

Parshat Yitro:
On Being Seen and Heard
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Parshat Yitro introduces the obligation to create ramps. After the *Aseret Hadibrot* (Ten Commandments) are given, the Torah discusses the *mitzvah* of building the *mizbeach* (altar):

You shall not ascent My altar on steps, so that your nakedness will not be uncovered upon it (Shemoth 20:23).
 וְלֹא-תַעֲלֶה בְּמַעֲלֹת עַל-מִזְבְּחִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תִגְלֶה עֲרוֹתְךָ עָלָיו (שמות כ:כג)

The Kohen, must be able to access the altar not by way of steps, but by a ramp.

After the climax of the *Aseret Hadibrot*, including the imperative to worship one God, honoring parents, observing Shabbat, and the prohibition against murdering and stealing, this pasuk seems inconsequential. The *Aseret Hadibrot* form the central core of our *halachik* (legal) system, which outlines an ethical and religious code of laws to live by, and continues to be developed in the very next chapter, in parshat Mishpatim. It is strange, then, to veer off into a detailed account of how to construct the altar when the command to build the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) has not yet been given. Rashi is bothered by this sudden, detailed, technical law of the altar and interprets this *halakha* (law) through a metaphorical lens.

He explains that the Kohen cannot climb steps to the altar lest he expose himself to the stones. Doing so would cause one “to behave toward the stones in a humiliating manner...If the stones on the altar, which have no intelligence and therefore cannot be humiliated, how much more so would your friend, who is [created] in the likeness of your Creator and who does object to being humiliated, how much more [must you be careful not to embarrass him.]”

In the case of your fellow-man who is made in the image of your Creator and who is particular about any disrespect shown to him, how much more certain is it that you should not treat him disrespectfully! (Rashi, Shemot 20:23)
 חֵבְרֵךְ שֶׁהוּא בְּדַמּוֹת יוֹצְרֵךְ, וּמִקִּפִּיד עַל בְּדִיוֹנוֹ, עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכְמָה (רש"י, שמות כ:כג)

Rashi is underscoring the importance of being sensitive to others. This law, which relates to the *mizbeach*, is also central to our system of ethics, in the same way that honoring Shabbat and our parents are. The ramp up to the *mizbeach* is a core ethical law as opposed to a merely technical one.

To extend the metaphor a little further-- this altar is called “*mizbeach adamah*” the altar of the ground. However, one can also translate *adamah* from its root adam—the altar of the person. The altar, then, is a metaphor for people, the *mizbeach adamah*, to strive to treat our peers with deep sensitivity.

It is with deep sensitivity that God demands *B'nei Yisrael* stand at Har Sinai to receive the Torah. There’s a famous midrash (Bereishit Rabah 95:1) that suggests at the moment of revelation at Sinai all the blind could see and the deaf could hear. I can’t help but wonder - were these disabilities actually cured? Did the fire and brimstone, the shofar blasts and the thunder have curative capacity, causing the blind to see and the deaf to hear? Rather, at that moment of heightened spiritual purity, perhaps all of God’s creations, those with and

without a disability, were seen as whole (*shalem*). Everyone, with all of their flaws, was created with *b'tzelom elokim* (in God's likeness).

We must build ramps that allow for all members of the community to be valued and treated with sensitivity. Where all people will be seen and heard. Where inclusion means that everyone has access to revelation and all that our community stands for.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.