

The Naturalness of Yerushalayim

Generally, the Torah is not circumspect in its demands. Commands are delivered directly and strongly. However, in three occasions, the Torah introduces a command with a conditional statement of “if.” The verse at the end of the parsha reads:¹

And if/when (*ve-im*) you make for Me an altar of stones, you shall not build them of hewn stones, lest you wield your sword upon it and desecrate it.

A simple understanding of the verse indicates that the Jewish people would have a choice if they wanted to build a stone altar. Rashi, though, explains:²

Rabbi Ishmael says: Every [mention of] אם in the Torah is optional except [for] three. [One of them is in this verse:] “And when (אם) you make Me an altar of stones.” Behold, this אם serves as an expression of כִּאֲשֶׁר, when, [meaning] and “when you make Me an altar of stones, you shall not build them of hewn stones.”... Similarly, “When (אם) you lend money” (Exod. 22:24) is obligatory, for it is said: “and you shall lend him” (Deut. 15:8). This one, too, serves as an expression of כִּאֲשֶׁר, when. Similarly, “And when (אם) you offer up a first fruits offering” (Lev. 2:14). This is the omer offering, which is [also] obligatory. Thus [all] these instances of אם are not conditional but are definite and serve as an expression of כִּאֲשֶׁר, when.

Thus, the mitzvot of building a strong altar, offering the omer korbon and lending money are obligatory even though they are introduced with a seemingly volitional statement.

What is the meaning of this? Why present a command as an option? The Maharal³ beautifully explains that even though we are commanded in these mitzvot, God wants us to

¹ Shemot 20:22.

² Rashi, *ibid.* Translation from Chabad.org

³ Gur Aryeh on the Rashi.

perform them volitionally – out of our own identification with the command. When we lend money to the poor or perform any other interpersonal mitzvah, the Torah's ideal of kindness should be so ingrained in us that the action should be a natural outgrowth of these ideals. Similarly, the stone altar and the omer offering represents our service of God – we should *want* to volitionally sacrifice to God and worship Him in prayer.

In this context, it is important to note that the altar that is mentioned is specifically the stone altar, which was in the Beit HaMikdash in Yerushalayim. While worshipping God should be natural everywhere, there is a higher level of identification when in the holiest spot on earth. Praying at the Kotel just seems natural to many of us, and even to many people who are far from Judaism. The location has an inner sanctity that makes it feel so right to talk to God. Therefore, it fits that specifically the stone altar is what is highlighted as a natural form of service.

May we merit to experience the naturalness and rightness of our prayers in Yerushalayim!