

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Yitro  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Yitro – Guarding the mitzvot<sup>1</sup>

In this week's Parasha of Yitro we read about the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments.<sup>2</sup> This is the only time in history that Hashem appeared to an entire nation.

The Ten Commandments serve as an introduction to the other commandments and they contain the essence of the entire Torah. It was through the Ten Commandments that Hashem sealed His covenant with Bnei Yisrael.<sup>3</sup> Next week's Parasha of Mishpatim then lists out many of the mitzvot in much more specific detail. This approach to teaching the Mitzvot seems logical. First, we receive an overview of the subject matter so that we understand the general structure and the major principles. Subsequently, we receive a more detailed explanation. Indeed, many text books are structured that way.

However, at the very end of Parashat Yitro, wedged between the narrative of Har Sinai / the Ten Commandments and the detailed list of mitzvot in Parashat Mishpatim, are a few pasukim that appear to interrupt the logical flow described above. Let's take a closer look at these pasukim and try to work out why they are placed here. Here they are:

*You shall not make [images of anything that is] with Me. An altar of earth you shall make for, and you shall slaughter beside it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your cattle. Wherever I permit My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.*

*And when you make for Me an altar of stones, you shall not build them of hewn stones, lest you raise your sword over it and desecrate it.*

*And you shall not ascend my altar on steps, so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it. (Shmot 20:20-23)*

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that these pasukim actually function as a summary of the Ten Commandments and a very appropriate introduction to the list of mitzvot in Parashat Mishpatim. He explains how these few pasukim contain a reference to the three cardinal sins and the three major categories of mitzvot which summarises the entire spectrum of religious observance.

- 1. Avodah Zara / Mitzvot ben Adam l'Makom:** the first mitzva that appears in these pasukim is the prohibition against idol worship and an instruction as to how to serve Hashem correctly (namely, offering sacrifices from certain kosher animals on a proper altar). This represents the category of mitzvot known as Ben Adam l'Makom (between man and Hashem).

<sup>1</sup> This week's Darchai Noam is inspired by a dvar Torah that I heard from a member of the Nof Ayalon community on Parashat Yitro last year.

<sup>2</sup> A more accurate translation of "Aseret Hadibrot" is the "Ten Statements". There are actually more than ten commandments contained within these statements. However, the common translation that is used is the "Ten Commandments" so we will use that term for simplicity.

<sup>3</sup> This summary was taken from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's "The Handbook of Jewish Thought". See this excerpt for a more detailed summary of the Ten Commandments: <https://www.aish.com/jl/m/pm/48936762.html>

2. **Murder / Ben Adam l'Chavero:** the second mitzva is that when building the altar, we must not cut the stones to size using metal utensils. Rashi explains that the altar was made to lengthen man's days but metal was created to shorten man's days because it is used to make weapons such as swords. It is inappropriate to use something which can be used as a tool of murder when building an altar to Hashem. This mitzva thus contains a reference to this sin of murder and it represents the category of mitzvot known as Ben Adam l'Chavero (between man and his fellow man).
3. **Forbidden relations / Ben Adam l'atzmo:** the third mitzva is that we must not build steps leading up to the altar. We must rather build a ramp. The reason for this mitzva is that if the Kohanim had to walk up steps to get to the altar, they would need to widen their strides and this is similar to exposing oneself. The words used by the Torah here<sup>4</sup> to describe the "uncovering nakedness" which would occur when the Kohanim walk up the steps, are exactly the same words that are used when the Torah describes forbidden relations. Thus, this mitzva represents the category of mitzvot known as Ben Adam l'Atzmo (between a person and himself). One who engages in such a sin is not hurting another, but rather they are hurting themselves, by taking a powerful and precious gift with enormous potential and using it inappropriately.

These few pasukim also contain fundamental lessons about how we should relate to the mitzvot in general, the extent to which we need to safeguard the mitzvot and the degree of sensitivity that we need to have. For instance, using a metal utensil to cut the stone for the altar is very far removed from the sin of murder, yet we learn from here how sensitive we need to be to the preciousness of life. Similarly, merely walking up steps is not a literal exposure and is very far removed from the sin of inappropriate relations. (And in any case, the Kohanim were wearing pants!<sup>5</sup>) But this restriction teaches us how careful we need to be when dealing with the altar of Hashem. Even a hint of something inappropriate needs to be avoided.

Rashi points out that stones are inanimate objects which would not be bothered by the fact that someone cuts them with a metal utensil or walks over them in an inappropriate manner. However, we learn that since we need to be careful about the "feelings" of stones, then how much more so do we need to be exquisitely sensitive to the feelings of fellow human beings.

These restrictions help to sensitise us to the holiness of the mitzvot and how much care we need to take when guarding the mitzvot.

Thus, these few pasukim are perfectly placed between the story of Har Sinai and the list of mitzvot in next week's Parasha. They contain a succinct summary of the three main categories of mitzvot and they also teach us some important principles about the sensitivity and care required in keeping the mitzvot.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we learn something new, such as new halachot, strive to see them in context first by focusing on the bigger picture.
2. Remember the message of the stones – if we need to be sensitive to the "feelings" of stones, how much more so do we need to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> לא תגלה ערבתך עליו

<sup>5</sup> One of the special items of clothing that the Kohanim had to wear when performing the service was linen pants (Shmot 28:42).