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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

The Green-Eyed Monster

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife...” (chapter 20)

Have you had the following experience? You’ve got your eye on the newest iPhone or the newest Toyota Sienna, or, if you’re really well-heeled, the latest Rolex. You start to pray the Shemoneh Esrei, the silent standing prayer, you bend forward, say *Baruch Atah...* and into your mind floats a picture of this beautiful gold Rolex Seamaster Oyster Limited Edition. *Baruch Atah HaRolex!* You’re obsessed. An embarrassing portion of your waking life might be spent fantasizing about that new car or that new watch that you really want to buy.

Rabbi Elyahu Dessler identifies the two root motivations of our personalities: the desire to give and the desire to take. The desire to take is unique in that it’s not really about the object of desire, it’s about fulfilling the desire itself. It’s about the desire to possess. Therefore, once you get whatever it is, it loses that pristine gleam very quickly. The desire to take is a “green-eyed monster that mocks the meat it feeds on.” It can never be satisfied, because as soon as you have your new Rolex, well, you’ve got it now, right, and so it loses that delectable allure, and then sometime later, the next obsession takes hold, and so on and on. Does this sound familiar?

It says in the Book of Proverbs: “All the days of a poor man are wretched, but contentment is a feast without end.” When you’re happy with what you’ve got, your life is a never-ending feast, but when you look over your garden fence at your neighbor’s Sienna, or his family successes, and you compare all that with your own, your entire life will likely be miserable.

There are many modern challenges that a person needs to overcome in order to feel truly satisfied. In particular, it is important to be careful about what we feast our eyes on. To be truly satisfied with our lives, if we are careful where we look and what we desire, then we have a much greater chance for life to become a never-ending feast.

Q & A

Questions

1. Yitro had 7 names. Why was one of his names Yeter?
2. News of which two events motivated Yitro to come join the Jewish People?
3. What name of Yitro indicates his love for Torah?
4. Why was Tzipora with her father, Yitro, and not with Moshe when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt?
5. Why does verse 18:5 say that Yitro came to the desert – don't we already know that the Bnei Yisrael were in the desert?
6. Why did Moshe tell Yitro all that G-d had done for the Jewish People?
7. According to the Midrash quoted by Rashi, how did Yitro respond when he was told about the destruction of Egypt?
8. Who is considered as if he enjoys the splendor of the Shechina ?
9. On what day did Moshe sit to judge the Jewish People?
10. Who is considered a co-partner in Creation?
11. "Moshe sat to judge the people, and the people stood before Moshe...." What bothered Yitro about this arrangement?
12. Why did Yitro return to his own land?
13. How did the encampment at Sinai differ from the other encampments?
14. To whom does the Torah refer when it uses the term "Beit Yaakov"?
15. How is G-d's protection of the Jewish People similar to an eagle's protection of its young?
16. What was G-d's original plan for Matan Torah ? What was the response of the Jewish People?
17. How many times greater is the "measure of reward" than the "measure of punishment"?
18. How is it derived that "Don't steal" refers to kidnapping?
19. In response to hearing the Torah given at Sinai, how far backwards did the Jewish people retreat in fear?
20. Why does the use of iron tools profane the altar?

Answers

1. 18:1 - Because he caused a parsha to be added to the Torah. Yeter means addition.
2. 18:1 - The splitting of the sea and the war against Amalek.
3. 18:1 - Chovav.
4. 18:3 - When Aharon met Moshe with his family on their way down to Egypt, Aharon said to Moshe: "We're pained over the Jews already in Egypt, and you're bringing more Jews to Egypt!'" Moshe, hearing this, sent his wife and children back to Midian.
5. 18:5 - To show Yitro's greatness. He was living in a luxurious place; yet he went to the desert in order to study the Torah.
6. 18:8 - To draw Yitro closer to the Torah way of life.
7. 18:9 - He grieved.
8. 18:12 - One who dines with Torah scholars.
9. 18:13 - The day after Yom Kippur.
10. 18:13 - A judge who renders a correct decision.
11. 18:14 - Yitro felt that the people weren't being treated with the proper respect.
12. 18:27 - To convert the members of his family to Judaism.
13. 19:2 - The Jewish People were united.
14. 19:3 - The Jewish women.
15. 19:4 - An eagle carries its young on top of its wings to protect them from human arrows. So too, G-d's cloud of glory separated between the Egyptians and the Jewish camp in order to absorb Egyptian missiles and arrows fired at the Jewish People.
16. 19:9 - G-d offered to appear to Moshe and to give the Torah through him. The Jewish People responded that they wished to hear the Torah directly from G-d.
17. 20:6 - 500 times.
18. 20:13 - Since it is written immediately after "Don't murder" and "Don't commit adultery," it is derived that "Don't steal" refers to a crime carrying the same penalty as the first two, namely, the death penalty.
19. 20:15 - They backed away from the mountain twelve mil (one mil is 2000 cubits).
20. 20:22 - The altar was created to extend life; iron is sometimes used to make weapons which shorten life.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Stairs to Above

In one of the first commandments listed after the Ten Commandments, Hashem stipulates, "you shall not ascend through stairs [*ma'alot*] upon My altar, so that you will not reveal your nakedness upon it" (Ex. 20:23). This verse is the source for the prohibition of building stairs – instead of a ramp – to lead up to the altar in the Tabernacle/Temple. Indeed, Maimonides (Laws of *Beit HaBechirah* 1:17) codifies this prohibition, and adds that one who violates this prohibition by ascending to the altar via stairs is liable for a flogging. In that passage, Maimonides uses two different Hebrew terms for “stairs”: when first stating the idea that one may not build “stairs” for the altar, he uses the word *madreigot*, but when codifying the punishment for one who ascends the altar on stairs, he uses the same word as the Bible, *ma'alot*. Though these two Hebrew words appear to be synonyms, the essay before you explores their respective etymologies, and tries to bring to light the possible nuances expressed by these different terms. Additionally, this essay also delves into the word *sulam* (usually translated as “ladder”) to see how it fits into the story.

It is virtually unanimous that the word *ma'alot* derives from the Biblical Hebrew root AYIN-LAMMED-(HEY), which gives us such words as *al* (“on”), *maalah* (“above”), *maaleh* (“raise”), *aliyah* (“high/height”), and *oleh* (“ascend”). Following that theme, the word *ma'alot* as “stairs” represents an instrument by which people may “ascend” to higher floors and reach a different height. Although “stairs” may technically also be used for going down on the descent, the word *ma'alot* focuses specifically on “going up” because that is more of novelty, as it allows a person to “defy” gravity. The same phenomenon is found in the English words elevator and escalator, which literally refer to “going up” (think elevation and escalation), even though those same implements can also be used for going down.

The term *ma'alot* appears several times in the Mishna. For example, the Mishna (*Sukkah* 5:4) states that the Levites who sang in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem stood on the fifteen “steps” (*ma'alot*) between the Israelite Courtyard and the Women’s Courtyard. The Mishna further notes that these fifteen steps correspond to the fifteen Psalms which begin with the words *Shir HaMaalot* (or *Shir La'Maalot*), “A song of/for Ascend” (Ps. 120-135). Similarly, the Mishna (*Tamid* 3:9) relates that a stone in front of the Menorah (“candelabra”) in the Temple had three steps (*ma'alot*), upon which the Kohen would stand when setting up the Menorah. In Talmudic Hebrew, the term *ma'alyuta* (“advantageous,” “superb”) was coined, which refers to something which is a “step up” over something else in an abstract sense.

Altogether, the term *ma'alot* and its various inflections appear some fifty times in the Bible. This contrasts with the word *madreigot*, which only appears twice in the Bible (Yechezkel 38:20, Song of Songs 2:14) and twice in the Mishna (*Kilayim* 6:2, *Sheviit* 3:8). One instance has the word in the plural form (*madreigot*), while the other has the word in the singular form (*madreigah*).

In line with the staggered, multi-staged nature of a staircase, the semantic range *madreigot* expanded to refer to any sort of graded steppe or terrace, both in a physical sense and in an abstract. Hence, in later Hebrew, *madreigot* refers to “degrees” (e.g., temperature, or degrees of a circle in the geometry) which make up a scale, or even any sort of “level” of achievement (like *madreigot* in a spiritual sense). It also gives way to the Modern Hebrew word *darga* (“rank” in the military sense). In this spirit, the Talmud advises that “one should go down a level (*darga*) to marry a woman” (*Yevamot* 63a), which Rashi explains means that a man should not marry a woman of a more prestigious class than he, lest she not be willing to accept him.

Four early Hebrew lexicographers, Menachem Ibn Saruk (920-970), Yonah Ibn Janach (990-1050), Shlomo Ibn Parchon (the 12th century author of *Machberet HeAruch*), and Radak (1160-1235), trace *madreigot* to the trilateral root DALET-REISH-GIMMEL. However, it should be noted that no other words derived from that root appear in the Bible.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 6:9, Ps. 25:4) explains that the word *madreigot* is conceptually similar to the word *derech* (“pathway,” “road”), as both words denote something like a path used to help a person reach his destination. In doing so, Rabbi Hirsch implies that the root of *madreigot* (DALET-REISH-GIMMEL) is somehow related to the root of *derech* (DALET-REISH-KAF), possibly due to the interchangeability of the letters GIMMEL and KAF. Rabbi Yitzchak of Zeldin in *Shoresh Yesha* takes a more prosaic approach in connecting *madreigot* to *derech* by noting that both words denote a place upon which one’s foot treads when taking a step.

When the Bible records that there were six steps that led up to King Solomon’s throne, it uses the word *ma’alot* to denote those “stairs” (I Kings 10:19). Rashi comments that these *ma’alot* were *madreigot*, and Targum Jonathan there translates *ma’alot* into the Aramaic *dargin*, which is a cognate of *madreigot*. In a parallel to that verse in Chronicles, pseudo-Rashi (to II Chron. 9:18) likewise explains that these *ma’alot* were *madreigot*, while Targum Rav Yosef uses a different Aramaic (*masok*, which is an inflection of the Aramaic verb that means “to ascend” and actually means “helicopter” in Modern Hebrew). In light of this, we may argue that the difference between *ma’alot* and *madreigot* might be that the former is Hebrew, while the latter comes from a different language (like Aramaic or Akkadian).

However, Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) takes a decidedly different approach. He wrote the work *Be'ur Shemot HaNirdafim* as a way of showing how no two words in Hebrew are truly synonymous. In that work, he takes groups of two or more Hebrew words which ostensibly mean the same thing, and shows how there is some slight nuanced difference between them. Rabbi Wertheimer initially notes that on the surface *ma’alot* and *madreigot* appear synonymous, as they both refer to things that people use to go up and down. However, he explains that in Biblical Hebrew, the term *madreigot* refers specifically to a walkway built to allow one to walk up a mountain. When a mountain is too high and its incline is too steep to be traversed, people might use dirt to fill in the surrounding area and build a terraced rampart/ramp to allow one to reach the top of the mountain (see Song of Songs 2:14). By contrast, he explains that the word *ma’alot* refers specifically to free-standing stairwell structures in a house or courtyard, that are not built into the side of a mountain. For this reason, when the Torah forbids building stairs to the altar, it uses the word *ma’alot*, as opposed to *madreigot*.

Intuitively, we might be resistant to the idea that *sulam* could be a synonym of *ma’alot* and/or *madreigot* simply because we see a “ladder” as something distinct from a “staircase.” But if we probe further, we have to wonder what, if anything, differentiates a “ladder” from a “staircase”? Is it that a “ladder” is moveable, while a “staircase” is built-in? Is it that a “ladder” can be closer to a totally-vertical 90 degrees, while the slope of a “staircase” is usually less pronounced?

The Hebrew word *sulam* is a *hapax legomenon*, meaning it appears only once in the Bible – in Jacob’s famous dream (Gen. 28:2). However, *sulam* does appear multiple times in the Mishna (*Beitzah* 1:3, *Bava Batra* 2:5, 3:6, *Makkot* 2:1, *Zavim* 3:1, 4:3). Ibn Saruk, Ibn Janach, Ibn Parchon, and Radak all trace that word to the trilateral root SAMECH-LAMMED-MEM, but this does not help us because there are no other words in Biblical Hebrew derived from that root. Scholars have proposed various possible etymologies for understanding the basis of the three-letter root SAMECH-LAMMED-MEM.

Dr. Chaim Tawil in his work *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* cites Landsberger as arguing that that the Hebrew SAMECH-LAMMED-MEM is actually a cognate of the Akkadian *simmiltu* (“stairway”) by way of metathesis (that is, rearranging the consonants). That Akkadian word is used in conjunction with the staircases used to take a person to the top of the famous Babylonian Ziggurats. According to this approach, the letter MEM in the word *sulam* is essential to the core root and *sulam* essentially means the same thing as *ma’alot* and *madreigot*.

But the more conservative approach sees *sulam* as deriving from Hebrew. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 28:12, Num. 20:19, Ps. 84:6), Gesenius, Kohut, and even *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew And English Lexicon* argue that the Hebrew root SAMECH-LAMMED-MEM is actually derived from the Hebrew root SAMECH-LAMMED-LAMMED (“paved,” “walkway” as in *mesilah*). This approach sees the final MEM as paragogic, and thus non-essential to the core root of *sulam*. According to this approach, there is quite a fascinating thematic affinity between the etymology of *sulam* and that of *madreigot*.

Interestingly, Rabbi Dr. Ernest Klein implies that the trilateral root SAMECH-LAMMED-LAMMED refers to “paving” a path by “lifting” all extraneous stones (or other objects in the way) and “throwing” them elsewhere. According to this, *sulam* derives from the “lifting” meaning of that root, as it is a means of lifting a person to a greater height.

Rabbi Aharon Marcus (1843-1916) makes a fascinating suggestion. He proposes that in Hebrew words whose essential root is the two-letter string SAMECH-LAMMED, the letter SAMECH is actually a placeholder for the letter AYIN which proceeds it in the Hebrew Alphabet. Accordingly, Rabbi Marcus explains that the root of the word *sulam* is actually AYIN-LAMMED. This means that *sulam* has the same root as *ma'alot*!

If this has not yet convinced you that *sulam* belongs in an essay of synonyms to *ma'alot* and *madreigot*, I will note that Rashi (to *Bava Metziah* 25a, *Sukkah* 53b) actually uses the word *ma'alot* to define the word *sulam*, and elsewhere (to *Beitzah* 36a) uses the word *madreigot* to do the same.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Bava Kama 93-99

A Blessing on Stolen Food

“This is not a beracha (blessing) – it is blasphemy!”

This statement refers to a person saying a *beracha* when eating food that he stole. He is possession of the food only because he committed the transgression of theft. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov teaches in a *beraita*: “Behold, one who stole a *se'ah* measure of wheat, ground it up, kneaded it, baked it, and then separated *challah* from it, how can he make a *beracha*? In this case, saying a *beracha* would not be blessing Hashem, but would actually be blaspheming Him. About this issue, the verse says: *Botze'ah berech, ni'etz Hashem.*” (Tehillim 10:3)

Rashi explains the word *botze'ah* to mean “steal,” and the verse is teaching that a person who steals food and makes a *beracha* on it is in fact committing blasphemy. Rava states on our *daf* that even though the thief acquired the wheat through *shinui ma'aseh* (changing the stolen item by an action), it is still blasphemy to say a *beracha* for this food because it would be a *mitzvah haba'ah ba'aveira* – a *mitzvah* that comes through a transgression.

The Maharsha asks why this verse from Tehillim is not cited in Masechet Succah regarding a stolen lulav, which is invalid for the *mitzvah* due to this same principle of *mitzvah haba'ah ba'aveira*. The *gemara* in Succah also teaches additional sources for this principle (Malachi 1:13 and Yeshayahu 61:8). But it does not mention

the verse in Tehillim, the verse our *gemara* cites as the source for the principle of *mitzvah haba'ah ba'veira*. Why not?

The Maharsha answers that the word *botze'ah* in Tehillim does not mean “to steal,” but rather it means “to separate.” Therefore, it is suited *only* to the case in our *gemara*, where a thief stole wheat and processed it, and then *separated challah* with a *beracha*, and then ate the resulting bread with a *beracha* (also, while eating, he *separated* the smaller piece of bread he eats a larger loaf of bread). The Maharsha adds that it is quite clear from the context of the chapter in Tehillim that verse 10:3 is in fact speaking about a thief.

▪ *Bava Kama 94a*

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

BIRKAT HAMAZON (PART 11)

BLUEPRINT OF JEWISH DESTINY

“Anyone who recites Birkat HaMazon is blessed through it.”
(Zohar HaKadosh to Parshat Terumah)

The Fourth Blessing begins: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, the Almighty, our Father, our King, our Sovereign, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Maker, our Holy One, Holy One of Yaakov, our Shepherd, the Shepherd of Israel, the King Who is good and Who does good for all.”

As mentioned in the introduction, this blessing was added to Birkat HaMazon by the Beit Din of Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh (Brachot 48b). The words, “Who is good and Who does good for all,” refer to a miracle that occurred during the Roman conquest of Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were brutally massacred. Among the many cruel and vindictive acts the Romans did was to leave the bodies of the slaughtered unburied for seven long years. And, yet, during the entire time that they had not yet been brought to burial, they miraculously did not decompose. It is this specific miracle that is being commemorated in our blessing.

However, the blessing is not only focused on one specific miracle, on one particular act of goodness that Hashem did for us. The Maharal explains that the beginning of the blessing, from “our G-d” until “the King Who is good”, is made up of ten different components. The Maharal says that the number ten always represents holiness. In our blessing, we are moving upwards from one level of holiness to the next, finally arriving at the greatest possible level of understanding the holiness of Hashem, which is His goodness. Thus, the blessing also focuses on the abundance of goodness that Hashem blesses us with. And the more that we recognize Hashem’s goodwill, the greater is our ability to thank Him for it. And the greater our ability, the greater is our responsibility to do so.

The Talmud (Ketubot 104a) partially portrays Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi’s great wealth and his unapparelled achievements. On his deathbed, our Sages relate that he lifted up his hands to the

Heavens and declared, “You [Hashem] know that I toiled before You with all my ten fingers in Torah, and I did not take any pleasure from this world, not even with my small finger!”

Rabbi Shlomo Goldman (1869-1945), the illustrious and saintly Rebbe Shlomke of Zvhil, points out that Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi’s statement seems to be implausible. He was wealthy beyond imagination. He was treated with the utmost honor by all, Jews and non-Jews alike. He was monumentally successful in his endeavors for the benefit of the Jewish People. Rebbe Shlomke asks, “How could Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi not have enjoyed this world?” Rebbe Shlomke explains that in the Spiritual Realms it was decreed for Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi to be destined to enjoy a certain amount of pleasure in the physical world. Therefore, Hashem blessed him with goodness in order that he could derive pleasure from it. But he didn’t want to take part in that enjoyment. He preferred to accrue more and more spiritual rewards and pleasures, and not to use any of his merits for his own physical comfort. Hashem then sent him more kindness and more goodness so that he would be able to experience the pleasures he was destined to receive. But, once again, he didn’t want to take pleasure from them. So, Hashem sent him more and more measures of goodness, but still he refused to allow those materialistic pleasures to affect his life. This was the secret to Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi’s immense wealth and success. Hashem continuously sent him more and more goodness so that he could enjoy his “portion” of physical pleasure, but he refused to take it for himself!

In the same vein, Rabbi Yosef ibn Migash (1077-1141) from Spain, commonly known by his acronym “Ri MiGash,” one of the most brilliant and influential spiritual leaders of Spanish Jewry, writes that our primary debt of gratitude – *hakarat hatov* – should be reserved for Hashem. In his words, “Hashem bestows perfect goodness upon us. How fitting and proper is it that we praise Hashem with perfect praises! That we should not do anything that will cause Hashem to be angry with us. And we should not do anything that Hashem hates.”

To be continued...

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Hearing of the miracles that Hashem performed for *Bnei Yisrael*, Moshe's father-in-law Yitro arrives with Moshe's wife and sons, reuniting the family in the wilderness. Yitro is so impressed by Moshe's detailing of the Exodus from Egypt that he converts to Judaism. Seeing that the only judicial authority for the entire Jewish nation is Moshe Rabbeinu, Yitro suggests that subsidiary judges be appointed to adjudicate smaller matters, leaving Moshe free to attend to larger issues. Moshe accepts his advice.

The Jewish People arrive at Mount Sinai, where Hashem offers them the Torah. Once they accept, Hashem charges Moshe to instruct the people not to approach the mountain, and to prepare for three days. On the third day, amidst thunder and lightning, Hashem's voice emanates from the smoke-enshrouded mountain, and He speaks to the Jewish People, giving them the Ten Commandments:

1. Believe in Hashem.
2. Do not worship other "gods".
3. Do not use Hashem's name in vain.

4. Observe Shabbat.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not kidnap.
9. Do not testify falsely.
10. Do not covet.

After receiving the first two commandments, the Jewish People, overwhelmed by this experience of the Divine, request that Moshe relay Hashem's word to them. Hashem instructs Moshe to caution the Jewish People not to draw close to the mountain or touch any part of it.

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS

Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.” (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)

THE SACRIFICIAL ALTAR AND ITS RAMP

(Mitzvos #40 and #41 in *Sefer HaChinuch*)

“Do not make with Me [idols]; gods of silver and gods of gold do not make for yourselves. Construct for Me an earthen altar, and you shall offer on it... in every place I shall mention My name, I shall come to you and bless you. If you construct an altar of stones, do not build them with hewn stones, for it will become profaned if your blade is waved over it. And do not ascend with steps upon My altar, upon which you may not expose yourself.” (Shemos 20:21-23)

THE MITZVAH

Hashem commands us to build “an altar of earth,” meaning that it must be set upon the ground and not upon pillars. In addition, the Sages derive from this that the altar in the Wilderness, which was made out of copper-plated wood, had to be filled with earth whenever the people encamped (*Rashi*). Alternatively, we may build “an altar of stones,” which may not be hewn. The altar is to be accessed using an adjacent ramp.

EARTH OR UNHEWN STONES

The idol-worshippers used to make their idols out of silver and gold in order to harness spiritual forces symbolized by these metals that would serve as conduits to bring down blessings. For example, they may have used gold to symbolize the sun and silver to symbolize the moon. They would build fancy

altars that they would decorate with idolatrous designs. In contrast, Hashem commands to sacrifice to Him directly, upon a simple and inexpensive altar of earth or stone. He does not need conduits to bring down blessings, and His honor is not dependent upon our constructs and designs. He therefore commands services that are readily available and inexpensive because He does not want to impose upon us (*Ibn Ezra*). The stones may not be hewn with a chisel or any metal tool, since metal is the material of weapons, which shortens lives, while the altar grants atonement and lengthens lives. Furthermore, the altar brings peace between us and Hashem, and it is unfitting to strike it with something that causes destruction (*Rashi*). In addition, Hashem wanted us to use whole stones, because if we would cut them in two, half of a stone would go to the altar and the other half would be thrown away, which would be disrespectful to the altar (*Ibn Ezra*). In prohibiting the use of metal tools, Hashem also intended to discourage the ways of idol-worshippers, who would chisel out designs on their altars (*Rambam*).

THE RAMP

We are commanded to treat the altar with great reverence since it provides atonement for our sins. Ascending or descending steps involves the spreading of one's legs, and even though the Kohanim wore pants beneath their tunics, this would suggest disrespect to the altar. We are therefore commanded to build a ramp, upon which the Kohanim must ascend foot-by-foot (*Rashi and Baal HaTurim*). In addition, it is haughty to walk with large steps, and haughtiness causes conflicts and destroys relationships. This is not the way a person should ascend the altar, whose purpose is to bring peace between us and Hashem (*Moshav Zekeinim*). Accordingly, after commanding us to build a simple and inexpensive altar, which increases the possibility that a worshipper may ascend haughtily and disrespectfully, Hashem instructed us to ascend meekly upon a ramp. The Sages remark that Hashem commanded us with this mitzvah not only so that we would treat the altar with respect. He wants us to realize that if it is necessary to avoid suggesting slight disrespect to mindless earth and stones, then we must certainly avoid being disrespectful to sensitive people, who are created in Hashem's image and deserve the utmost respect.

We may further suggest that the altar had to be made out of earthly materials and set down upon the earth to symbolize that the offerings we bring upon it provide atonement for the entire earth (see *Sukkah* 55b). It had to be accessed specifically by a ramp for it to be considered an extension of the earth.

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