

Parsha Ponders

Yisro | Feb 1, 2024 | 23 Shevat 5784

Respect, honour, and small steps¹

ולא-תעלה במעלת על-מזבחי אשר לא-תגלה ערותך עלי

Don't make steps on My altar, such that you don't reveal your nakedness upon it²

The Torah prohibits us from building steps for the Temple altar. The reason for this³ is so that the *Kohanim* would not be forced to take large steps during their ascent. Large steps over its stones is, in a way, considered improper, almost profane. Our Sages draw⁴ a logical deduction from this. If the Torah was particular about the disgrace of these stones, which don't have intelligence to notice, your friend, who was created in the image of G-d, all the more so you should be careful not to disgrace them.

Now, we need to understand this extrapolation. How can we derive anything from the laws surrounding the altar? Seemingly, the reason for the Torah's restrictions is because of the sanctity of the location of the altar: The holy Temple, the resting place of the Divine Presence. Even the Temple Mount has restrictions on our behavior and dress⁵; all the more so the altar, which has a greater level of sanctity. How then can we learn anything to our fellow man?

Our Sages have revealed that the caution surrounding the Temple altar isn't solely due to the sanctity of its location. The proof is that the *Heichal*, the inner chamber of the Temple, has a greater sanctity than the Temple altar⁶. Yet, it's perfectly permissible to take large steps elsewhere in the Temple⁷. Instead, the reason must be because of the unique qualities of the Temple altar. We are taught⁸ that it lengthens man's days. It brings peace between the Jews and their G-d, through the Temple offerings. Therefore, we are to treat it as a greater level of respect.

Now the logical deduction is solid. Since the Temple altar was made for the benefit of man, to atone and protect him, the Torah commanded us not to disgrace it. All the more so should we be careful not to disgrace man himself, who was created in the image of G-d. As well, there's a deeper message. When the *Kohanim* would ascend the altar, they would have the utmost concentration and the loftiest of intents⁹. Nevertheless, they are entrusted with the responsibility to ascend in a manner of honor and respect. All the more so then should we, even if we're on our way to perform an important *mitzvah*, be concerned about the honor and respect of our fellow.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on [Be'er Yosef](#) to [Exodus 20:22-23](#). The [Be'er Yosef](#) also discussed the previous verse, which forbade making the altar out of hewn stone, but I felt it was sufficient for this piece to focus on the large steps

² [Exodus loc. cit.](#)

³ [Mechilta ad. loc.](#), brought by [Rashi ad. loc.](#)

⁴ [Ibid](#)

⁵ [Berachos 54a](#)

⁶ [Keilim 1:9](#)

⁷ See [Mechilta loc. cit.](#)

⁸ [Ibid](#)

⁹ See [Zevachim 46b](#)