YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Tetzaveh**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

**"And You Shall Make an Altar for Burning Incense"**

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At the end of our *parasha*, we read of a commandment that seems to be out of place – the construction of the incense altar.

And you shall make an altar for burning incense; of acacia wood shall you make it. (*Shemot* 30:1)

We would have expected this commandment to be placed together with the commandments regarding the other vessels of the *Mishkan*,in *Parashat Teruma.* Why was it given in isolation from the other vessels, after the instructions regarding the construction of the *Mishkan* seemed to have been completed?

The *Meshekh Chokhma* explains this based on a connection to the *kiyor* (washbasin), which Moshe is commanded to construct next: in both cases, the vessel not indispensable for the service in the *Mishkan*; the priests' hands and feet could be washed even without a dedicated basin, and the incense could be burned even on the floor.

However, we will follow the Ramban's interpretation, which reads:

"And you shall make an altar for burning incense." Now the altar of incense, being one of the vessels in the inner part of the Sanctuary, should have been mentioned with the table and the candelabrum together with which it was placed, as indeed they are mentioned at the actual construction in *Parashat Vayakhel*. But the reason for mentioning it here, after the *Mishkan* and all its vessels and the sacrifices [for the seven days of consecration], is because He said at the completion of them all: "And [the tent] shall be sanctified by My glory" (*Shemot* 29:43); "and I will dwell among the children of Israel" (*Shemot* 29:45). He now said that they will yet be obliged to make an altar for the burning of incense – to burn it for the glory of God.

And this was a secret which was transmitted to Moshe Rabbeinu, that incense stops plague (*Shabbat* 89a). For the incense is of the attribute of justice, as it is stated (*Devarim* 33:10): "They shall put incense before You [*be-apekha*]" – from [the root]: "My anger [*api*] shall be kindled" (*Devarim* 31:17). It is for this reason that He said, regarding [the harsh consequences of] incense that was burned improperly: "And before all the people I will be glorified" (*Vayikra* 10:3), [meaning] that they will know My glory, “for He will not pardon your transgression” [*Shemot* 23:21], and they will be careful about My glory. And therefore He said here [of the incense altar]: "And you shall place it before the curtain that is upon the ark of the testimony, before the ark-cover that is over the testimony, where I will meet with you" (*Shemot* 30:6). For why is it necessary to speak at length of all these matters, and [why did] He not say briefly: "And you shall put it before the ark of the testimony in the tent of meeting," as He said in *Parashat Vayakhel* (*Shemot* 40:5)? But [the extended form of the verse] here indicates the purpose [of the incense altar]. (Ramban, ad loc.)

The Ramban analyzes the law based on the special connection between the incense and the resting of the *Shekhina* in the *Mishkan*, once its construction was complete. He further explains that there is a secret in the incense, which was communicated to Moshe and is connected to the attribute of justice: the ability of the incense to soften the wrath of God and protect the people of Israel. This is illustrated by the account of the plague that struck the people after Korach's rebellion, when Aharon, at Moshe's command, burned incense and thereby atoned for the people and stopped the plague. This was not a one-time event, but an integral part of the function of the priests who served in the *Mishkan*, as we find in Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Levi: "They shall put incense *be-apekha*." The Levites' contribution lies in the offering of incense, which softens the wrath of God.

At the same time, the connection between incense and the attribute of justice may have disastrous consequences; for example, in the case of the sons of Aharon who lost their lives as a result of an offering of incense that was not acceptable.

What makes the incense what it is?

**The Uniqueness of the *Ketoret***

It seems that the incense lies outside the normal halakhic framework, which explains why its altar is discussed only after the formal commandment to build the *Mishkan*. It is meant to serve as a tool in times of crisis, one that is not to be found in any of the four sections of the *Shulchan Arukh* and which, to a certain extent, even contradicts them. As such, its use is fraught with great risk: if properly employed, it is a mighty protector of the people, but if a small error is made in its operation, the consequences can be disastrous to the one who burned the incense.

This can be explained by considering the actual nature of the incense. The incense is a mixture of aromatic herbs that are ground together into a powder and placed upon glowing coals. The person burning the incense is supposed to sprinkle the powder slowly and gradually, so that it burns and produces a fragrant cloud of smoke – but if the powder is sprinkled incorrectly, it may extinguish the coals altogether, or, conversely, it may turn into a raging fire, which can leap up and scorch the face of the person burning the incense. What is the determining factor; when is the incense an extinguishing agent, and when does it ignite? It seems that everything depends on balance, literally and figuratively: too many coals, and the fire will leap; too much powder, and no cloud will rise at all. Only by way of a precise ratio of incense to coals will a cloud of incense rise without causing any damage.

Beyond the question of the physical reality, on the spiritual plane, everything depends on the intention: someone whose mindset is flawed will be burned by the fire; only if his intention is pure and proper will the cloud of incense ascend. Nadav and Avihu, and the two hundred incense-burners of Korach's company, did not have the proper intentions, and they were consumed by the fire. Aharon had the proper intention, and it was on his account that the plague was stopped. The distinction is a thin line: one thought may be a proper intention for the incense, which will bring about an increase of mercy for the Jewish people; whereas its counterpart may have the opposite effect, and result in the death of the person burning the incense.

It is therefore understandable why the high point of the High Priest's service on Yom Kippur is the burning of the incense. On the holiest day of the year, in the holiest place, the incense is the "star." On this day, the High Priest atones for the entire Temple. This whole idea lies outside the normal halakhic system, and thus its essence is none other than the incense.

**The Use of Incense in Times of Crisis**

With this understanding, we can explain one of the most puzzling stories in Tanakh, found in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

And as [Uziyahu] became strong, his heart was lifted up so that he did corruptly, and he trespassed against the Lord his God and he went into the Temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense. And Azaryahu the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore valiant priests of the Lord; and they confronted Uziyahu the king, and said to him: “It is not for you, Uziyahu, to burn incense to the Lord, but it is for the priests, the sons of Aharon, who are consecrated, to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed; it will not be for your honor from the Lord God.” (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 26:16-18)

The question jumps out: What possessed Uziyahu, who was a righteous and successful king (as is described in the first part of the chapter), to do such a foolish thing? We must also understand the meaning of the punishment he received:

Then Uziyahu became angry; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense; and when he was angry with the priests, *tzara’at* broke forth on his forehead before the priests, in the house of the Lord, beside the altar of incense. And Azaryahu the chief priest, and all the priests, turned to him, and, behold, he had *tzara’at* on his forehead, and they hurried him out from there; he himself also made haste to go out, because the Lord had smitten him. And Uziyahu the king had *tzara’at* until the day of his death, and dwelt in a house set apart, with *tzara’at*, for he was cut off from the house of the Lord; and Yotam his son was in charge of the king's house, judging the people of the land. (ibid. vv. 19-21)

We can understand this only in accordance with the above: Uziyahu was in a crisis situation and felt that in this emergency, he needed an act that transcended the ordinary framework – and so he wanted to burn incense. However, since his intention was not sufficiently pure, his forehead was burned by the fire. This burn subsequently turned into a burn of *tzara’at* (*mikhva*; see *Vayikra* 13), which remained until his death.

There is another king who had a similar experience. In the days of Chizkiyahu, Sancheriv, king of Assyria, ascended against Jerusalem. There, he sent his servant Ravshakeh to deliver a collection of threats in order to break the spirit of the city’s inhabitants. The prophet describes an action that took place at that time that was extraordinary by any measure:

And Chizkiyahu received the letter from the messengers, and read it; and Chizkiyahu went up to the house of the Lord, and spread [the letter] before the Lord. And Chizkiyahu prayed before the Lord, and said: “O Lord, God of Israel, that sits upon the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; You have made heaven and earth. (II *Melakhim* 19:14-15)

Chizkiyahu takes the book written by Ravshakeh and brings it to the Temple. The fact that Chizkiyahu addresses God as "sitting upon the cherubim" suggests that he had opened the curtain at the entrance to the Holy of Holies. There is no doubt that Chizkiyahu at this point feels a sense of emergency that requires extreme action, outside any logical halakhic system.

The prophet does not explicitly state that Chizkiyahu burned incense, but this may be implied in the continuation of the narrative. In the next chapter, we are told that Chizkiyahu is seriously ill, and the prophet gives him the news that this illness will bring about his death. In the end, however, God forgives him and adds fifteen years to his life. In the account of Chizkiyahu's recovery, we read as follows:

And Yeshayahu said: “Take a cake of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.” (II *Melakhim* 20:7)

It would seem that Chizkiyahu's illness was related to a boil, which apparently developed into a life-threatening necrosis in his body. The terms boil, burn, and *tzara’at* are all related, and it would not be far-fetched to assume that, like Uziyahu, Chizkiyahu was afflicted following his entry into the Holy of Holies, which he did because he hoped to atone for and protect the people of Israel in the midst of a terrible crisis.

The prophet does not explain why Uziyahu was left with his *tzara’at*, while Chizkiyahu was healed of it, and it seems that the difference must be due to their respective thoughts and intentions. As we have seen, burning incense is a momentous and critical act and requires the utmost balance and precision, in deed as well as in thought. If the offering is performed with wholehearted intent for the sake of Heaven, it will be accepted, and it has great protective power in times of crisis and distress. But if, God forbid, even a trace of an outside thought should intrude, the entire act may be rejected, and the person bringing the offering may be found liable to death.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Tetzaveh* 5779.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)