



Shoftim: Altars & Aspirations

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These were the final conversations. The nation could see and feel the Land of Israel. It was finally within reach. But Moshe had to prepare them. Although he would not accompany them into the land, Moshe's sacred mission was to prepare them for the challenges they would face. Chief amongst Moshe's fears was that the people would fall prey to the idolatrous culture prevalent amongst the indigenous nations. Over and over again Moshe warns and exhorts the nation to uproot and destroy every last vestige of Canaanite polytheism.

Among the multiple prohibitions, Moshe commands: "*And you shall not set up for yourself a monument (matzeyva), which the Lord your God despises (Devorim 16:22).*" What is this *matzeyva* monument? Rashi explains that it was an altar made from one stone as opposed to the *mizbeyach* altar, which was made of multiple, individual stones. But why would God "*despise*" it? Throughout the book of Genesis (Bereishis) we find many examples of great, righteous people building *matzeyvos* to serve God. What changed to make the *matzeyva* so terribly distasteful in the eyes of God that the Torah must warn us so strongly against its use? Rashi explains that the *matzeyva* had become central to Canaanite idolatrous practice. Thus, although it was "*beloved*" by God when the Patriarchs used it, it was now abhorrent in the eyes of the Creator. Still, the Torah could have simply stated "*don't build a matzeyva*" (much in the same way it says, "*Don't plant an asheyra tree*" - a type of tree used for idolatrous worship). But to say that God despises something which was a staple in the religious service of the forefathers seems extreme. At the base of Mount Sinai, the very spot of incredible Divine revelation, the Torah tells us that Moshe built twelve *matzeyva* altars for the twelve tribes of Israel. On the future site of the Beis HaMikdash our forefather Yaakov built a *matzeyva* altar from the stone he had placed beneath his head. Avraham and Yitzchak built *matzeyva* altars wherever they travelled. How could it be that the very thing that was beloved and accepted by God in previous generations had suddenly become despised?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook zt'l, in his work titled *Midbar Shur*, explains that each of the Patriarchs represented and embodied a particular character trait (*middah*). Avraham represented *chessed* (kindness), Yitzchak embodied *gevurah* (strength), and Yaakov stood for *emes* (truth). Each Patriarch used his *middah* in the service of God. If you were to approach Avraham and ask him for advice on how to create a meaningful relationship with God, he would instruct you to do good for others and you will merit this desired closeness. *Chessed* is the key for connection. We lose connection with God because we become overly focused on the self. Think about others; give to others, live for the other and you will find God. Yitzchak would advocate for *gevurah* – one must display personal strength and commitment to personal growth. One must find the strength to sacrifice for the Almighty. You must build and bolster yourself in order to influence the world around you. If one cultivates these strengths, then a meaningful and lasting relationship with the Almighty is within reach. Yaakov would advise that the path to God requires unequivocal commitment to *emes*; truth must serve as man's compass in finding our Father above. It is easy to lose your way in life you must be firm in your commitment to our values and beliefs.

Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov created these solid pillars of *chessed*, *gevurah*, and *emes*. Their single-stone *matzeyvos* represented their singular and individualized approach to the service of God.

Moshe declared to the Jewish People that this was no longer an acceptable approach. After forty years of spiritual maturation in the desert, God expected us to spiritually diversify, becoming "proficient" in many areas of life by acquiring different character traits and abilities. One has to strive to become a *chessed, gevurah and emes* Jew. We have to become people who engage in meaningful prayer and help the poor. We must be people who are focused on growth and personal development and at the same time are attentive to the needs of the other. We must remain true to our values and beliefs while coexisting with others who may live and believe differently. The single-



stone *matzeyva* was acceptable and even desirable for the forefathers but it is off limits to us. From us, God demands a *mizbeyach avanim*, a multi-stone, multi-faceted altar.

But Moshe does not stop there. *Asher sanay* - the one thing that God despises more than anything is when we sell ourselves short. The greatest affront to God is when we convince ourselves that we cannot be more. God endowed each of us with such beautiful and awesome abilities and talents – it is our Divine obligation to discover and utilize them. I have no right to tell God that I can only be proficient in one particular area or only accomplish certain things while other achievements are simply beyond my reach.

The single stone, the single approach *matzeyva* gives man a license to be “one thing.” *Asher sanay* - “I hate when you convince yourselves that you can’t be more.” Hashem hates the *matzeyva* because it has come to represent excellence and commitment in one area, whereas God asks us to be *mitzuyanim*, to excel in all we do.

Our life mission is to accumulate stones. These stones represent all of the different character traits, middos and abilities we must possess in order to be successful people. We must learn to spiritually diversify and strive for proficiency and piety in all areas of Judaic life. We begin this process one ‘stone’ at a time. I begin by taking inventory of the stones I have already accumulated. *Are they polished and properly chiseled? Are they clean and properly cared for? Am I actualizing the strengths I already know I possess? Am I maximizing the potential I know I have?* After the inventory I ask myself a simple question – *what additional stones do I need? What qualities and traits do I lack and how can I acquire them?*

We have outgrown the *matzeyva* and we are privileged to be a *mizbeyach*. May we find the strength to actualize this great gift.