

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Parashat Hashavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated
Le-zekher Nishmat HaRabanit Chana bat HaRav Yehuda Zelig zt"l.

PARASHAT KORACH

Dedicated in memory of Cvi ben Moishe Reinitz (Nagykallo, Hungary)
- whose yearzeit is on 2 Tammuz, from those who remember him.

This shiur is dedicated in celebration of
Ahavya and Hillel's successful completion of shana rishona.

The Significance of the Incense
By Rav Yehuda Rock

The incense (*ketoret*) appears in our *parasha* in two contexts. First, following the complaint of Korach and his company, Moshe sets up a test:

(16:5) "He spoke to Korach and to all of his company, saying: In the morning God will show who is His, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to Him; He will cause him who He chooses to come near to him.

(6) Do this: take censers, Korach and all of his company,

(7) and put fire in them and place incense upon them before God tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom God chooses – he shall be holy...

(16) And Moshe said to Korach: You and all of your company – be before God, you and they and Aharon, tomorrow.

(17) Let each man take his censer, and let them put fire upon them, and place incense in them, and present yourselves before God, each man with his censer – two hundred and fifty censers, and you, and Aharon; each with his censer.

(18) So they took each man his censer and put fire upon them, and placed incense in them, and they stood at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, with Moshe and Aharon.

(19) And Korach gathered the whole congregation against them at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and God's glory appeared to all of the congregation...

(35) And a fire came out from God and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who offered the incense."

Further on in the story, when God is about to destroy the nation, it is Aharon's incense that stops the plague:

(17:11) "Moshe said to Aharon: Take the censer and put fire in it from off the altar, and place incense, and go quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them..."

(12) So Aharon took as Moshe had spoken, and he ran to the midst of the congregation, and behold – the plague had begun among the people. And he put incense, and made atonement for the people.

(13) And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was halted.

It is not clear from these verses for what reason it was specifically incense, rather than any other aspect of the service of the Sanctuary, that was chosen as a test of holiness and of God's selection. Rashi explains:

"The incense is more beloved than any of the sacrifices, and [also because] it contains the drug of death, with which Nadav and Avihu were burned..."

Rashi distinguishes two characteristics of incense: firstly, it is "more beloved than any of the sacrifices" – but gives no basis or reason for this. Secondly, he asserts that incense is dangerous, as proven by what happened to Aharon's sons. However, this still does not tell us how or why it is that specifically the Divine service of incense is dangerous.

In order to understand the significance of incense in general, let us first review the places in the Torah where it is mentioned.

- a. *Shemot* 30: in the command concerning the Sanctuary, as part of the command to build the golden altar (the incense altar), the Torah states that incense must be offered on the golden altar, twice each day. Further on, the preparation of the incense is discussed.
- b. *Vayikra* 9: On the eighth day of the inauguration of the Sanctuary, Nadav and Avihu offer incense with "foreign fire"; as a result they die.
- c. *Vayikra* 16: As part of the order of the Yom Kippur service, the Kohen Gadol is commanded to offer incense in the Holy of Holies.
- d. *Bamidbar* 7: At the dedication of the altar, the prince of each tribe offers various sacrifices, including a golden spoon full of incense.
- e. Our *parasha*.

In the fourth appearance – the sacrifices of the princes – incense appears among all of the necessities for the Sanctuary that were provided by the princes, and so nothing may be deduced from this source with regard to the significance or characteristics of the incense. The first and third appearances concern commandments for all generations concerning offering of the incense by the kohen. The second and fifth are narratives of events involving sin and a punishment of death.

Let us start with the first mention of incense in the Torah: the commandment of the golden altar. A number of difficulties arise with regard to this unit, the first of which concerns its location. The command to build the Sanctuary, in the *parashot* of *Teruma* and *Tetzave* (*Shemot* 25-29) has a relatively clear structure; its focus moves from the inside of the Sanctuary outward. *Parashat*

Teruma begins (after the command to collect the raw materials) with a command to construct the inner vessels – the Ark, the Table, and the *Menora*. This is followed by the structure of the Sanctuary itself: the curtains, covering, boards, rings, sockets, and the veil. Then comes the altar, and the courtyard of the Sanctuary – its hangings, pillars, and screen. After every part of the Sanctuary has been described, there are commands concerning the kohanim and their garments, and the sanctification of the kohanim and of the Sanctuary (during the seven days of inauguration).

In *Shemot* 29:38 we find the *parasha* of the daily sacrifice, which clearly concludes the body of commands concerning the Sanctuary. The daily sacrifice appears as the central rite of worship performed upon the altar facing the Tent of Meeting. It is also a rite that facilitates the dwelling of the Divine Presence, which was described at the beginning of this lengthy unit as its purpose.

Following this entire structure comes the command about the golden altar (*Shemot* 30:1-10). Ramban notes that the proper place for this unit would seem to be among the discussion of the inner vessels, along with the Table and the *Menora*. He brings support for this view from the description of the actual building of the Sanctuary, in *parashat Vayakhel*, where the golden altar does in fact appear along with the Table and the *Menora*. He comments as follows:

"You shall make an altar for offering incense' – but the incense altar is one of the inner vessels; it should have been mentioned with the Table and the *Menora*, since it stands together with them, and they are mentioned [together] accordingly in *parashat Vayakhel*."

Why, then, is this unit not located in its proper place? Ramban answers:

"The reason for it being mentioned here, after the Sanctuary and all of the vessels and the sacrifices, is because God said, after all of that, "It shall be sanctified with My glory" (29:43); "I shall dwell in the midst of Bnei Yisrael" (45). This implied that He would still require them to construct an altar for the offering of incense for the glory of God. This was a secret that was conveyed to Moshe – that the incense halts the plague, for incense is of the attribute of justice... that they should acknowledge My glory, for it will not tolerate your sins; so let them be cautious concerning My glory."

Therefore He says here, "And you shall place it before the veil that is upon the Ark of Testimony, before the covering that is over the Testimony where I shall meet with you'. For why should He elaborate as to all of this? After all, He did not say, "You shall place it before the Ark of Testimony in the Tent of Meeting" when He conveyed the *parasha* of *Vayakhel* (40:5)! However, it comes to indicate our point."

Ramban notes the Torah's emphasis on the location of the golden altar, facing the place of the Divine presence, and explains that since the Divine Presence dwells in the Sanctuary in the wake of the daily sacrifice, this demands a show of honor. The incense symbolizes the attribute of justice by arousing honor for the Divine Presence.

Ramban's explanation brings together a number of assumptions:

- a. The basic structure of the command concerning the Sanctuary, up to the unit on the daily sacrifice, includes those factors that bring the Divine Presence (as indicated by the introduction to the command – "Let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst," and from the end of the command in the discussion of the daily sacrifice), and does not include those objects or actions which are required as a result of God's Presence.
- b. The Divine Presence necessitates a show of honor, in accordance with the verse from the daily sacrifice: "It shall be sanctified by My glory."
- c. The incense expresses the attribute of justice.
- d. Acknowledgment of the attribute of justice arouses honor.

This presentation raises several difficulties. Ramban does not explain in what way the incense expresses the attribute of judgment. Furthermore, the simple meaning of the verses, according to his approach, is not that the Divine Presence necessitates honor, but rather that the honor of God brings sanctity and the Divine Presence: "I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael, and it shall be **sanctified with My honor**... and I shall dwell in the midst of Bnei Yisrael...."

The Vilna Gaon, in *Aderet Eliyahu (Parashat Tetzaveh)* offers an explanation that is similar to that of Ramban in his first assumption ('a' above):

"You shall make an altar for incense" – this was not mentioned among the vessels of the Sanctuary that were to be made.

First God gave the details of the Sanctuary and its vessels, the garments, and the preparation of Aharon for the [service of the] altar. Thereafter He commanded the offering of the daily sacrifice, saying, "By means of this I shall dwell in your midst." Then He mentions the fashioning of the incense altar and the atonement money.

This tells us that these [latter elements] were not a necessary precondition for the dwelling of the Divine Presence; they were merely for atonement for Israel. And so the Torah says, with regard to the atonement money, "To make atonement for your souls" (*Shemot* 30:16)."

The Vilna Gaon asserts, like the Ramban, that the golden altar lies outside of the basic structure of the command concerning the Sanctuary because it does not contribute towards the Divine Presence dwelling there. However, while Ramban understands its purpose as showing honor towards the Divine Presence, the Vilna Gaon maintains that the incense is necessary for atonement – like the half-shekel, which appears in the text immediately thereafter.

The Vilna Gaon does not tell us why it is that the Torah provides for these means of atonement specifically here. We may propose that God's Presence among Bnei Yisrael brings a higher level of the attribute of justice, such that there is greater need for atonement.

The idea of the incense as bringing atonement is obviously based on the narrative in our *parasha*, where Aharon does indeed make atonement for Bnei Yisrael by means of incense.

However, in *parashat Tetzaveh*, in the context of the golden altar and the daily offering of incense, there is no mention of atonement. The concept of atonement appears only in the context of the "blood of the sin-offering of atonement" of Yom Kippur, some of which is placed upon the golden altar on that day. And still it is not clear why the incense should serve as atonement rather than any other sacrifice.

The key to this puzzle appears to lie in a question raised by Ridbaz on the Rambam, but the substance of his question concerns not the Rambam, but rather the incense altar:

"It is asked in the midrash: no sacrifice was offered upon it; why, then, is it called an 'altar'?"

The verse states: "You shall make an altar for offering incense" ("*mizbeach miktar ketoret*"). Ridbaz notes that the word 'altar' (*mizbeach*), as a noun derived from the root "z-v-h," is not appropriate for this golden altar. Not only are no sacrifices offered upon it, but there is actually an explicit negative command that prohibits offering sacrifices upon it: "You shall not offer foreign incense upon it, or any burnt offering, or any meal offering..." (*Shemot* 30:9). Moreover, the Torah itself provides a suitable name: "*miktar*." This noun parallels "*mizbeach*," being derived in this case from the root "k-t-r." Hence, this would seem to be a better name for a vessel meant for burning incense; why, then, does the Torah add the word "*mizbeach*" to describe this incense altar?

Ridbaz answers:

"According to the plain meaning we may say that its form and its purpose resembled the form and purpose of the outer (sacrificial) altar, since the outer altar, too, was square. They would not slaughter the animals at the top of the altar, but would bring the carcass up to there and offer it (*maktirin*), and because of the smoke [that was thereby created] this was called "*haktara*" (literally, "offering incense"). Likewise, incense was offered upon the inner (golden) altar, and it is called "*ketoret*" because of the smoke that arises from it, and [the form of this altar] was also square, like that of the outer altar."

In other words, to Ridbaz's view, the golden altar is called a '*mizbeach*' because it resembles the outer, sacrificial altar. The similarity involves both their form (square) and the fact that an act of '*haktara*' – burning that gives rise to smoke - is performed on both of them.

This would seem to be a surprising interpretation. Is the golden altar really called a '*mizbeach*' only because of its physical resemblance to the sacrificial altar, and because of the similarity of the technical actions performed on them, using different substances (sacrifices vs. incense)? Can we suggest such an explanation when the action in question is precisely that which would make the name '*miktar*' more appropriate, and where the name '*mizbeach*' is altogether inappropriate from the point of view of its function?

In fact, the Ridbaz's explanation gives rise to another question: If the golden altar and the sacrificial altar have different functions, why are they so similar in form? Why does the Torah command that the altar form be imitated for a vessel that is going to be used for offering incense?

We may propose the following explanation:

The main purpose of the Sanctuary is for God's Presence to dwell in the midst of Bnei Yisrael. It is meant to reflect, more than anything else, a relationship of closeness between God and Israel. However, man is limited; Bnei Yisrael have their deficiencies and their transgressions; they cannot live in close proximity with God's Presence without being harmed (by punishment) or distanced. In the words of Yishayahu (6:5), "I said: Woe to me, for I am ruined; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a nation of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, Lord of Hosts."

For this reason, the Sanctuary is constructed in concentric form, with barriers within barriers – the courtyard, the Tent of Meeting, and the Holy of Holies. Thus, the Sanctuary expresses the tension between closeness and distance: a fundamental relationship of closeness, while maintaining a proper distance and separation. God is in the midst of Bnei Yisrael, but He dwells within the Sanctuary, while they are outside of it.

This tension is given prominent expression in the context of the sacrifices. As noted, in the unit discussing the daily sacrifice, in *parashat Tetzaveh*, the Torah describes how the sacrifices bring the Divine Presence: "This is how you shall prepare the sacrifice... and I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael, and it shall be sanctified with My glory... and I shall sanctify the Tent of Meeting and the altar... and I shall dwell amongst Bnei Yisrael..."

The Divine Presence is depicted here as an expression of acceptance and favor shown towards the sacrifices by God. As such, it would seem that the Divine Presence should really rest at the place where the sacrifices are offered – on the sacrificial altar. However, the altar is the place where Bnei Yisrael perform the sacrificial service – and, as we have mentioned, man and the Divine Presence cannot exist in the same place without man being harmed. This presents a problem: the Divine Presence must express acceptance of the sacrifices, and therefore should be at the place where the sacrifices are offered. But Bnei Yisrael cannot offer sacrifices in the place where the Divine Presence rests!

The golden altar seems to offer a solution to this problem. The Torah commands that inside the Tent of Meeting, a model of the sacrificial altar be constructed – the golden altar; upon it will be an expression of the fire and the cloud of the Divine Presence – the incense.

The Divine Presence at the end of *parashat Mishpatim* – the same Divine Presence that descended into the Sanctuary at the end of *parashat Pekudei*, (which has clear linguistic links to the end of *Mishpatim*) – is described as a cloud, with "the glory of God" within it, with "the appearance of God's glory like a consuming fire." It would seem that God expresses this image for all generations not by means of miraculous fire and cloud, but rather by means of His emissaries – the kohanim who offer up the incense. The kohanim perform the service of the incense – not as one of the sacrifices, which express man's service of God, but rather as emissaries of God. The incense is fundamentally an expression of God's Presence, His closeness to Israel, and – in the case

of the daily incense on the golden altar – His acceptance of their sacrifices, specifically the daily sacrifice offered on the sacrificial altar.

Now the nature of the golden altar is clear: it is fashioned in the same form as the sacrificial altar because it symbolizes it and is meant to be the place that receives the Divine Presence, which in turn expresses the acceptance of the sacrifices that are offered on the sacrificial altar. It is called '*miktar*' because of the service that is actually performed on it, but it is also – and more importantly – a '*mizbeach*,' because of its fundamental significance. The unit describing the golden altar comes as a continuation to the unit on the daily sacrifice, because it serves as a solution to the "problem" of the Divine Presence that arises in that context.

Let us try to anchor the perception of the incense as an expression of the Divine Presence more firmly in the text. Firstly, in the offering of the incense there is an emphasis on the "fire" that is placed in the censer, in a number of places (as in our case, concerning Korach: "Each man took his censer and they put fire on them, and they placed incense in them..."). As we shall see further on, the same can be said of the cloud of incense. These elements of fire and cloud resemble the elements of the Divine Presence at the end of *Mishpatim*.

The incense as an expression of the Divine Presence is almost explicit in a *beraita* in *Yoma*, discussing the incense of Yom Kippur (53a): "It would rise up like a staff, until it reached the ceiling. Once it reached the ceiling it would come down the walls, until the Sanctuary was filled with smoke, as it is written, "And the Sanctuary was full of smoke."" The verse cited in the *beraita* is from *Yishayahu*, chapter 6, which discusses the revelation of the Divine Presence: "In the year of the death of King Uzziah, I saw the Lord sitting upon a Throne, high and elevated, and His train filled all of the Temple. Serafim stood above him... and they called to one another, saying: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole world is filled with His glory... and the House was filled with smoke."

In two different places, the Torah stipulates that the fire – i.e. the coals – upon which the incense is placed, must be atop the altar. Thus, in the Yom Kippur service (*Vayikra* 16:12) we find, "He shall take a censer full of burning coals from off the fire before God, and his hands full of incense beaten fine...." Likewise, in our *parasha*, when Moshe sends Aharon to stop the plague, he tells him: "Take the censer and place fire on it from off the altar, and place incense...."

In light of what we have said, the reason for this is clear: the specific expression of the Divine Presence that is realized by means of the incense is God's closeness in the wake of the offering of sacrifices; it is an expression of favor and acceptance of the sacrifices. This is expressed in the fact that the incense "rests" upon fire (coals) taken from the altar, and thereby comes to symbolize the fire of the altar.

Let us now consider the other type of commandment of incense – the incense offered by the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. Thereafter we shall come back to the two narratives that involve incense – the sin of Nadav and Avihu, and our *parasha*.

The Tziddukim and the Perushim were divided as to how the incense is offered on Yom Kippur (Yoma 53a): "He shall place the incense upon the burning coals before God – he should not arrange them in place outside [of the Holy of Holies] and then enter, except the Tziddukim who say that he should arrange it outside and then bring it in." In other words, the view of the Tziddukim is that the Kohen Gadol offers the incense while he is still outside of the Holy of Holies, and only then does he enter with the censer. Unquestionably, this view regards the incense as a sort of screen that protects the Kohen and separates between him and the Divine Presence (as Rashbam explains). The halakha, on the other hand, stipulates that the Kohen offers the incense only after he enters. Clearly, then, the function of the incense is not to create a barrier.

In light of what we have said, the matter is clear: the crux of the Yom Kippur service is the atonement that is made for the places of the Divine Presence (*Vayikra* 16): "... And he shall make atonement for the holy place, from the impurities of Bnei Yisrael, and from their transgressions in all their sins; and so he shall do for the Tent of Meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their impurity... and he shall finish making atonement for the holy place and for the Tent of Meeting and for the altar... and he shall make atonement for the Holy Sanctuary, and for the Tent of Meeting, and for the altar shall he make atonement...." The incense in the Holy of Holies creates a tangible expression of the Divine Presence; only after this does the Kohen Gadol come and make atonement for it.

We mentioned previously that the essence of the Yom Kippur service is atonement for the places of the Divine Presence – the Holy of Holies, the Tent of Meeting, and the altar. Which altar is referred to here? In the order of the service, at the stage where Aharon is in the Tent of Meeting, we read: "He shall go out to the altar which is before God and make atonement for it...." This means that he goes out to the courtyard of the Sanctuary, and the altar in question is the sacrificial (outer) altar.

In contradiction to this stands the verse in the unit concerning the golden altar (*Shemot* 30:10): "Aharon shall sprinkle upon it for atonement, once in the year, of the blood of the sin offering of atonements." Clearly, this is talking about the golden altar, and the Mishna decides the halakha accordingly in *Yoma*. How, then, are we to understand the verses in the order of the Yom Kippur service?

The order of the Yom Kippur service was conveyed to Aharon in the wake of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Sanctuary. On this day, the devouring fire of the Divine Presence emerged outward to the sacrificial altar and was visible to the nation (*Vayikra* 9:23-24): "And the glory of God appeared to all of the nation, and a fire came out from before God and it consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats, and all the nation saw...." For this reason, in the order of the first Yom Kippur service that Aharon performed, the Divine Presence was in its proper place – on the sacrificial altar. For this reason, the atonement was likewise made upon it. But for future generations, as we have seen, the resting of the Divine Presence upon the altar was realized in the golden altar, in the form of the incense. Therefore, for future generations, the atonement for the altar is performed on the golden altar.

On the eighth day of the inauguration, Nadav and Avihu brought incense, which was a "foreign fire." It seems that they believed that the Divine Presence that is expressed through the incense rests especially on the person who offers the incense. By means of the incense they meant to direct the Divine Presence itself. As a result of their actions, a fire emerged from before God and consumed them – the same "consuming fire" that is meant to be symbolized by the incense. Not only could Aharon's sons not control it, it came out and killed them.

The lesson to be learned is stated by Moshe: "That is as God spoke, saying: I shall be sanctified by those close to Me, and before the entire nation I shall be honored." Moshe explains the significance of the commandment of incense and the promise of the Divine Presence: only the selected, close few, actually perform sanctification by offering the incense, but God's glory is not limited to them; He is glorified before all the nation equally.

Korach and his company sinned in the same way as Nadav and Avihu. They too aspired to be among the kohanim in the Sanctuary who effected the bringing of the Divine Presence. Moshe's test was meant to prove that only God's chosen – a person who is appointed and sent for this by God – is really capable of bringing the Divine Presence. And they, too, like Nadav and Avihu were consumed by God's glory, the consuming fire – the same fire which they had sought to control.

Aharon was able to make atonement and to halt the plague, not because the incense is fundamentally a mechanism of atonement, but because in this way he – as the person so authorized and appointed – was able to correct that which had been perverted, and to show that the Divine Presence indeed rests only by means of the actions of His chosen servants – the kohanim. Aharon's act of repair, as a counter-action to Korach and his congregation, indeed made atonement for Bnei Yisrael and halted the plague.

Translated by Kaeren Fish