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בס"ד

Parashat Tesavveh Part III

The Rambam, the Shamir and Cutting Stones for the Temple

1. A Question and Rabbi Shamah's Response (from Mail-Jewish, an e-mail forum)

Question: *I remember learning that no metal tools may be used to cut [the stones] for the Beit Ha'Mikdash [the Temple]. Originally, there was a worm [the shamir] that would eat through the rock...[but it] is believed to be extinct. So how do we cut the stones?*

Rabbi Shamah's Response: According to the Rambam there is no problem. He writes that the stonemasonry and chiseling for the stones of the Temple should not be done at the Temple Mount but outside and brought in finished. Metal tools are forbidden to be used...only at the Temple Mount area. This is what was done in King Solomon's Temple as stated in 1 Kings 6:7; 7:9-12. (*MT, Laws of the Temple* 1:8)

In rejecting the explanation of the *shamir* in construction, the Rambam followed Rabbi Neḥemiah who told Rabbi Judah: "How is it possible to say this (that Solomon built with the *shamir*); does not Scripture state explicitly that the stones were cut with tools? Therefore the explanation is that he did the metal work outside and brought them in finished" (*b. Sotah* 48b).

Perhaps the primary source for the Rambam's view is the *Mekhilta*. On the verse "And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build them hewn; for by wielding your [iron] tool upon it you have profaned it" (Exod. 20:22), the *Mekhilta* comments that this law only applies to stones for the altar, not stones for the Temple structure and the Holy of Holies: "Do not build 'them' finely finished (*gazit*) – the stones for the *altar* may not be finely finished, but other sanctuary stones may be so finished." The *Mekhilta* continues: the explanation of the verse in 1 Kings 6:7 "And there was neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool heard in the House while being built," is that at

the Temple site such tools were not heard, but they were heard outside. There is no controversy on this point in the *Mekhilta*.

In the above-cited talmudic passage there is a follow-up by the anonymous questioner: According to Rabbi Neḥemiah, what was the *shamir* used for? The answer: for engraving the precious stones [of the *hoshen* and *ephod*]. Interestingly, in codifying the laws of engraving the stones (*MT Laws of Temple Vessels* 9:7), the Rambam does not mention the *shamir*. This has puzzled many commentators. Perhaps, since the *shamir* was not available, as stated in the Mishnah upon which that talmudic passage revolved, "From the time of the Temple destruction the *shamir* has become annulled" (*m. Sotah* 9:5), the Rambam's position is that the work must proceed as best as possible without it. Or perhaps there is another explanation for the Rambam's omission, but that is not for now.

2. Subsequently Added to the *Halakhic* Discussion

In the Rabbi Judah–Rabbi Neḥemiah dispute (*b. Sotah* 48b), *Rabee* (Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, redactor of the Mishnah, not to be confused with the Rabbi Judah we have been citing) stated that Rabbi Judah appears correct regarding the Temple building and Rabbi Neḥemiah appears correct regarding the building of Solomon's palace. Rabbi Joseph Karo, in his *Kesef Mishneh* commentary on the Rambam (*MT Laws of the Temple* 1:8) asks: How is it that the Rambam formulated the *halakhah* against *Rabee's* opinion, which is generally recognized as authoritative in deciding between the Tannaim?

It is noteworthy that within his answer the *Kesef Mishneh* states that a factor taken into account is that the scriptural peshat supports Rabbi Neḥemiah (the account in 1 Kings so indicates and there is no scriptural mention or hint of the *shamir*). Although the *Kesef Mishneh* does not mention it, it is also

noteworthy that *Rabee* does not cite any tradition regarding use of the *shamir*. Apparently, he was only *inclined* toward Rabbi Judah's view without having any solid proof. In such cases, perhaps the standard rules of deciding *halakhah* do not apply. For that matter, Rabbi Judah himself does not explicitly mention the *shamir* – it is only the anonymous talmudic passage that indirectly imputes the opinion regarding use of it to him. (The relationship between an anonymous talmudic follow-up comment or discussion and the authority being explicated is not generally explained in the Talmud and neither is it a matter of consensus.)

Given that the Torah's prohibition of using iron tools was explicitly stated only regarding the altar, what is the scriptural source for the view that use of iron tools for cutting and finishing non-altar Temple stones is only permitted away from the Temple site? The verses in 1 Kings 6:7 and 7:9-12 only indicate that it was done that way, but was that mandatory from Torah law? Was it part of the oral tradition independent of a verse or was there a derivation from the Torah? The above-cited *Mekhilta* passage, subsequent to expounding the *halakhah* for differentiating between altar stones and other Temple stones, stated that when metal tools may be used, the work must necessarily be done away from the Temple site, but it did not provide a source.

It is hardly likely that the source is a derivative from the prohibition of using hewn stones for the altar, for that law is formulated as an unconditional absolute, that is, stones upon which an iron tool has been lifted are profaned and disqualified for the altar regardless of where the procedure was done (Exod. 20:22; Deut. 27:5). In his formulation of the law banning the use of iron tools at the Temple site, the Rambam merely cited the 1 Kings verses. Although he did not count it as a separate law it surely does not appear to be of rabbinic origin, but rather subsumed under another category, apparently as an extension of the altar prohibition, as indicated in the *Mekhilta*. As a last resort we would say it is based on an oral tradition from the lawgiving to Moses at Sinai (*halakhah lemoshe misinai*), and that the opposing view does not agree there is such a tradition, an approach the Rambam generally does not favor.

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon addressed this question in an unpublished manuscript. He considered the source to

be Deuteronomy 27:5, a verse prescribing a future building of an altar to G-d: וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ...מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים (Deut. 27:5) “You shall build there an altar...an altar of stones; do not wield upon them [an] iron [tool]”). Following is his explanation (translated from the Hebrew):

The expression עֲלֵיהֶם (generally translated “upon them”) in the phrase לֹא תִגִּיר עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרִזָּל (Deut. 27:5) may be understood as “next to them” or “close by” as in the phrase וְעַלְיוֹ מִטָּה מְנַשֶּׁה (Num. 2:20), which means “next to [Ephraim] is the tribe of Manasseh” as translated by Ongelos and Rashi. We may assume that in the days of Solomon they took this possible interpretation into account and were careful not to use iron tools near the altar. We should bear in mind that at the time of the building of the Temple the altar was already standing in its place, for David had built it at what had been the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite and made an explicit declarative statement (1 Chr. 22:1) that it should be the altar for the offerings of Israel.

Thus, Rabbi Sassoon was of the opinion that although the source of the prohibition may have somehow been overlooked or forgotten, it may have always been the law that iron tools were banned in the vicinity of the altar and was faithfully so explained by the sages. Even had it been viewed when building the Temple that translating עֲלֵיהֶם as “close by” was only a possible explanation, it might have been treated as a case of having a doubt if there is a biblical prohibition in a matter and the practice would have been to be stringent (סִפְקָא דְאִוְרִייתָא לְחַוְמָרָא).

3. The Shamir and the Rambam

Clearly, the Rambam did not accept the existence of *shedim* (demons) in their literal sense, as described in the Talmud.* The Talmud associates access to the *shamir* with the world of demons, albeit a class of generally benevolent demons who interact with humans, do favors for them, laugh at their foibles and have knowledge of Torah (*b. Git.* 68a-b). The relevant story is an absolutely fantastic and bizarre one of the genre that the Rambam and many leading rabbis through the centuries did not consider to be literal.

In commenting on the final words of the verse in Qoheleth 2:8, that “I amassed...the luxuries of human

beings, *shidah* and *shidot*,” an opinion in the Talmud (*b. Git.* 68a) states that in Babylonia they translate *shidah* and *shidot* as “male and female demons.” (The root of *shidah* and *shidot* is not otherwise attested in Scripture.) The talmudic account continues: What did King Solomon need them for? When he was ready to build the Temple he asked the sages how to proceed with the stonecutting. They advised him to use the *shamir* (a worm or material that cuts stone), as Moses [supposedly] did for engraving the stones of the *ephod*. He asked concerning where it may be found. They replied that he should get a male and female demon, tie them together, and they may reveal the information to him.

He did so and was told that Ashmodai, king of the *shedim*, may know how to get the *shamir*. The king sent Benaiah, who, through a ploy, managed to get Ashmodai drunk and captured him, placing a chain containing Hashem’s name around him. Ashmodai informed the king that the Prince of the Sea is in charge of the *shamir* and he, in turn, entrusted it on oath to the field rooster (or “woodpecker”). Through another ploy the field rooster was prompted to bring the *shamir*, at which time Benaiah captured it. (The field rooster then committed suicide, thinking it violated its oath.) The king used the *shamir* for the Temple building.

Subsequently, when the king desired some information from Ashmodai, the latter refused until the king removed the chain from off of him and gave him his ring. At that point the demon played a trick on the king. He ousted him from the kingship and personally replaced him, impersonating him. The king was forced to go around begging, claiming he was king of Israel, while people thought he was a madman. Eventually, the sages realized what had happened and advised him how to regain his position.

In any event, as access to the *shamir* was through *shedim*, and as the Rambam does not consider *aggadot* such as this to be literal, nor does he accept the existence of *shedim* as literal, he surely regarded the subject of the *shamir* itself to be nonliteral. The Mishnah in *Abot* includes the *shamir* among the ten items G-d created *ben hashamashot* (during twilight) at the very conclusion of the sixth day of creation, together with the mouth of the well, the mouth of Baalam’s ass, etc. The Rambam does not interpret the speaking of Balaam’s ass literally.

In his Commentary to the Mishnah, which he wrote when he was relatively young (completed in 1168, when he was in his early thirties), the Rambam twice comments on the *shamir* (on *Sotah* 9:12 and *Abot* 5:5). In both statements he takes the position that Solomon used the *shamir* to cut large stones. His words on *Abot* 5:5: הַשְּׁמִיר' הוּא בְּעַל חַיִּים קָטָן, יִנְסֹר הַאֲבָבִים: וְבוּ בָנָה שְׁלֵמָה הַמְּקֻדָּשׁ הַגְּדוֹלוֹת בְּעוֹבְרוֹ עֲלֵיהֶן, וְבוּ בָנָה שְׁלֵמָה הַמְּקֻדָּשׁ (“The *shamir* is a small creature which saws the large stones in passing over them and with it Solomon built the Temple”).

However, we know the Rambam reversed himself on many statements that he made in his Commentary on the Mishnah. He explicitly stated so in an 1191 letter to his student Rabbi Joseph (either Ibn Waqnin or Sham’un), concerning some of the variations between his Commentary on the Mishnah and *Mishneh Torah*. He acknowledges having erred in the earlier work, usually in instances of having relied uncritically on the interpretations of the gaonim. He writes that upon subsequently studying those matters more carefully he concluded that those gaonim were mistaken. Apparently, from the *shamir*’s total absence in his *Mishneh Torah* compendium, this is one of his reversals (not necessarily being a case in which his original opinion was attributable to the gaonim), later considering the *shamir* allegorical.

4. Follow-Up Discussion

To Rabbi Shamah from Rabbi U. W.:

I would like to add two notes.

- 1) There may have been more than one worm that could cut through stones. (If there can be one, there can be two.) Perhaps one of them was not extinct when Solomon built the Temple.
- 2) The Mishnah in *Abot* makes reference to the *shamir*, and the Rambam therefore needs to explain what it is about. The Mishnah is in accordance with that view that the *shamir* was used. In codifying the *halakhah* in *Mishneh Torah*, he did not accept that view, but in explaining the Mishnah he must explain what it is about. What is he to do, ignore the reference to *shamir* because he does not accept it as *halakhah*?

Thus it may not be necessary to posit that he changed his mind. Not that there is a problem in principle with

the idea of change, just that it may not be necessary here.

To Rabbi U. W. from Rabbi Shamah:

1. Even if it was thought that the *shamir* was a species and there were others (from the talmudic account one may surmise that it was necessary to get the one specific *shamir*), it appears correct to state that the Rambam eventually rejected the possibility of its reality. There was no scriptural reference to it, the Rambam did not know of it and had not heard of it from any scientific account, and the talmudic description of it and the fantastic method employed to obtain it, all lead to the conclusion of an allegoric interpretation.

2. The Rambam's *shamir* comments in his Mishnah commentary do not lend themselves to being understood as his explicating the "other" opinion that he personally rejects. He describes the *shamir* in a factual manner. Had he believed at that time that it had no reality he could not have described it as he did, but surely would have said "according to their opinion."

This does shed some light on the Rambam's views and methodology in different phases of his life.

To Rabbi Shamah from Rabbi D. B.:

In a *shiur* I heard from Rabbi M. Tendler, he stated that they had found the *shamir* not long ago near Beer-sheba. Apparently there was an article in *Nature* magazine regarding this. It does not cut [through] rock but does engrave in it up to 3 mm [.12 in.]. It cuts into rock to eat the lichen inside. According to Rabbi Tendler the *shamir* was only used to engrave the stones on the breastplate.

To Rabbi D. B. from Rabbi Shamah:

Does the newly discovered *shamir* carve into the substance even when the lichen is on the surface? Otherwise, how does one get it to engrave exactly according to the desired pattern? One cannot place the lichen beneath the surface of the breastplate gems

in exactly the pattern required, so as to inscribe the names of the tribes.

The ancients possibly knew of such a creature as you describe and it would then be likely that folklore would have magnified its powers many times over. Through a *midrashic* interpretive process it was integrated into the system of Temple construction.

Endnote

* The Rambam did not make an explicit statement denying the existence of *shedim*. But his position is crystal clear, for he unfailingly ignored explanations of the Talmud in various areas that attributed reality to them, devising alternate interpretations. The Vilna Gaon (d. 1797; the word *Gaon* used in his name is an honorific title, not to be confused with the term *Gaon* used for Babylonian academy-heads of the early post-talmudic era) harshly criticized him for this. In commenting on *Shulhan Arukh's* statement that it is permitted to mutter incantations for one bitten by a scorpion, although they have no efficacy, for such an individual might be in mortal danger and there is a fear that if not permitted he may "lose his mind" (*Yoreh De'ah* 179:6), the Gaon states:

[The words] "although it has no efficacy" are from the Rambam...for he followed philosophy and therefore wrote that magic, names, incantations, demons (*shedim*) and *qemi'ot* (amulets) are all false. However...there are numerous such cases in the Talmud... Philosophy tilted him to explain all these in poetic [allegorical] fashion uprooting their simple meaning but *has veshalom* I do not believe in those explanations or those similar to them. All those statements are according to their peshat. Although they do possess inner meaning, it is not the inner meaning of the philosophers but of those possessing the truth (ad loc).

However, in countless cases science has come to the Rambam's defense, such as by providing compelling explanations for phenomena that had previously been unexplainable in a natural way and had been thought to indicate the existence of *shedim*.