

The Altar and the Law

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What relationship does the Temple altar have with Jewish civil law?

This is precisely the question faced by anyone who attempts to navigate the seemingly disjointed transition between the conclusion of Yitro, which relates to the ramp which leads up to the altar, and the beginning of this week's sedra, Mishpatim, the Jewish code of civil law.

What does the altar, the most potent symbol of Jewish ritual law, and the unquestioned centerpiece of the sacrificial order, have to do with what follows it, a dense legal thicket concerning torts and liabilities?

Rather than immediately reconciling our textual puzzle for us, Chazal compound the issue by actually deriving a legal conclusion from this challenging section. Taking their cue from this strange textual juxtaposition, the Sages taught that the Sanhedrin, the embodiment of Jewish law *par excellence*, must be located on the Temple Mount, in the very shadow of the altar. Finally, the Sages further contended that the first letter of Mishpatim should be interpreted as a '*vav ha-chibbur*,' a conjunction that serves to securely fasten these two sections of the Torah together.

In the face of this mounting evidence concerning the relationship of the altar with the civil code, we must revise our initial hypothesis. In point of fact, that which appeared to be a *non sequitur* might actually be intended as a seamless transition. The implications of this bond are crystal clear; there can be no tending to the altar in the absence of equal care for the civil law. The concept of a ritually pious thief, or an observant con artist, is an absolute paradox. Likewise, the parallel opposite paradigm, which attempts to portray Judaism as a purely civil or ethical tradition absent a ritual core, is an equally egregious distortion.

The special haftarah we read for Shabbat Shekalim is a clear example of this holistic ethic, the unity of ritual and civil law. Yehoash, the righteous king who assumed the throne as a seven year old boy, recognized the need to improve and enhance the Temple structure. Though the project met with some initial delays, Yehoash persisted, and marshalled the kohanim to ensure that the requisite funds necessary for enhancing the Temple, the space of Jewish ritual, were directed to their proper purposes, and that the workers were properly compensated.

Indeed, the prophetic text testifies to the absolute integrity of those involved in this sacred undertaking, that of financing the Temple maintenance, **כי באמנה הם עשים**, 'they acted in good faith.' They were the embodiment of ethical integrity in the ritual space of the Temple.

For us, this remains a polestar. When it comes to ritual law and civil law, the altar and the *mishpatim*, the Temple and the Sanhedrin, we aspire to full integration. A life of sanctity

and true piety demands our steadfast commitment to both realms. We fully reject a life of conformity to ritual law which disregards the most basic imperatives of honesty and integrity, as we do a basic ethical commitment devoid of Godliness. Only in our unyielding aspiration to synthesize these two realms, absolute interpersonal integrity, and steadfast devotion to our cherished and sacred rituals, can the Torah's vision of sanctity be fully realized.