

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion: *Mishpatim*

COURTS OF JUSTICE AND HOLY PLACES

וְאִם־מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי לֹא־תִבְנֶה אֹתוֹן גָּזִית כִּי חֶרֶב הַנֶּפֶת עָלֶיהָ וַתְּחַלְלֶנָּה:
וְלֹא־תַעֲלֶה בְּמַעֲלֹת עַל־מִזְבְּחִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגָּלֶה עֲרוֹתֶךָ עָלָיו: פ פ פ
וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תִּשִּׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם:

1. *And if you make me an altar of stones, do not make it of hewn stones; for by wielding your iron upon it you have profaned it. Do not ascend my altar by way of steps, so that your nakedness not be exposed to it...And these are the laws that you shall set before them...*

[Exodus 20:22-23, 21:1]

AVODAH COMMENTARY: The Torah portion *Yitro* ends with an chapter describing the altar. Immediately thereafter, with no transition at all, begins the Torah portion called *Mishpatim*. *Mishpatim*, which means “laws,” contains a digest of rules for a just society.

The rabbis saw the juxtaposition of these two passages as purposeful, and they asked:

2. From where do we learn that the Supreme Court was located right next to the altar?

To which they answered:

[From here]: *Do not ascend my altar by way of steps...* What is written just next to that verse? *And these are the laws...*

[*Yerushalmi Makkot* 2:6]

ומניין שהיתה סנהדרין גדולה אצל המזבח ולא תעלה במעלות על מזבחי ומה כתיב תמן
ואלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפניכם

QUESTIONS: What is the tradition teaching us about the pursuit of justice by placing the nation’s highest court inside the Temple, right next to the altar? What does it teach us about the Temple and what goes on there?

How do these teachings apply in a society such as ours, where there are strict rules of separation imposed between church and state? Does separation of church and state mean that religion and justice should not mix? How do you think they should mix?