

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Ki Tavo

The Altar as a Symbol of Peace and Reconciliation

וְאִם-מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה-לִּי לֹא-תִבְנֶה אֹתוֹ גִּזְיֹת כִּי חִרְבָּה הִנֵּפֶת עָלֶיךָ וְתִחַלְלֶה:

If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone, for by lifting up an implement upon it, you have profaned it. [Exodus 20:22]

אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת-מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהֵעַלִית עָלָיו עֹלֹת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

You shall build the altar of Adonai your God out of whole stones. [Deut. 27:6]

1. Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar used to explain: [Iron tools are used to hew stones. But] the altar is made to prolong human life, and iron is used to cut life short. It is not right to yield that which cuts life short against that which prolongs it.

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai offered a different interpretation: It says in the Torah, *You shall build the altar of Adonai your God out of whole stones (avanim shlemot)*. This verse teaches that the stones of the altar establish peace.

[AVODAH commentary: Rabbi Yohanan's midrash is based on the fact that the root of the Hebrew word "whole" (*shalem*) is the same as the root of the Hebrew word for "peace" (*shalom*).]

2. Now the stones of the altar do not see, nor do they hear or speak, yet because they establish peace between us and God, the Holy One said: *You shall not lift up an iron tool against them* (Deuteronomy 27:5)

How much more so should the peacemakers among us – anyone who establishes peace between people at odds with one another, between spouses, between city and city, between nation and nation, between family and family, between government and government – be protected so that no harm should come upon them! [Midrash Mekhilta, Bahodesh 11:80-93]

Questions: How does Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai's opinion differ from Rabbi Shimon ben Eleazar's?

What does it mean to use the symbol of the altar – the center of prayer and ritual life – to teach lessons about peace and reconciliation? What might it say about the role of worship in peacemaking? Peacemaking in worship?