canaanites known as *Ashera*), we can only assume that such a monument is forbidden because it is in fact a form of idolatry.

Indeed, **Rashi**, the famous super-commentary on the Torah, explains that we are referring to an altar essentially made of one single stone, and that such an altar is unacceptable *even if dedicated to offering sacrifices to Hashem*, because it was a Canaanite practice, abhorrent to G-d.

What was so terrible about such an altar, or monument, that made it hateful to G-d? Rashi notes that there is a fundamental difference between a *Mizbeach* (altar), which was a mitzvah (commandment) to build, and a *Matzevah* (monument) which was abhorrent, simply because it had become the practice of the Canaanites (whose practices had become so abhorrent to G-d that they would lose the land of Canaan they had been given...) to offer sacrifices to their gods on such a *matzevah*-monument.

This is a challenging idea, to say the least. How could a simple stone become unacceptable as a vehicle to G-d, simply because some people (or a particular society) mis-used it? And what does difference does it make what the altar is made of? Isn't the most important question whether the person sacrificing has the right intentions in his or her heart?

Even more challenging, is the fact that no less than our own patriarchs themselves offered offerings, which were absolutely accepted by G-d, on the very same type of *matzevah*-monument! So why is the same altar which was Abraham's vehicle for reaching out to G-d now unacceptable to the point of being 'abhorrent'?

As an example, *Ya'acov*, in his famous sojourn in *Beit El* (having left the home of his parents *Yitzhak* and *Rivka* on his way to the house of *Lavan*, where he will marry and become the father of twelve tribes that will become the Jewish people) takes the stone on which he lay his head in the night and set it up as no less than a *matzevah* or monument (pillar). And it was this *matzevah* (see *Bereishit* (Genesis) 28:18) on which *Ya'acov* enters his covenant with G-d that leads to the birth of the Jewish people! So what is now so terrible about the exact same type of *matzevah*?

Why is the same monument abhorrent simply because it is now used for idolatry? And lastly, what is the fundamental difference between a *matzevah* which is unacceptable, and a *mizbeach* (altar) which is the vehicle for our relationship with G-d, itself a mitzvah (commandment) given the right circumstances (see Exodus (*Shemot*) 20:21-22)?

There are, perhaps, two details that may serve to give us insight into what the difference between a *matzevah* (monument) and a *mizbeach* (altar) is, and why the Torah has such a different attitude towards them both. Firstly, a *matzevah* is made of one single stone, whereas a *mizbeach* (altar) is made of many stones. (See *Shemot* 20:22; an altar is called a “*mizbeach avanim*” or stones, the plural form, rather than even or stone in the singular.)

Indeed, the *matzevah* *Ya'acov* erects in *Beit El* is exactly that: one stone. And not a hewn stone, but a stone or pillar taken as is, directly from the ground, pure and natural, which fits with the ancient pagan practices of idolatry, which worshipped nature in its purest form.

Thus, it seems we are meant to develop our relationship with G-d through an altar of many stones, and not a single stone monument as was done in days of yore.

Further, the root of the word *matzevah* is almost diametrically opposed to the root of *mizbeach*. *matzevah*, or monument comes from the root *yatzev*, or standing (stable), as in the ladder Ya'acov dreams of whose head reaches to the sky, but whose base is “*mutzav artzah*” “*set in the earth*” (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 28:12). Indeed, Hashem (G-d) in that same dream is described as “*Nitzav Alav*” or “*Standing* over him (Ya'acov)”.

The *matzevah* therefore, is the altar which is set and stands alone, rooted in the earth and eternally unchanging; the monument meant to stand forever.

The *mizbeach* on the other hand, is the receptacle for the zevach (sacrifice or slaughtered animal) and may relate to the similar root *zov*, or *flowing*, as in:

“*Oloteichem ve'zivcheichem, le'ratzon al mizbechi*”
“*Their (whole-burnt) offerings and sacrifices for desire (desirous) on my altar*” (*Yishayahu* (Isaiah) 55:7), which perhaps represents the offering as an *outpouring* of desire before G-d.

All of which might serve to help us understand the issue at stake here.

You see, in life there is no such thing as standing still; we are either moving forwards or moving backwards, and the critical question is where we are, and where we want to be headed.

Too often it seems easiest to stand still, to take no risks, and to let life take charge. But that is not what life is meant to be. It takes a lot of work to grow, and challenge, to seek change and even, often, to start again. But the ability to do this is one of the greatest secrets of life.

Too often, we prefer the simple path of the *matzevah*: the monument that signifies we have arrived, and would like to sit still where we are. But to stand still in reality is to regress and lose any gains we might have achieved. And the issue is not just the realization that we are not meant to be standing still, but as much, the belief that we can change, and grow.

Take, as an example, one of the essential ingredients in any loving relationship: the question of compatibility. Sometimes couples experiencing difficulties in marriage or dating, think they are just “not compatible, and that they are “too different”. But one person’s “too different” is another’s ‘complimenting’. And the real issue is whether people choose to be stuck in where they are at, or decide to grow together and learn from each other. If two people were exactly the same, what would they have to offer each other? How would they help each other to grow?

In fact, the issue is not whether you are compatible with your spouse, but how compatible you feel with them. (For a great article on this topic, see Dr. George Pransky’s *The Relationship Handbook*) And that is not a reality you are stuck in, it is a reality you can choose to create. A couple can make a decision to see each other as compatible; they can choose to look at the world differently. And that is the difference between the *matzevah*, which might represent the world as it is, an unchanging world implying no room for change or growth, and no belief in the purpose of growth. It is the world of the pagan idolater who sees nature as the source of all beauty and reality, unchanging and forever. It is the worship of the sun which will rise every day in the east and set in the West, ever unchanging.

But Judaism believes in the world of *mizbeach*, which is full of the motivation to change and grow, to give and to receive, because nothing is random and I am never stuck in my current reality. I always have

the ability to change who and what I am, as witness by Judaism's Lunar calendar. The moon is never exactly the same from one day to the next, waxing and waning from day to day.

All of which of course, fits with the fact that this portion is always the first portion read in the month of Elul leading up to Rosh HaShana, the time of year most associated with our ability to change who we are, and reassess our goals and what we hope to give to the world in the coming year.

And maybe this is reflected as well in the fact that the *matzevah* (monument) is one stone, reflective of one and only one opinion, and the lack of a need to change because I am the center of my universe and my perspective is fine with me. The *mizbeach* however, is many stones because true change and growth comes from the perception of many different ways of seeing the world, and of the ability to work with each other to grow and to make the world a better place. The more points there are on a piece of paper, the more each one's placement affects every other one...

May we be privileged in the coming year, to follow the example of the Klausenberger Rebbe, to work together to build altars of light in the world, instead of pillars of darkness.

Shabbat Shalom, from Efrat and Jerusalem,

R. Binny Freedman