

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

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In our Parsha, the awesome Revelation at Sinai is followed by what appears to be a rather prosaic ruling that enjoins the kohen from climbing with steps upon [Gd's] altar (20:23). Rather than steps, a ramp was constructed to reach the altar. The question is plain: How may this apparently anticlimactic conclusion to an otherwise inspirational and highly spiritually charged narrative be explained?

If we view ascending Gd's altar as a metaphor to serve HaShem, then the contrast between steps and a ramp teaches an important lesson. Attempting to reach a summit via steps affords the climber both the opportunity to rest at each step, and by standing level, avoiding slipping backwards. Using a ramp, however, not only does not allow for a respite, but one must exert a steady effort just to remain stationary and even greater exertion to move forward. So too, in our aspiration to forge a lasting relationship with HaShem, especially after a thrilling and ecstatic encounter with Divinity, we must be committed to brook no slacking-off, that our strivings must be constant and persistent with the realization that if we do not commit to constantly move upwards, we will

inevitably backslide. And even when we do choose to take some moments of relaxation - which inevitably we must from time to time, we must be ever vigilant and alert - with an effort of conscious awareness - lest we succumb to our worst demons (yetzer haras), fritter away our forward progress, and slide - fall back and stumble into sin. Hence, the imagery of a ramp toward the altar serves as a fitting epilogue to the Giving of Torah instructing the Jew how to climb the ladder of moral and religious enlightenment and incorporate the experience of Sinai into his daily life.

Rashi, quoting the Midrash (Mechilta, Yitro 11), suggests another answer to our question. If the purpose of the ramp was to avoid even the slightest exposure of the nakedness of the kohen's legs as the verse explicitly indicates (which taking wide steps might occasion), then the law contains a far-reaching ethical lesson: "If regarding these stones which have no perception to care about their humiliation, the Torah nevertheless stipulates that since they serve a useful purpose, you should not treat them in a disrespectful manner, then in the case of your fellow-man who is created in the image of your Creator, how much more so must you treat him with respect and dignity." The message here is quite blunt. If after your spiritually enthralling rendezvous

with Gd and hearing His voice, if that incomparable, rapturous experience does not translate into ethical and moral excellence insofar as your relationship with others, then the Revelation will have proven to be a transitory, ephemeral event with no lasting concrete value. If the great theophany at Sinai yields no righteous behavior, then, if we may coin an expression, that stirring experience will have been just so much "spiritual candy". In a word, the Parsha of Yitro must immediately be followed by the ethics of Parshat Mishpatim.

A final message of this simple passage is offered by Rav Ben Tzion Zachs (Menachem Tzion, p. 270). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 7b) states: "Bar Kapara taught, [based on a homiletical interpretation of this verse]: From where do our Sages derive [the ethical principle to]: Be temperate in judgment (Avot 1:1)? As it is written: "Neither shall you go up by steps onto My altar" (Sh'mot 20:23), [i.e., do not ascend hurriedly], and juxtaposed to it, [it is written]: V'EILEH HAMISHPATIM, And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them" (21:1). According to Rashi and Maharsha (ad loc.), the injunction against reaching the altar via steps was to caution a person not to rush to the top. Rather, he is counseled to ascend slowly and deliberately. The lesson that Bar Kapara derives from this ruling is that judgments should not be reached

hastily and forcefully (as one typically climbs steps in such a fashion), but rather with patience and forethought.

On this last insight, Rav Shlomo Zevin extends this advice to propose an even more valuable lesson (L'Torah UI-moadim, pp. 98-100). Often in life, people experience a new awareness that inspires them to move their lives to a different level, to live deeper. They are moved to make changes. Yet often, as a result of a genuine longing to abandon a previous lifestyle of shallowness, falsehood, or shame, people begin to take wide and expansive steps, determined to reform their lives and transform into a greater person in short spans of time. Therefore, the Torah is teaching us to never disregard the value of one small move in the quest for truth. Wherever you are in life, you can serve Gd genuinely according to your own unique talents and abilities. Challenge yourself to encounter your own inner light and truth; you need not climb on the truths and experiences of others. Grow slowly and be true to yourself. Take the ramp, not the stairs. Don't jump ahead of yourself, because your authentic self may be left behind. King Solomon put it simply (Mishlei 25:6): "Do not stand in the place of the great." Why? Not because by stepping into the shoes of the great, you will be robbing somebody else of his or her place of greatness. Rather,

by doing so, you will be denying yourself your own individual process, the one that is great for you. Real people are inspired by other people but never copy them.

Of course, there are moments when a huge jump is justified. Big things happen when ordinary people muster the courage to actualize extraordinary visions. Sometimes, the path to recovery and to healing always requires a drastic leap. Yet we must ensure that these big steps enhance our true identity rather than crush it; that they embody our inner calling and not a superficial emulation of other people's standards and behaviors.

To anchor down this truth, Rav Zevin quotes a fascinating Talmudic passage (Chulin 105a). Mar Ukva, said the following curious statement about himself: "I am, in comparison to my father, what vinegar is in comparison to wine. When my father would eat meat, he would wait a full 24 hours until he ate cheese. But I? When I eat meat, I eat cheese during the following meal." The obvious question is, if this sage held his father's behavior in such high esteem, to the extent of seeing himself as vinegar compared to his father as wine, why didn't he change his behavior and follow his father's custom and turn himself into "wine"? The answer may be that Mar Ukva was keenly aware of the truth that his

father was on a totally different spiritual level than he. Waiting a full 24 hours between meat and milk would be merely an act of copying and mimicking his father's behavior. For his soul, this would be a meaningless experience. The halacha of waiting only 6 hours would suffice for Mar Ukva.

Thus, immediately following the most spiritually exhilarating event in history, the Torah culminates with this declaration: "You shall not ascend My altar via steps, so that your nakedness not be exposed upon it." Do not become who you are not. Do not jump to places beyond yourself. Every movement forward must be internalized and integrated into your individual identity because when you take steps that overwhelm you, rather than elevate you, you may end up naked, and worse, you might fall down and lose everything.

In sum, the concluding pasuk in our Parsha has multiple meanings, each of which provide an extraordinary lesson and necessary epilogue to ensure that the glorious spiritual revelation and exalted religious teachings of the sacred covenant at Sinai would not be for naught. 🙌