

מאמרי תורה - Torah Talk



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Parashat Ki Tavo
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פרשת כי תבוא
כ"א באלול תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 26:1-29:8

In this *parasha*, Moshe instructs *Bnei Yisrael* (the Israelites) on the first fruit offering, then elaborates on the terms of the covenant by listing the blessings for fulfilling the commandments and the punishments for disobeying them.

The Torah sometimes contains subtle messages in the ways it phrases verses. A case in point comes in this week's *parasha*, in chapter 27, verses 5 and 6. The context is God's command that *Bnei Yisrael* build an altar immediately after crossing the *Yarden* (Jordan) River and entering the Land of Israel. Hashem gives the following directions:

וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים, לֹא-תִבְנֶיךָ עָלֵיהֶם בְּרִזָּל.
אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶנּוּ, אֶת-מִזְבֵּחַ הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ; וְהִעַלְתָּ עָלָיו עֹלֹת, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

There you will build an altar to Hashem your God, an altar of stones; you shall lift up no iron tool upon them. You will build the altar of Hashem your God of complete stones; and you shall offer burnt-offerings on it to Hashem your God.

The idea of eschewing iron tools – the Hebrew word for iron is בְּרִזָּל, *barzel* – harkens back to previous statements in the Torah.

Shemot (Exodus) 20:21 states, “ וְאִם-מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה-לִּי, לֹא-תִבְנֶנּוּ אֶתְהֶן גְּזִית: ” – And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones; for if you lift up your tool [literally, sword] upon it, you have profaned it.” This echoes the discussion of the development of weapons way back

in *Bereshit* (Genesis) 4:22: “ וַצִּלָּה גַם-הוּא, יִלְדֶה אֶת-תּוֹבֵל קַיִן--לִטֵּשׁ, כָּל-חַרֵּשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת ” – And Tzillah, she also bore Tuval-Kayin, the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron.”

Note the use of the word “iron” in these examples, and its connection to weaponry. “Iron” denotes violence and brutality, reflected in the Torah describing *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) with the words כּוּר הַבְּרִזָּל – the iron furnace (*Devarim* 4:20). The altar that *Bnei Yisrael* is commanded to build in this week’s *parasha* must be a place of peace; therefore, no iron can touch the stones from which the altar is made.

Furthermore, the stones for the altar must be אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת – “complete stones.” We encounter the same term in *Devarim* 35:13-16:

לֹא-יְהִיֶּה לָּךְ בְּכִיסְךָ, אֶבֶן וְאֶבֶן : גְּדוֹלָה, וְקִטְנָה... אֶבֶן שְׁלֵמָה וְצָדֵק יְהִיָּה-
לָּךְ... לְמַעַן, יִאָּרִיכוּ יָמֶיךָ, עַל הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר-ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָּךְ כִּי תוֹעֵבֵת
ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ, כָּל-עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּה : כָּל, עֲשֵׂה עֹל.

You shall not have in your bag diverse weights [literally, a stone and a stone], a great and a small. A perfect and just weight [literally, a complete stone] shall you have...that your days may be long upon the land which Hashem your God gives you. For all that do such things, even all who do unrighteously, are an abomination to Hashem your God.

This text associates wholeness in general and the completeness of one’s stone with honesty. We can derive from this that the second thing that the altar needs to be is a place of integrity and honesty. Anything short of that renders worship useless and futile.

This is a good reminder to all of us as we enter the season of *teshuvah*, repentance. As the *haftarah* on Yom Kippur morning reminds us, God does not want our empty sacrifices and prayer; God wants us to right our wrongs, mend our ways, and treat each other with truth and justice, kindness and mercy.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why does “iron” mean violence and brutality? What else could “iron” denote?
- Why does the Torah talk about a “big stone and a small stone” when it is talking about honest measures? (Think about how scales looked and weighed out things in ancient times.)
- What might you want to work on in terms of improving yourself during this season of repentance?