



## Reverence for the Temple – Then and Now By Rabbi David Silverberg

Parashat Vayetze describes Yaakov's famous dream of the ladder extending from the ground to the heavens, upon which God's angels ascended and descended to and from the sky. When Yaakov awoke from his dream, he exclaimed, "Indeed – the Lord is present at this place, and I did not know... How awesome is this place! This is nothing other than the house of God – and here is the gate to the heavens!" (28:16-17). Rashi explains that Yaakov here bemoans the fact that he slept on sacred ground. This holy site – which many scholars identified as the future site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – must be treated with utmost reverence and respect, and Yaakov therefore felt dismayed over having made use of this site as a place to sleep.

The Torah obligation of *mora Mikdash*, to show reverence for the site of the Temple, appears in the Book of Vayikra ("*u-mikdashi tira'u*" – 26:2), and is included in Maimonides' list of the Torah's affirmative commands, in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (asei 21). In his codification of these laws in his *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Beit Ha-bechira, chapter 7), Maimonides draws a distinction in this regard between the times when the Temple stood and the period following its destruction. Although the obligation of *mora Mikdash* applies even in the Temple's absence, it applies differently after the loss of the *Mikdash* than it did previously:

Even though the Temple is, as a result of our iniquities, destroyed, a person is obligated to show reverence to it, just as it applied when it was built. One may enter only the place where it is permissible to enter [when the Temple stood], one may not sit in the [site of the] courtyard, and one may not act lightheartedly facing the eastern gate, as it says, "You shall observe My Sabbaths and you shall act reverently toward My Temple" – just as Sabbath observance applies eternally, similarly, acting reverently toward the Temple applies eternally, for even though it is destroyed, it retains its sanctity.

In the time when the Temple is built, it is forbidden for a person to act lightheartedly from Mount Scopus, which outside Jerusalem, and inward, so long as he sees the Temple and there is no obstruction between him and the Temple. (Hilkhos Beit Ha-bechira 7:7-8)

Nowadays, Maimonides rules, it is forbidden to act "lightheartedly" only in the sacred site of the Temple itself, specifically, when one faces the eastern gate. When the Temple stood, however, this prohibition applied even outside the Temple and Temple Mount, until Mount Scopus, which stands just east of the Temple Mount. What might underlie this distinction?

The Talmud in Masekhet Yevamot (6a) raises a seemingly peculiar question concerning the precise nature and definition of *mora Mikdash*. The Torah states, "*u-mikdashi tira'u*," which, literally translated, requires one to "fear" the Temple itself. The

Gemara thus asks whether the “fear,” or reverence, required by this *mitzva* is directed toward the building of the Temple, or rather toward the One who resides, as it were, within its walls. The Gemara’s conclusion is that the Torah requires showing reverence to God, to the divine presence which dwells in the Temple.

What is the meaning behind this discussion? What difference does it make if we define the *mitzva* as requiring reverence for God or reverence for the Temple?

Possibly, the Gemara here raises the fundamental question as to whether the *mora Mikdash* obligation applies in the Temple’s absence, when the *Shekhina* (divine presence) still resides at the sacred site, but the building no longer stands. Does the reverence required by this *mitzva* pertain specifically to the building, or to the divine presence? The Gemara answers that the Torah demands showing reverence to the *Shekhina*, and therefore, as Maimonides rules, one must act reverently at the sacred site even after the destruction of the Temple.

If so, then it is possible that even in the Gemara’s conclusion, this *mitzva* actually contains both elements: reverence for the building, and reverence for the *Shekhina*. The Gemara concludes that one must show reverence to the site even in the building’s absence, out of respect for the *Shekhina*, but there may still be a separate obligation to show reverence for the building, as well, when the building stands. This would mean that in the times of the Temple, one must show reverence for both the structure as well as for the divine presence, while in the Temple’s absence, one must show reverence only for the divine presence.

This dual nature of the *mora Mikdash* obligation likely accounts for the distinction drawn by Maimonides. When the Temple stood, one was obligated to show reverence not only for the *Shekhina*, but also for the building itself. Therefore, it was forbidden to act disrespectfully once one entered the proximity of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, specifically, when one was within viewing distance. After the Temple’s destruction, however, the *mitzva* requires reverence only for the *Shekhina*, which is not visible. Thus, it is only at the sacred site, where the divine presence resides, where one is forbidden from acting in a lightheaded manner.

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