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ד"ר

Cutting Stones for the Temple, the Rambam and the Shamir

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. 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 I Kings 6:7; 7:9-12. (MT *Hilkhot Beit Habehira* 1:8)

In rejecting the explanation of the *shamir* in construction, the Rambam followed Rabbi Neḥemiah who told Rabbi Yehuda (BT *Sota* 48b) "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."

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" (Ex. 20:22), the Mekhilta comments that this law only applies to stones for the altar, not stones for the *Heikhal* 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 I 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 *Hilkhot Kele Miqdash* 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 preceding that passage, "From the time of the Temple destruction the *shamir* has become annulled," 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 Yehuda-Rabbi Neḥemiah dispute (BT *Sota* 48b), *Rabee* (Rabbi Yehuda the Patriarch, redactor of the Mishnah, not to be confused with the Rabbi Yehudah we have been citing) stated that Rabbi Yehuda appears correct regarding the Temple building and Rabbi Neḥemiah appears correct regarding the building of Solomon's palace. Rabbi Yosef Karo, in his *Kesef Mishneh* commentary on the Rambam (MT *Hilkhot Bet Habehira* 1:8) asks: How is it that the Rambam formulated the *halakha* against *Rabee's* opinion, which is generally recognized as authoritative in deciding between the *tana'im*?

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 I 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 Yehuda's view without having any solid proof. In such cases, perhaps the standard rules of deciding *halakha* do not apply. For that matter, Rabbi Yehuda 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 I 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 or did they have a derivation from the Torah? The above-cited Mekhilta passage, subsequent to expounding the *halakha* 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 (Ex. 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 rabbinic, 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 *halakha leMoshe miSinai* (an oral tradition from the Lawgiving), 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 וְבָנִיתָ עָלֵיהֶם בְּרִזָּל (“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 עָלֵיהֶם in the phrase לֹא תִגִּיף עָלֵיהֶם (Deut. 27:5) may be understood as “next to” or “close by” as in the phrase וְעָלִיו מִטָּה מִנְּשֵׂה (Num. 2:20), which means “next to [Ephraim] is the tribe of Menashe” as translated by Onqelos 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 Aravnah the Jebusite and made an explicit declarative statement (I Chrn. 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 been overlooked or forgotten, it may, indeed, have been part of the law not to use iron tools for, or rather in the vicinity of, the altar and was faithfully so explained by the Sages. Of course the law itself may have never been forgotten, but even had it been viewed when building the Temple as only a possible explanation of the verse it would have been treated as וְכִפְּקוֹ דְאִוְרֵי יִתָּא לְהוֹמְרָא, a case in which it is proper to be stringent since it concerns a doubt of Biblical law.

3. The Shamir and the Rambam

It is a well-founded assumption that the Rambam did not accept the literal existence of *shedim* (demons)*. The Talmud associates access to the *shamir* with the world of demons, albeit a class of generally benevolent ones who do favors for humans and laugh at their foibles and have knowledge of Torah (BT *Git.* 68a). 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 literally true.

In commenting on the final words of the verse in Qohelet 2:8, that “I amassed...the luxuries of human beings, *shidah* and *shidot*,” an opinion in the Talmud

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 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 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. Tandler, he stated that they had found the *shamir* not long ago near Beer Sheva. 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 Tandler the *shamir* was only used to engrave the stones on the breastplate.

To Rabbi 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 explicitly deny the existence of *shedim* in his writings. But his position is crystal-clear, for he unfailingly ignored explanations of the Talmud that attributed reality to them, devising other interpretations. The Vilna Gaon (d. 1797) harshly criticized him for this. On *Shulhan Arukh's* statement that it is permitted to mutter incantations for one bitten by a scorpion, although it has no efficacy, for the individual is in mortal danger and there is a fear that if it is not permitted he may "lose his mind" (*Yoreh De'ah* 179.6), the Gaon comments:

[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 Gemara... 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.

However, in numerous cases science has come to the Rambam's defense, such as by providing compelling explanations for numerous phenomena that had been thought to indicate the existence of *shedim*.