

As a (now-licensed) architect I can't help but be attracted to passages of the Gemara that give dimensions for certain parts of the Temple or of the Mishnaic world. Stairs in particular are tightly regulated parts of a building since people tend to fall or trip if the steps don't match up with a person's natural stride. Also, in the commercial world, stairs are most often used as part of an egress system, raising the stakes even higher.

Yoma 16A states:

*In addition, fifteen stairs ascend from within the women's courtyard and descend from the Israelite courtyard to the women's courtyard. Each stair was half a cubit high and half a cubit deep, for an additional ascent of seven and a half cubits. The total height of both staircases together was thirteen and a half cubits. And we learned in that mishna: The area between the Entrance Hall and the altar was twenty-two cubits wide, and there were twelve stairs in that area. Each stair was half a cubit high and half a cubit deep, for an additional ascent of six cubits and a total height of nineteen and a half cubits.*

If we assume cubits of about 18 inches (from the Gemara-Card!), that means that these steps were “huge”, possibly 9” rise and 9” run (100% slope), compared to the modern everyday world (~63% maximum slope). The Mishna in Middot, which our Gemara seems to challenge, describes the steps this way:

*There were twelve steps there, each step being half a cubit high and a cubit broad.*

This is better, but it's still a little odd: 4.5 inch rise and 9 inch run (50% slope). Sometimes having too little slope is just as bad as too much.

A very quick survey of some important buildings contemporary to Herod's Temple: the steps of the Parthenon (432 BCE, Athens) are about 12 inches tall and the steps of the Roman Temple to Fortuna Virilis (80 BCE, Rome) are between 10 and 11 inches tall.

Modern building codes limit step heights to a maximum of 7 inches and treads are supposed to be a minimum of 11 inches, which is supposed to correspond to modern strides and the size of people. I find that this is a minimum – if you've ever worn shoes that aren't like tennis shoes, your feet will still poke off the edge of the step.

As we consider including people of all ages and sizes, we might consider tweaking those dimensions a little bit in our synagogues, public buildings, and ultimately, the Third Temple, to make sure physical access to our sacred spaces are as open as possible. Shemot / Exodus 20:23 (at the end of Parshat Yitro) commands:

וְלֹא־תַעֲלֶה בַּמַּעֲלֹת עַל־מִזְבְּחִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגָּלֶה עֲרוֹתְךָ עָלָיו

*Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it.*

A Rashi to that verse mentions:

*the taking of large paces is near enough to uncovering one's nakedness that it may be described as such, and you would then be treating them (the stones of the altar) in a manner that implies disrespect...How is it in the case of stones which have no sense (feeling) to be particular about any disrespect shown to them? Scripture ordains that since they serve some useful purpose you should not treat them in a manner that implies disrespect! Then in the case of your fellow-man who is made in the image of your Creator and who is particular about any disrespect shown to him, how much more certain is it that you should not treat him disrespectfully! (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 20:23:1)*

Let's sing our fifteen pilgrim songs this and every Shabbat, while we carefully, comfortably and safely ascend to more holiness.

-Daniel Alhadeff

The Gemarra in *Yoma* 53 b notes:

This is analogous to a student who takes leave of his teacher. If [after stepping away from the teacher, the student] returns immediately, [the student] is like a dog that returns to its vomit [i.e., the student has defeated his initial gesture of respect.] Artscroll, *Yoma* 53.

Artscroll has some footnotes focusing on the imagery of dog vomit as a *lack of respect* that the student shows the teacher. The imagery of dog vomit is rather repulsive, but *Yoma* is not the first instance of its use. Note *Proverbs*, 26: 1-12 presents sayings on fools. Proverbs 26: 11-12 is particularly insightful for our purposes:

As a dog that returneth to his vomit,  
So is a fool that repeateth his folly.

Seest thou a man wise in his own eyes?  
There is more hope of a fool than of him.

*Proverbs*, edited by A. Cohen, London: the Soncino Press, 1952.

The verses from *Proverbs* use the imagery not for *disrespect* but for repeated *foolishness*. The concept, medically accurate or not, is that the dog vomits because it has eaten something noxious. Rather than avoid the vomit as in avoiding something noxious, the dog eats it again. It is the repetition of something harmful to oneself—again, this may not be medically accurate but appears to be the intent of Proverbs—that is the characteristic of a fool. (The Christian Bible in the book of Peter cites the dog vomit in Proverbs.)

Disrespect has an element of intent. A baby cannot possibly disrespect a wise person because a baby has no sense of propriety or respect, much less intent. So too, a dog has no sense of propriety with respect to food. The disrespect of the student goes to conscious willfulness. Contrast with the story of Rava and Rav Yosef and the profound and conscious respect the former had for the latter.

But *Proverbs* expands on the concept of a fool, one not willfully disrespectful, but rather self-absorbed and haughty, as in Proverbs 26:12. Such a person holds himself as “wise in his own eyes.” *Proverbs* holds such a person as lower than a fool. If prayer is a recognition of one’s own humility and lack of self-importance, then the failure to end a prayer with a humble gesture is according to *Yoma* 53b a sign of disrespect, and possibly according to *Proverbs* even worse than being a fool. The compilers of the Gemarra would have been quite familiar with the image in *Proverbs*. Such, ironically, is the lesson of dog’s vomit, an image as far removed from prayer as possibly imaginable.

I chuckled when I first read *Yoma* 53 because I had at least one economics professor who repeatedly used the image of dog’s vomit to indicate a stupid idea in general and Marxism in

particular. For these professors, dog vomit did not represent either disrespect or foolishness but rather quite simply bad ideas. For decades, I had assumed that the image was developed in the perverse environments of economics graduate programs in the 1950s and 1960s. Now I know that the image has been around for at least 2500 years, with successive generations of scholars finding new interpretations.

-Harold Furchtgott-Roth