

Ascending and Descending, a Hebrew Idiom?

This weeks reading is from Parashat Terumah (*Shemot / Exodus 25:1-27:19*), the Lord tells Moshe to speak to the Children of Israel to raise a contribution for the Lord (25:1) א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ-לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ, (25:1): אֶת-תְּרוּמַתִּי: (אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבָבוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַתִּי:) asking them to give gold, silver, and bronze, linen materials, goat hair, rams skins, and acacia wood all for the purpose of the construction of the Mishkan. The word *terumah*, (“*lifting up*”) comes from the verb stem, “*rum*” (רום) meaning “*high*” or “*to lift up*.” The raising up, or the lifting up of something is a significant concept within the Torah. The example provided here is to the tithe offering. “*Terumat ha-maaser*” (תרומת המעשר) is a rabbinical term based on the commandment in the Hebrew Bible to give a tenth *maaser* (מעשר) to the Levites. The Septuagint renders this as “*afairema*” (ἀφαιρέμα), which is translated as “*offering*,” “*oblation*,” or “*heave offering*.” *Terumah* is used in various contexts throughout the Hebrew Bible, where in most cases it refers to designating something for a higher purpose. The reading for this week describes an obligatory offering (*Terumah*) that the Lord is asking the people to contribute for the specific purpose of the construction of the Mishkan. The Lord is asking that the Mishkan be constructed with all of its instruments and altars that are to be made in the specific way He has shown Moshe (25:9-27:19). The Lord states that the sanctuary be constructed so that He can dwell among His people (25:8). The concept of raising up, ascending, and descending finds a great amount of meaning throughout the Scriptures.

ספר שמות פרק כה

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ-לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבָבוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַתִּי: ג וְזֹאת תִקְחוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַתִּי אֲשֶׁר תִקְחוּ מֵאֵתֵם זָהָב וְכֶסֶף וְנִחֹשֶׁת: ד וְתִכְתֹּב כְּלֵת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ וְעֵדִים: ה וְעֵרַת אֵילִם מְאֻדָּמִים וְעֵרַת תְּחָשִׁים וְעֵצֵי שִׁטִּים: ו שֶׁמֶן לְמָאֵר בְּשָׂמִים לְשֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה וְלִקְטֹרֶת הַסַּמִּים: ז אֲבָנֵי-שֹׁהַם וְאֲבָנֵי מְלֵאִים לְאַפֹּד וְלַחֹשֶׁן: ח וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם:

Shemot / Exodus 25:1-8

25:1 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 25:2 Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution. 25:3 This is the contribution which you are to raise from them: gold, silver and bronze, 25:4 blue, purple and scarlet material, fine linen, goat hair, 25:5 rams' skins dyed red, porpoise skins, acacia wood, 25:6 oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, 25:7 onyx stones and setting stones for the ephod and for the breastpiece. 25:8 Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. (NASB)

The first occurrence of the phrase “*ascending and descending*” is found in Parashat Vayetze, *Bereshit / Genesis 28:11-15*, and the story when Jacob was fleeing his brother Esau.

Bereshit / Genesis 28:11-15

28:11 He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. 28:12 He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 28:13 And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. 28:14 'Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 28:15 'Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' (NASB)

The Artscroll Bible on Bereshit quotes Rashi saying, *“The Torah does not tell us which place. Instead it uses the definite article in “the place,” implying that the identity of the place was so well known that it need not be specified. This indicates that it refers to the site mentioned elsewhere in Scripture by the designation “the place,” Mount Moriah, of which it is said in Bereshit / Genesis 22:4 (see also Devarim / Deuteronomy 16:16)”* The interpretation on the location of this place is taken to refer to Mount Moriah since the Torah refers to the site Abraham saw *“ha'makom,”* the place. Mount Moriah has special significance since it is the place where the sacrifice of Isaac is believed to have taken place (*Bereshit / Genesis 22:2*), it is also the location where Solomon built the Temple, and it is also the place where the Lord appeared to David. All of these things coupled with the ladder that was let down from heaven where the angels were *“ascending and descending,”* the interpretation on this place is believed to be the location that God dwells (the Temple Mount). Because of these things, the concept of *“ascending and descending”* takes on a special significance in the minds of the rabbis and their interpretations of the Scriptures. For example, in *Midrash Rabbah Shemot, Parashat 33, Part 2*, the rabbis give an interpretation on the Scriptures pertaining to this week's Torah portion, Parashat Terumah saying the following:

Midrash Rabbah Shemot, Parashat 33, Part 2

Another explanation of That they take for Me an offering. It is written, You have ascended on high, You have led captivity captive (Tehillim / Psalms 68:19). All your promotions have been from above. You did ascend on high, and Moshe went up to God (Shemot / Exodus 19:3), and Moshe drew near unto the thick darkness where God was (Shemot / Exodus 22:18). You have led captivity captive. Lest you think that just as a king is distressed when his hosts are captured, so this was also here the case, therefore the verse adds, You have received gifts among men (Tehillim / Psalms loc. crit.). Again, when a man sells a

thing, he is distressed; therefore it says, receiving gifts among men. God said to them, It is as if I bestowed a gift on you. Yea, among the rebellious (Sorerim) also. God said to Moshe, What do the heathen maintain, that I will not return with them, because they worshiped idols, as it says, They are quickly (saru) turned aside (Devarim / Deuteronomy 9:12)? Even if they are rebellious I do not abandon them, but still dwell with them, for it says, Yea, among the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell there.

מדרש רבה שמות פרשה לג סימן ב

ב דבר אחר ויקחו לי תרומה, הה"ד (תהלים סח) עלית למרום שבית שבי, כל עלוייך לא היה אלא מן המרום, עלית למרום, (שמות יז) ומשה עלה אל האלהים, (שם שמות כ) ומשה נגש אל הערפל, שבית שבי מלך בשעה שחיילותיו נשבים הוא מיצר תאמר אף כאן כך, ת"ל לקחת, וב־שעה שאדם מוכר הוא מיצר ת"ל מתנות באדם, אמר להם כך אני מעלה עליכם כאלו מתנה נתתיה לכם, אף סוררים אמר הקב"ה למשה מה עובדי כוכבים אומרים שאיני חוזר עמהם על שעבדו עבודת כוכבים שנאמר (דברים ט) סרו מהר, אפילו סוררים הן איני מניח אותם ועמהם אני דר שנאמר אף סוררים לשכון יה אלהים.

In Midrash Rabbah, the rabbis describe the making of an offering with the concepts of “*ascending*” (to the altar) and “*leading captivity captive*,” quoting from the psalms, to Moshe who ascended up to the Lord God on the mountain of Sinai. Moshe drawing near to the cloud on the mountain, leading captivity captive, and gifts given unto men are all drawn into the context of the free will offering of Terumah. The Lord received gifts from the children of Israel, and the rabbis say “*it is as if God said to them, it is as if I bestowed a gift to you.*” The idea is Moshe will return and the Lord will be with him. This is contrasted to the heathen who serve idols, the Lord does not totally abandon for the sake of His word. To understand the meaning of “*ascending and descending*” with regard to these Scriptures from Parashat Terumah, let’s look at *Midrash Tehillim 36, Part 1*.

Midrash Tehillim 36, Part 1 opens with the Dibur Hamathil (דיבור המתחיל) saying “*To the Lord of victories, A Psalm of David, the servant of the Lord (Tehillim / Psalms 36:1).*” The homiletic introduction to the Midrash states “*The phrase Lord of victories is to be considered in the light of the verse Happy are you, O Israel, who is like you? A people saved by the Lord (Devarim / Deuteronomy 33:29).*” The rabbis continue saying the following:

The Holy One blessed be He, wages Israel’s wars, but victory is ascribed to Israel. Thus, Scripture says, In all the signs and wonders and in all the mighty hand, and in all the great terror, which Moshe wrought (Devarim / Deuteronomy 34:11-12), here it is not written, Which the Lord wrought, but which Moshe wrought. (Midrash Tehillim

Midrash Tehillim 36 speaks of the victories of the Lord and point out an example saying the victory that is the Lord may also be ascribed to someone else. The proof text that is given is from *Devarim / Deuteronomy 34:10-12*.

Devarim / Deuteronomy 34:10-12

34:10 Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, 34:11 for all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land, 34:12 and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. (NASB)

Note how the Hebrew text is written וְלִכְלֵל הַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְלִכְלֵל הַמּוֹרָא הַגָּדוֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה לְעֵינֵי כָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל “and all the hand of power, and all the great fear or terror that Moshe did / performed (עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה) before the eyes of all of Israel.” The text states “*asher oseh Moshe*” (אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה) “that Moshe did / performed” where the previous verses states that the Lord is who sent him to perform these signs and wonders. Based upon the Scriptures, the Lord empowered Moshe to perform the miracles in Egypt and the victory was ascribed to Moshe according to the Torah while at the same time, the victory was the Lord God in heaven. In a similar manner, the rabbis use the example from *Judges 5:12*, the prophetess Deborah and Barak. The midrash says the following:

Deborah said, Arise, Barak, and lead your captivity captive, you son of Abinoam (Judges 5:12). But could it be said to him Arise, Barak, and lead captivity captive, as if it were really his captivity? What could Deborah have meant by Arise except Arise, but you will not do battle for the battle is the Lord's, as is said This is the day in which the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand (Judges 4:14), and also, They fought from heaven (Judges 5:20). And yet, when Barak was about to say, The victory is the Lord's, Deborah said, Lead your captivity captive. (Midrash Tehillim 36, Part 1)

The Midrash states that Deborah tells Barak to arise and “*lead your captivity captive.*” The Rabbis ask the question “*But could it be said to him Arise, Barak, and lead captivity captive, as if it were really his captivity?*” This may be the same concept of leading captivity captive as we find in *Midrash Rabbah Shemot, Parashat 33, Part 2*. We are beginning to understand the rabbinic concept of leading captivity captive. Note the context regarding the battle and the section of the text from Midrash Tehillim. The rabbis ask “*what could Deborah have meant,*” and they say “*This is the day the Lord has delivered Sisera into your hand (Judges 4:14).*” The rabbis then state that when Barak was about to say the victory is the Lord's, Deborah said, Lead your captivity. The rabbis comments

here are under the opinion that the Lord performs the miracles (*He fights the battle in this case*) and ascribes the victory to someone else (i.e. Barak). The leading of captivity captive appears to be a reference to Barak who is leading, however, the victory is the Lord's even though the victory is being ascribed to Barak. (*Similar concepts are put forward in the midrashim regarding Moshe and the mountain of Sinai.*) This is emphasized by the last line of the midrash that states Barak was about to declare the victory is the Lord's and Deborah states lead your captivity captive.

The phrase "*leads captivity captive*" reminds us of the Apostle Paul's words in *Ephesians 4:8-10*. Let's read the context of *Ephesians 4:1-27*; pay close attention to who is being led captive?

Ephesians 4:1-27

4:1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, 4:2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; 4:3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4:4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; 4:5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism, 4:6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. 4:7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. 4:8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. 4:9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? 4:10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 4:12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 4:13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: 4:14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; 4:15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: 4:16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. 4:17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, 4:18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: 4:19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. 4:20

But ye have not so learned Christ; 4:21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: 4:22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; 4:23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 4:24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. 4:25 Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. 4:26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: 4:27 Neither give place to the devil. (KJV)

Typically, Christian commentators state the ones who were being led captive are those who have died being led captive out of hell and on into heaven. This might be because Paul reverses the rabbinic idiom of ascending and descending, saying first He (Yeshua) descended, and then he ascended. The idea is that Yeshua descended into hell to tell the righteous souls in the paradise side of Hades what he had accomplished. (*Note this is from Greek mythology and having a Greek mind.*) Is that what Paul was trying to say here in *Ephesians 4*? According to Ephesians chapter 4, Paul speaks of himself being a prisoner of the Lord (4:1). He appeals to the Ephesians to walk according to their calling, to be humble, meek, and to love one another, to be one in spirit with one another in peace. Paul speaks of one body and one Spirit, One Lord, one faith, one immersion (baptism), and one God and Father of all, and that the Lord has given each of us grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ (Χριστοῦ). In *Ephesians 4:8*, Paul says *4:8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (KJV)* What is interesting is that this phrase “*led captivity captive*” appears to follow the same idea from the midrash, that the Lord God Almighty is the one who is the victor, but the victory is ascribed to Yeshua the Messiah. Because of this, He has given gifts to us (e.g. *the gifts of eternal life, peace, fellowship with God, salvation, etc*) Paul then leads into what appears to be a midrashic understanding of Yeshua ascending and descending saying the following:

Ephesians 4:9-10

4:9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? 4:10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) (KJV)

The ascending and descending reminds us of *Midrash Tehillim on 68:11*. According to Rabbi Nathan, Moshe went up on Sinai, received the Torah from God, and then come-down to give gifts to humans. (*See also the Midrash on Proverbs 30, where the ascending and descending language is also used.*) In the first century, the ascending and descending that Paul is speaking about in *Ephesians 4* would have been a well known teaching tool in the synagogues of his day. What Paul is suggesting here is that Yeshua is the One who is greater than Moshe, since Yeshua descended and then ascended up above

all heavens for the purpose of fulfilling all things. (*See the rabbis comments on Midrash Proverbs 30:4 and the Psalms 2 study at matsati.com*) From a midrashic and Torah perspective, Paul is not necessarily making a reference to Yeshua (Christ) descending into Hell (or Hades) which is what many of the church fathers believed (*i.e. Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Jerome, etc.*). Based upon Ephesians, it appears that Paul is making use of midrash to refer to Christ who led captivity captive, He is greater than Moshe which was indicated by his descending and then ascending higher than the highest heavens. Note that the lower parts of the earth may also be a reference to the regions of the earth as “lower” than heaven. Paul may also be emphasizing Yeshua’s words which state in *John 3:13*, “*No man hath ascended into heaven, but He that came down from heaven,*” which may be the reason for the reversal of the rabbinic idiom to “*descending and ascending*” instead of “*ascending and descending.*” Note that in the midrash on Parashat Ki Tisa, the rabbis say that Moshe ascended Sinai with the merits of the people for the hope of gaining their forgiveness. With this same rabbinic mindset, Yeshua ascended with the merits of our salvation before our Father in heaven and He did indeed obtain our forgiveness before God.

Based upon the Scriptures, the Lord finds glory in and through the one whom He helps to bring victory. This is a great example of how our Father in heaven receives glory in His Son Yeshua the Messiah, where the victories of the Lord may be understood in a parallel fashion in Yeshua the Messiah which brings glory to our Father in heaven. In *Tehillim / Psalms 36*, David says “*You ascribe the victory to me, but I will ascribe the victory to you,*” we can see a parallel in the life of Yeshua the Messiah. Judaism in the Midrashic literature contains the principles that we have been taught in the Apostolic Writings. The victories that we have in Christ, by faith in Yeshua the Messiah, we by our faith bring glory to our Father in heaven. We by our faith in the atoning sacrifice of Yeshua, our High Priest, we receive the forgiveness of sins.

For the Torah portion (Parashat Terumah), most people would say “*the tithe is why this portion is important for us today.*” However, there is a much deeper meaning that is contained in the underlying idea of raising up an offering unto the Lord. The Apostle Paul told the people of his day in *Acts 17:24* ‘*The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 17:25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 17:26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 17:27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 17:28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’* (NASB) In the text of the Torah, God asked for the people to make a sanctuary so He may dwell among His people. The Hebrew word for “*sanctuary*” is mikdash (מִקְדָּשׁ) which comes from the root word kadash (קָדַשׁ) meaning “*holy*” and “*to be set apart as sacred.*” A mikdash is therefore a “*holy place*” a “*set apart space*” that is meant to be a place of worship and rest. Note also how these other words share this root word “*kedushah*” (holiness), “*kiddushin*” (betrothal), “*kaddish*” (sanctification), and “*Kiddush*” (a sacred time), etc. So when the Lord asked the people

to make him a mikdash (מִקְדָּשׁ), he was asking the people to make a sacred place for His presence to manifest. It is interesting to note that the Terumah is one of the “free will” offerings that are given to the Lord and therefore the Lord was also asking the people to make a place in their hearts for the purpose of worshiping God that is expressed in the free will offerings that were given to the Lord. Note in *Shemot / Exodus 25:8* that the mikdash is what the Lord asks to be built. Note also that the Lord is asking the people to build this “set apart place” (מִקְדָּשׁ, mikdash) so that He can “dwell” there which comes from the root word shachan (שָׁכַן) meaning “to sit, dwell, or lie down with someone.” The Tabernacle was called the mishkan (מִשְׁכָּן) a set apart place that was intended for rest and intimacy with God. Therefore, we can conclude that within the command to build a place for the Lord to dwell, we are to invite God’s presence within our hearts that gives us communion and fellowship with Him. Note, Yeshua also said that we will find joy, rest, and peace when we “abide in him” (*John 15*). The end goal of the Mishkan was found in sacrificial love, that the life of the innocent was given for the sake of the sinner that provided for us a tangible hope of holiness and perfect righteousness that only God gives making a way for us to be acceptable in His sight. Because of Yeshua the Messiah, we are able to draw near to God because He is our korban (קָרְבָּן, sacrifice) that brings us into eternal fellowship with the Lord.

In this week’s Portion, we read about the free will offering, the Terumah and the concept of raising up (ascending and descending), making a free will offering unto God asks for the purpose of building a place to dwell among His people. If we offer up our lives for Yeshua to come into our hearts, He will come to dwell with us. As noted earlier, the terumah is the designating of something for a higher purpose by lifting and setting apart for the Lord. Could one application of these Scriptures today be offering ourselves, giving of our lives, our hearts, all of who we are to the Lord so He can construct His tabernacle within us? According to the Scriptures, we must give our hearts freely to Yeshua the Messiah so the Lord can work in our lives and construct a place where he can dwell.