

## Once Loved, Now Rejected

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider

“You shall not erect for yourself a matzevah (stone pillar) which the Lord your God detests” (Devarim 16:22).

A seemingly obscure law. The Torah teaches that the structure known as a matzevah (stone pillar), cannot be used when worshiping of God. Rather, service to God must be performed using only a mizbeach (altar).

Rashi raises the following question: Is it not the case that our forefathers erected a matzevah? How then could the Torah suddenly consider it loathsome in the eyes of the Almighty?

Rashi answers: “Although it was once beloved by God during the days of the Patriarchs, now He hated it because these (Canaanites) adopted it for idolatry” (Rashi, Devarim 16:22).

In other words, the Divine attitude changed based on the fact that the matzevah (stone pillar) became part of idolatrous worship.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook zt”l saw a significant spiritual lesson in the paradigm shift from matzevah to mizbeach. His interpretation is based on the difference between the two structures: The earlier matzevah consisted of a single stone, while the mizbeach was built of many stones (Talmud Yerushalmi, Avodah Zarah 4:4). A single stone is symbolic of a single approach to serving God. During the days of the Avot, the Patriarchs, this singular relationship was proper. Each of the forefathers served God in their

own unique way: Avraham exemplified the middah, characteristic, of ‘love’, Yitzchak - ‘fear’, Yaakov - ‘truth’. Each epitomized and modeled their own individualized definition of Judaism to their followers.

A mizbeach which consists of many stones, on the other hand, symbolizes the idea that God can be reached via a multiplicity of paths. With the giving of the Torah, God now desired that the Jewish people serve Him through a symphony of ideas. No longer is God to be reached through one exclusive path. True unity of the nation of Israel will be achieved precisely through a healthy diversity. Reverting back to the old ways that only tolerates one path is repudiated. Diversity of opinions and allowing each individual to find their path within the construct of the Torah and mitzvot brings the greatest glory to the Almighty. (Sichot HaRav Zvi Yehuda, Sefer Devarim p. 275 and Midbar Shor, pp. 74-76).

”וכן הוא רצון ה' יתברך שכל אחד ואחד יעסוק בתורה ומצות לפי מדתו רק שיתאחד עם הכלל וילך על פי דרך התורה...וכולם יתכוונו לשם שמים, בזה יתגדל ויתקדש שמו הגדול ברוך הוא. על כן רצונו דוקא במזבח של הרבה אבנים שכולן מתחברות יחד (מדבר שור, הדרוש התשיעי, עמוד עד).”

This unique understanding presented by Rav Kook can help us unlock the meaning of a puzzling episode in which Moshe engages in building both a mizbeach and a matzevah. At the giving of the Torah, Moshe actually erects twelve separate matzevot, and one mizbeach at the foot of the mountain: “...he rose early in the

morning and built a mizbeach at the foot of the mountain, and twelve matzevot, for the twelve tribes of Israel' (Sh'mot 24:4).

Moshe had just seen Israel act as one saying, "All the words that Hashem has spoken, we will do" (24:3). It, therefore, seems inappropriate to choose this exact moment to remind them that they were divided up into twelve tribes.

Apparently, this was precisely the message Moshe wished to convey. Each tribe exhibited a different strength and skill. One group excelled as teachers of Torah, one was successful in commerce, one led in battle etc.. Each tribe, and each person for that matter, must be lauded and admired for their unique contribution. Along with the twelve matzevot Moshe builds one mizbeach. The composite nature of the mizbeach which consists of many stones represents the blending of the many ideas and ideals to form one cohesive nation. Every Jew must operate within the framework of the Torah and the commandments but each of us does so in a unique way. Moshe, at this momentous occasion, portrayed an essential message utilizing the symbolism contained in these two structures.

As the Jewish people took their first steps after being freed from the bondage of Egypt, the Holy One Blessed Be He, split the sea. Numerous commentators agree that the sea split into twelve paths so that each tribe could cross the sea independently of the others (Ibn Ezra, Sh'mot 14:29, Pirkie DeRebbe Eliezer chap. 41). Why was it so important for each tribe to

cross independently? Apparently the Almighty had never wanted us to be one and the same. There is a critical lesson here regarding the importance of preserving diversity within the Jewish people. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught that each tribe prayed their own distinctive supplication which opened up twelve unique pathways in the sea (Likutey Moharan Lesson #9). Some have commented on this beautiful Breslov teaching suggesting that the twelve windows that are traditionally placed in the structure of a synagogue reminds us of the numerous paths that can be accessed in serving Hashem.

Taking a bird's eye view of Parshat Shoftim, Rav Kook identified four leadership roles found within the nation: Melech (king), Shofet (judge), Kohen (priest), and Navi (prophet). Rav Kook would say, "Take the first letter, the rashei tevot, of each of these four personalities who are representatives of the entire nation and one will note that it spells out the word Mishkan (Tabernacle)." "nyko". This teaches us that when the various dimensions of the nation work in tandem with one another the result is that the presence of God dwells among us (Sichot HaRav Zvi Yehuda, Sefer Devarim, p.283).

The multiplicity and range within our people fosters abundant blessings. We become the beneficiaries of this blessing when we wholeheartedly honor and admire each sector of our nation and every individual within Klal Yisrael.