

YOU SNOOZE, YOU LOSE!

Category: Shemos, Tetzaveh

The Altar had a ramp, not steps. Was that to be handicapped accessible? Or perhaps, do ramps teach us an important lesson...

The Ramps

Handicapped accessible. Everyone knows these words — especially if you're involved in building any type of public facility. There are a number of laws requiring every public place to be handicapped-accessible. They all have to have entrances that allow wheelchair access.

In this week's Torah portion we continue reading about the building of the Mishkan. One of the most important parts of the Mishkan was the Mizbayach, the altar. The Mizbayach was ten Amos tall, which is roughly 15 feet. Concerning the Mizbayach, however, the Torah issues a "strange" command at the end of the Torah portion of Yisro, actually. There it states: "Do not go up with steps on my altar upon which you shall not reveal your nakedness."

The Torah forbids equipping the altar with steps. Why? Because it's not too modest. Instead, there needs to be built a "kevesh," a ramp, for the Mizbayach.

So perhaps here the Torah was also concerned for the handicapped. But when we look at Jewish law (Maimonides, Laws of the Temple 2:13), we discover that the altar's ramp was 32 amos long, which is about 48 feet. American law, however, states that for every 15 feet of height, a ramp must be provided of 180 feet in length. This tells us that the Mizbayach's ramp was very slanted and certainly not intended for use by the handicapped. So why were there no steps? Why specifically a ramp?

At the beginning of the Torah portion we read about the kindling of the Menorah. The Menorah's height totaled 18 tefachim, which is four and-a-half feet. In front of the Menorah were three steps which the Kohen would climb to light the Menorah. We can ask the obvious question: If steps were forbidden for the Mizbayach "upon which you shall not reveal your nakedness," then why are they permitted for the Menorah?

Furthermore, when we study the construction of Bais Hamikdash in Yerushalayim on the Temple Mount, we discover that it contained many steps! There were 12 steps going up to the first level, 15 steps going up to the second level, and then three steps followed by 12 more leading up to the Heichal, or central hall.

Not only that, but these very steps were used for very important things: the choir of the Leviim, which consisted of 120 male vocalists, would stand on the 15 steps and sing what we today refer to as the “Song of Ascents”—the melody they would chant on the “ascents,” or the Temple’s steps. That’s why there are 15 “Songs of Ascents” in Tehilim (Psalms): because they correspond to the Bais Hamikdash’s 15 steps. On the three steps above these 15, the Kohanim would stand to bless the people every day with Birkas Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing.

We thus see that not only did the Bais Hamikdash have steps, they were well used. So again, why is it that when it comes to the Mizbayach, there it’s suddenly forbidden to have steps and only a ramp is allowed?

The Key Difference

Perhaps we can say that there are several differences between steps and a ramp. If a person has the choice of which to use, most people I know will choose the steps, because it’s shorter and quicker than a ramp, which requires a longer and more difficult walk.

But besides that, there is an essential and very important difference between steps and a ramp.

When a person goes up steps and gets tired midway, he or she can stop and stand or sit on the steps to rest. A ramp, on the other hand, and especially with a slanted ramp like the one at the Mizbayach, does not let one stop, either to stand or to sit. You constantly have to be moving upward, because if you don’t, you immediately start slipping backwards.

This is the lesson we can learn from the ramp going up to the Mizbayach. Steps are not invalid, which is why the Bais Hamikdash did in fact have steps. Even the Mishkan had three steps to allow the Kohen to light the Menorah. But when it comes to the Mizbayach, which symbolizes the service of G-d, the place where Korbonos, sacrifices, which comes from the word Kiruv, or drawing close, the

place where a Jew can find the closest bond to G-d... it is there that G-d specifically wanted a ramp.

When you approach the service of G-d, you can't have interruptions. You can't stop for a short time to catch your breath, because the moment you stop, you've already lost. Perhaps it can be said that the popular expression "You snooze, you lose," comes from this.

When Rabbi Elazar Missed Out

We see the same concept in the life of human beings.

The Talmud relates a story that happened 2,000 years ago. In the generation of the destruction of the Second Temple, the leader of the Jews was Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai. He had five top students, and the top among them was Rabbi Elazar Ben-Arach.

The Mishnah in Tractate Avos tells us how Rabbi Yochanan recounted their qualities, concluding, "If all the Sages of Israel were on one side of a scale and Rabbi Elazar Ben-Arach on the other, he'd counterbalance all of them" (Avos 2:9).

The Mishnah further states that Rabbi Yochanan asked each of his five leading disciples, "What is a good life path for a man to choose?" One said, "Having a good eye." A second said, "Having a good friend." A third said, "Having a good neighbor." A fourth said, "Seeing the outcome." Finally, Rabbi Elazar said, "Having a good heart." Rabbi Yochanan immediately picked out Rabbi Elazar's words, explaining that his suggestion contained all the others.

We see from here and other sources that Rabbi Elazar was the great promise of the next generation. Everyone had hope in him that he'd be the leader after Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai. On the verse (Psalms 1:3) "And everything he does succeeds," the Midrash (Midrash Tehilim 1:19) states, "[this means] that everyone needs his advice, for example: Rabbi Elazar Ben-Arach, who would offer advice which would bear out and succeed."

And then a tragedy befell the Nation of Israel. The Bais Hamikdash was destroyed and Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai passed on. All his students moved from

Yerushalayim to Yavneh, which had become the center of Judaism after the Destruction. But Rabbi Elazar Ben-Arach, we are told, “went after his wife’s wishes to find a place of excellent water and a fine home” (Koheles Rabbah 7:2). He went to seek out some place like Florida—he decided to take a break. And he thought his students would come running after him, but they didn’t come. So he wanted to go to Yavneh but his wife didn’t let him and he listened to her.

Ultimately, he decided to go back to Yavneh, but when he returned, it was already too late. He had missed the train. The place had flourished without him, and Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer, his fellow disciples, had become leaders and he was left behind. As the Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 147b) tells us, when he got up to read from the Torah scroll, instead of reading “Hachodesh hazeh lachem,” “This month shall be for you,” the portion of the Torah that talks about the holiday month of Nisan, he instead read, “Hachayreish haya leebam?!”—“have their hearts become deaf?!” which essentially conveyed his entire situation.

And it all happened because he took a brief break. The lesson is simple and clear. In anything in which you want to succeed, especially in service of G-d, you must not stop and you must not take a vacation. You snooze, you lose.