

## And do not erect for yourself a matzeivah (idolatrous pillar) which Hashem, your G-d, hates. (16:22)

Much of *Sefer Devarim* alludes to warnings concerning the idolatrous behavior of the nations inhabiting *Eretz Yisrael*. The Torah admonishes us not to learn from their nefarious practices, lest we fall prey to the *yetzer hara*, evil inclination, which seduces one to worship idols. One of the prohibitions is the erection of a *matzeivah*, pillar of stone, on which they would offer sacrifices. This is forbidden, even if the offerings are to Hashem. *Rashi* explains that Hashem abhors a *matzeivah*. He commanded us to make a *mizbayach avanim*, altar of stones, a *mizbayach adamah*, altar of earth, but not a *matzeivah*. He hates it because it had become the practice of the *Canaanim*. Although at one point, earlier in history, it had been beloved by Hashem, having become the altar of choice used by the *Avos*, Patriarchs. This all came to an end as a result of the *Canaanim* converting it into an altar dedicated to idolatry. *Ramban* notes that the *Canaanim* did not single out pillars as opposed to altars. They used both. Thus, according to *Rashi*, the Torah should have prohibited both types of *matzeivah*.

The *Shem MiShmuel* explains that actually there is a conceptual variation between the altar made of several stones, and the pillar consisting of one stone. One of the most famous altars was built by *Eliyahu HaNavi*, using twelve stones – one for each *shevet*, tribe.

*Eliyahu's mizbayach* connotes the essence of what an altar should be – and what it should represent. Comprised of twelve stones, it represented the Jewish nation – all twelve tribes – functioning as one. Each tribe, symbolized by its individual stone, made its unique contribution to the wholeness of *Klal Yisrael*. Together, the stones represent an integrated unit devoted to the service of Hashem. This is the principle of Divine worship – everyone together as one unit. An individual may not bring his own personal offering connecting to the integrated unit. A disenfranchised Jew has no business offering a sacrifice. He should join with the rest of *Klal Yisrael*, because that is what we are: a *klal*, united congregation.

We now understand the contrast presented by the *matzeivah*, single pillar of stone. By the very nature of its singularity, it fails to symbolize the need for an amalgamated unit, joined by a unifying belief. The pillar represents the individual who has yet to join the *klal*. Thus, the pillar fosters a distorted, perhaps spurious, perception of Divine service. A word of caution must be interjected. It is not as if the individual has no bearing. Indeed, individuality is encouraged. However, regarding Divine service, when an entire nation comprised of individuals each makes his own conscious decision to unite with the group in worshipping Hashem, it has greater meaning and efficacy.

Having said this, we must understand why the use of a *matzeivah* was not only permitted, but beloved by Hashem, when the *Avos* were offering the sacrifices. This does appear to be some form of spiritual double standard. The *Sochachover* explains that during the tenure of the *Avos*, prior to the formation of the Jewish nation, the *Avos* were *Klal Yisrael* in microcosm. Each Patriarch was

the standard-bearer for the belief in one G-d. Monotheism coursed through their veins, and the message of Torah – its values, observance, and the character traits of its adherents – was part and parcel of their lives. While it is true that they were individuals, their feelings represented the values and qualities of an entire nation.

Avraham *Avinu* inherited the Holy Land, just as the entire nation which is “registered” under his name was destined to do. Yaakov *Avinu*’s immediate seventy descendants who descended with him to Egypt are represented as “one soul.” Each Patriarch embodied all of the traits and elements of the nation that would originate from him. Avraham stood alone, as did Yitzchak and Yaakov: as the nation’s Patriarchs they – in their individual, singular selves – represented the entire nation.

With this in mind, we understand the permissibility of the pillar in the era of the *Avos*. The *Avos* were a complete nation unto themselves. Thus, it was entirely appropriate for them to offer sacrifices on the pillar comprised of a single stone. The sacrifice on the single stone represents the service of the individual, which in the case of the Patriarchs was synonymous with the entire nation. The *Canaanim* specifically chose the pillar as their mode of service. Idolators, by definition, have no sense of unity – each one doing what he sees fit – worshipping whatever he sees fit. Essentially, the idolator worships none other than himself. Selfishness marks the character of the idol worshipper. As such, the pillar, the symbol of personal devotion, was well-suited for their needs. The idol worshipper never attains a sense of unity. It goes against the grain of his theology.