

Teshuvah: Return and Renewal

Shoftim 5779

In the opening verses of Parashat Shoftim, the Torah commands us not to construct a *matzevah*, a stone used for ritual sacrifice¹, for it is despised by Hashem². This injunction is particularly surprising given the fact that figures as illustrious as Yaakov³ and Moshe⁴ both built *matzevot*, and used them for ritual purposes. How, then, can the Torah prohibit construction of *matzevot* altogether. Moreover, how can the Torah describe such *matzevot* as literally despised entities, ‘*asher sanei Hashem Elokecha*’⁵?

Indeed, Ibn Ezra⁶, on the basis of this evidence, argues that the Torah never actually restricted the construction of *matzevot*. On the contrary, the words, *asher sanei*, ‘that are despised’, is a qualification of the restriction. That is, only *matzevot* associated with idolatry are prohibited, as the Torah already mandated their annihilation in Parashat Re’eh.

Yet, Ibn Ezra’s view remains an isolated view within the scope of the rabbinic tradition. Rashi⁷, on the basis of a passage in Sifrei⁸, makes a remarkable argument regarding the prohibition against constructing *matzevot*, despite the fact that Yaakov and Moshe both used them for Divine service. Rashi, conceding the past utility of these *matzevot*, explains that since *matzevot* were subsequently adopted by the indigenous pagans for their rituals, they indeed became prohibited, and even despised.

One can hardly overstate the novelty, and even audacity, of such an argument. Producing the very same structure that Yaakov and Moshe used for service of the Almighty, with the exact same noble intentions as they had, is, on account of an external association with pagan worship, both despised and prohibited. And yet, this is precisely what Rashi argues, giving voice to the mainstream rabbinic tradition.

¹ See Ramban to Devarim 17:22 for a more holistic depiction of a *matzevah* relative to *mizbe’ach* and *asherah*. In brief, it appears to be a stone upon which pagan clerics would call others to this form of worship.

² Devarim 17:22.

³ Bereishit 28:18.

⁴ Shemot 24:4. In fairness, Moshe appears to have poured the blood only on the altar, and not on the twelve *matzevot*. Nevertheless, the injunction in our context relates even to construction itself.

⁵ See Ha-Emek Davar for Netziv’s analysis of why *matzevot* were prohibited while altars, *mizbechot*, which were equally used in pagan rituals, remained licit. In brief, he argues that the single stone of a *matzevah* was not only the structure upon which pagan ritual sacrifices were offered, but that the stones were themselves worshipped.

⁶ Devarim 17:22 s.v. *Vi-Lo Takim Licha Matzevah*

⁷ Ad loc.

⁸ Sifrei Devarim 146.

It seems to me that within this tradition, a profound message for this season of *teshuvah* resides. To be sure, much of *teshuvah*, as the very word suggests, is about return: return from sin, return to the Almighty, and indeed, to the best version of ourselves. And yet, at the same time, we must be cognizant that our processes of teshuvah also include elements of *hitchadsbut*, of renewal. What may have been effective and inspirational in the past, the proverbial *matzevah*, may no longer resonate with us, as we mature through life, and different stages, of marriage, of parenting, of loss, of disappointment, of career transitions, of relocations, exert their influence on us.

As such, it is our responsibility to find the appropriate synthesis of the old and new in our *teshuvah* processes. We ought to return to those paths that continue to resonate for us, while we seek out new ways of connecting to Hashem. *Hashivenu Hashem Elecha...Chadesh Yamenu Ki-Kedem*, as we seek out Hashem this Elul season, may we identify a balance between *chadesh*, renewal, and *kedem*, return.