

Joshua 22:1-34

The Altar at the Jordan

The tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had sent their best troops to be the vanguard in the Israelite attacks against the Canaanites. They had been away from their own their wives and children, and flocks, and herds in the Transjordan for most of 14 years (Seder Olam Rabba, c. 11. p. 32).

(This recalls the time spent by Jacob laboring for Laban first seven years for Leah and then seven years for Rachel as his wife).

Those tribes had promised Moses:

- **Numbers 32:18** - "We will not return unto our houses, until the children of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance."

Now Joshua exhorts them. It is a classic condensation or concentrate of what it means to love God:

Joshua 22:5-6 - "But take diligent heed to do the commandment and the law, which Moses the servant of the LORD charged you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cleave unto him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. So Joshua blessed them, and sent them away: and they went unto their tents."

This exhortation is seen all through the Bible, in the Shema (**Deuteronomy 6:4–5**) and in the words of Jesus, which Jesus fulfilled in Himself; and because He fulfilled this, we are able to love God "with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves."

- **Matthew 22:36-49** - "Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

"cleave unto Him" - *dabaq* - cling to, be joined to, adhere to as with glue, cleave, attach, follow closely, stick to, pursue and catch, to be lovingly devoted to - as a husband and wife are to be.

- **Genesis 2:24** - "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave (*dabaq*) unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

The husband and wife don't dissolve into a single entity. But their love combines to produce a child, in whom their DNA is genetically merged into a single new fleshly body.

This is oneness and unity with God, while at the same time retaining the distinction between the Creator and his creatures, between Bride and Bridegroom. The new entity - the "one flesh" - is spiritually the church, the body of Christ on earth, of which we are all distinct members but one with each other and our Head - Christ.

Prayer is both the entrance to, and the end result of, this oneness:

In true prayer, we bare our souls before God, like Hannah who spoke "in her heart" and, "poured out my soul before God" (**1 Samuel 1:15**).

The Controversial Altar

Joshua 22:10 - "And when they came unto the borders of Jordan, that are in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to."

or "a great altar in appearance." or "an impressive altar" (NET)

The LXX has "*bomos*" or "high place" instead of "altar" throughout this passage. High places usually included sacrifice and an altar. When the Tabernacle was set up, sacrifices could only be brought to the "entrance of the tent of meeting" (**Leviticus 17:2-4, Deuteronomy 12:5-7**) Later the Tabernacle and the ark resided on high places in Israel.

Solomon sacrificed at the "great high place" at Gibeon (**1 Kings 3:3-4**). But all high places became forbidden after the Temple's sacrificial system was established.

Suspicion

The three Transjordan tribes bore a stigma since Moses accused them of trying to dishearten Israel by choosing to settle on the east side of Jordan. Remember that Dathan and Abiram who joined with Korah to rebel against Moses (**Numbers 16**) were from the tribe of Reuben. Perhaps they bore some guilt too. They calmed the crisis then by agreeing to Moses' command to serve in the forefront of the war of conquest. Now, Joshua blessed them saying, "Ye have kept all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, and have obeyed my voice in all that I commanded you."

Still, they suspected that their counterparts on the other side of the Jordan would eventually grow to reject them as being part of Israel. Perhaps they thought their own descendants might also succumb to that idea. At any rate, they built an altar as a "witness," they said, against such an idea.

Josephus says it was erected on the eastern side of the Jordan, probably near a road or crossing point near Jericho where Israel had crossed the Jordan previously. The altar is described as a copy or replica of the altar in the Tabernacle, which had been established in Shiloh (**Joshua 18:1**). It is also described as a "great altar" made of stone, but the altar in the Tabernacle was made of metal and was not "great." So it must

have been a conspicuous structure - probably placed on a high or built up mound to increase visibility - with the replica altar sitting on top.

Joshua 22:12 - "And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up to war against them."

Why? Because God had commanded that idolatry would not be tolerated. Since the only sanctioned altar was at Shiloh where God dwelled with Israel, any other altar must be used to serve some other God.

- **Deuteronomy 13:13-15** - "If, regarding one of the cities the LORD your God is giving you to inhabit, you hear it said that wicked men have arisen from among you and have led the people of their city astray, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods" (which you have not known), then you must inquire, investigate, and interrogate thoroughly. And if it is established with certainty that this abomination has been committed among you, you must surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword."

But also, God commanded that worship was to be restricted to only one place:

- **Exodus 20:24** - "An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee."

- **Deuteronomy 12:10-11** - "But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes, and the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice vows which ye vow unto the LORD"

The "place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there" was further narrowed down in the days of David:

- **2 Samuel 7:1** - "When the king was settled in his palace and YHWH had granted him rest from all the enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan: "Here I am dwelling in a house of cedar, while the Ark of God abides in a tent!"

The ultimate fulfillment of this is in the body of Jesus, who referred to Himself as the Temple of God; later in His body, the church, whose members are living stones in this spiritual Temple; and eventually in the New Jerusalem, where no Temple is needed, and all dwell in the presence of the Lamb.

Dispelling Animosity

Even before this incident, there was probably still ample suspicion simmering under the surface about the decision of these tribes to settle outside the original boundaries of the

Promised Land. This matched the suspicion of the Transjordanian tribes that they would eventually be dismissed by future generations as not being part of Israel.

Appearances

Moses had told these tribes that if they completed their promised service, they would be "guiltless before the LORD, and before Israel."

This phrase fueled a strong tradition in Judaism about the importance of appearances, and avoiding even the appearance of evil. You could be innocent before God, but by leaving doubt in eyes of your brethren, your fellow Israelites, you would still leave things unsettled.

For example, according to the Mishnah, the person appointed to withdraw funds stored in the Temple treasury would be required to have no pockets, purses or even *tefillin* where money might be concealed. A companion would keep up a constant conversation with him to insure that no coins could be concealed in his mouth. "For we must be free of blame in the eyes of people just as we must be free of blame before God, as it is said, 'You shall be innocent in the eyes of God and Israel.'"

The Jerusalem Talmud adds: Where [is this] in the Prophets? In the verse, "God, the Lord God, He knows, and Israel too shall know" (**Joshua 22:21** - Joshua is considered a prophetic book) Where in the Writings? In the verse, "You shall find grace and good favor in the eyes of God and men" (**Proverbs 3:4**).

This is possibly the importance of the description of the young Jesus: "And Jesus increased in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor both with God and man" (**Luke 2:52**).

This tradition no doubt enters into Paul's discussion of eating meat offered to idols and warning those whose faith is strong to be sensitive to a "weaker brother" who might be drawn into behavior against his own conscience. (**Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8**)

The extreme form of this tradition was exemplified by the Pharisees, to whom care for appearances spilled over into blatant hypocrisy.

The balancing principle is it is forbidden to suspect people of wrongdoing. The rabbis said, "One who suspects [and accuses] the innocent is [punished by being] bodily afflicted."

And Rashi said that despite his holiness, even Moses was not able to avoid suspicion: "If he left his tent early, people would say that he had had a row with his wife. If he left late, they would say, 'He is devising evil plots against us.'"

To counter the appearance of separation, the Transjordanian tribes built "a great altar in appearance." But without the right context, it did just the opposite.

Averting Civil War

With the tribes gathering to go to war against their brother tribes, Joshua stepped in with a plan. He implemented the spiritual procedure prescribed by God prescribed before taking any action against suspected idolatry. - " inquire, investigate, and interrogate thoroughly." i.e. find out the truth.

The key ingredient here is mistrust of one's own perceptions. It appears these tribes have violated God's law, but, you know ...*we could be wrong*.

Don't Jump to Conclusions

In Nicodemus' defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, he emphasizes that the Law does not allow for rash judgments:

- **John 7:51** - "Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?"

- **Proverbs 18:13** - "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him."

- Believe the best of one another (Philippians 4:8)

Later Jewish writers say the defecation of a city too idolatry was to be tried by the great sanhedrim. If it appeared that they were thrust away to idolatry, they were to send two learned men to admonish them. If they repented, all was well; if not, all Israel was to go up and execute this sentence. Once the city has been breached, they are to set up many courts of judicature, and they judge them; and against whomsoever two witnesses come that he served idols, after they have admonished him they separate him; if all the worshippers be the fewest, they stone them, and the rest of the city are delivered; if they are found the greater number, they bring them to the great sanhedrim, and finish their judgment there, and they slay all those that have served with the sword:(Maimonides, Obede Cochabim, c. 4. sect. 3. 6.)

In this case, a delegation was arranged that included representative leaders from all the tribes, headed by Phinehas, son of Eleazar the High Priest.

Phinehas was famous for his zeal, delivering the first judgment against the sin at Baal Peor, spearing the Israelite and his Moabite seductress as they had sex in their tent (**Numbers 25**). His leadership of this delegation sent a message - we won't hesitate to respond with violence if idolatry is proven.

In fact, Josephus in his telling of this incident (Antiquities 5.107), has Phinehas threaten the Transjordanians with "righteous vengeance, should the accusation prove true."

Their message was that any sin or rebellion by the Transjordanian tribes would result in God's judgment on all the tribes, and they presented the examples of the plague at Baal Peor (**Numbers 25**) and of Achan's sin. It was through Achan's sin that 36 men were

slain by the men of Ai (**Joshua 7:5**).

But included in their message was a generous offer.

Joshua 22:19 - "Notwithstanding, if the land of your possession be unclean, then pass ye over unto the land of the possession of the LORD, wherein the LORD'S tabernacle dwelleth, and take possession among us: but rebel not against the LORD, nor rebel against us, in building you an altar beside the altar of the LORD our God."

Perhaps the Transjordanian tribes had found (or felt) that God was not present with them on the east side of the Jordan, and their land was therefore "unclean" and that's why they felt they needed their own altar. Or, if idolatry was so deep in the land where they settled that it couldn't be dislodged.

Even if they had disobeyed and built a rival altar, they could still opt out of idolatry and rebellion. War and judgment were not the only possible outcome of this situation. The 9 1/2 tribes could make room for them, even ceding some of their own lands to let them dwell in the west side of the Jordan.

Are we willing to help someone turn from themselves, break free from sin or addiction or some other idolatry even if it costs us in time or money?

Phinehas had been blessed for his zeal with a promise of a "covenant of peace" and an everlasting priesthood because he "turned away the wrath of God from Israel" and "was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel" (**Numbers 25:13**).

But others, including Rabbi Ashi (352-427 A.D.), said that Phinehas' blessing was also a reward for this incident - keeping the peace between the Israelites who settled in the Land and the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh who stayed on the other side of the Jordan.

[However, the blessing was later lost by Phinehas because of his refusal to annul Jephthah's rash vow concerning his daughter (**Judges 11:35**) and his failure to prevent the civil war with the Ephraimites (**Judges 12**).]

Then the Transjordanian tribes responded to Phinehas:

Joshua 22:22 - "The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if it be in rebellion, or if in transgression against the LORD, (save us not this day,)"

"Yahweh is the God of gods" - By using three words for God - Yahweh, El and Elohim, and repeating the phrase, they were emphasizing that they believed Yahweh was the only God, the God over any other gods or idols.

The altar, they insisted, was for a witness, for remembrance to future generation that they too served and loved Israel's God, and that they were indeed part of Israel.

Probably their intent was that in the same way the altar in the court of the Tabernacle was built as a replica of the heavenly altar, so this replica altar pointed back to the original altar in the Tabernacle.

Joshua 22:31 - "And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the children of Manasseh, This day we perceive that the LORD is among us, because ye have not committed this trespass against the LORD: now ye have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD."

- we perceive the Shekinah among us (Targum)

See **Psalm 133:1** - "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity"

Joshua 22:34 - "And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar Ed: for it shall be a witness between us that the LORD is God."

ed = "It shall be a witness" - a witness, legal testimony

Some rabbis say they engraved this name on the altar to clarify its purpose, so that no one would try to make a sacrifice on it.

Negotiation Without Sacrificing Your Ideals

The interaction here and before between Moses and the Transjordanian tribes is a great lesson in conflict resolution, which kept the nation together, allowed for the conquest of Canaan and left the Transjordanian tribes with good relations all around.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sees Moses employing elements of the four processes needed for a successful negotiation laid out in the book "Getting to Yes."

- Separate the people from the problem. There are all sorts of personal tensions in any negotiation. It is essential that these be cleared away first, so that the problem can be addressed objectively.

- Focus on interests, not positions. It is easy for any conflict to turn into a zero-sum game: if I win, you lose. If you win, I lose. That is what happens when you focus on positions and the question becomes, "Who wins?" By focusing not on positions but on interests, the question becomes, "Is there a way of achieving what each of us wants?"

- Invent options for mutual gain. This is the idea expressed halakhically as *zeh neheneh ve-zeh neheneh*, meaning that an act is permissible if "one side gains and the other side

does not lose" - i.e. "both sides benefit." This comes about because the two sides usually have different objectives, neither of which excludes the other.

- Insist on objective criteria. Make sure that both sides agree in advance to the use of objective, impartial criteria to judge whether what has been agreed has been achieved. Otherwise, despite all apparent agreement, the dispute will continue, both sides insisting that the other has not done what was promised.

See https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2591146/jewish/Conflict-Resolution.htm

That last element is what is lacking in our current political divide. No one can agree on objective criteria by which to judge truth, or even how to define goals for the common good. (But that's another story)

Bottom Line:

One lesson of this incident could be "don't judge a book by its cover."

But many scholars insist this was all still a dicey situation. The altar is not mentioned again. Later in Israel's history rival altars would be built in Samaria and the northern kingdom. Many small replica altars that were used for idolatry have been found by archaeologists in Israelite dwellings. Eventually it was forbidden to make even replicas of the Temple's menorah for fear it might lead to idolatry.

The "great altar" was their own idea, initiated from fear and suspicion. No reference is given to their asking God about whether this was a good idea or not. It's a slippery slope whenever we come up with sincere ideas that are not backed up by scriptural witnesses.

As we will see in the Book of Judges, chaos results when men do "each what is right in his own eyes." (**Judges 17:6**)

I prefer to focus on this incident as a lesson in unity and maintaining fellowship.

Spiritually, the Lord's Supper offers a similar pattern for believers, a symbolic ritual established by Jesus for his future generations, by which we remember Christ's death "until He comes." Like Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, we are part of Israel, yet separated by the gulf between this world and eternity. Citizens of both, and seated with Him in heavenly places, we are yet struggling through trials and temptations here below. The Afikomen / Lord's Supper elements of bread and wine point to His real body and blood, which we partake of spiritually through faith.