

THE MYSTERY OF KETORES

The Essence of the Incense

Rav Chananyah taught in a Baraisa, cited in *Zevachim* 88b: “From where do we know that the burning of the incense atones? For it is stated (*Bamidbar* 17:12): וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַקֶּטֶר וַיִּכַּפֵּר עַל הָעָם, Aharon placed the incense and provided atonement for the people. It was taught in a Baraisa in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Yishmael: For what sin does the burning of the incense atone? It atones for the sin of *Lashon Hara*. Let something that is offered in private come and atone for that sin which is committed in private”. After the crushing of Korach’s rebellion, the entire assembly of Yisrael accused Moshe and Aharon of causing Korach and his followers to die. In reaction to this sin of slander, HaShem sent a deadly plague upon the nation, which killed over 14,000 people. Moshe instructed Aharon to burn *ketores* and the plague was halted. This teaches that *ketores*, whose offering is performed by the *Kohen* in complete privacy, atones for slander, which is generally spoken in private. What is special about *ketores* that it can act as an antidote to death by plague and also atone for slander? The Kaf HaChaim (132:23) writes that recital of *Pitum HaKetores* from a text written on parchment in *Sefer Torah* script is a *segulah* for wealth and success in life. What is so special about *ketores*?

PITUM HAKETORES ON PARCHMENT

Before we discuss the deep concepts behind *ketores*, let us note briefly the ruling of Rav Ovadia Yosef that it is forbidden to write the Torah verses relating to *Pitum HaKetores* on parchment in *Ashuris* lettering (*Yabia Omer*, vol.9, *Yoreh De'ah* 23). This is because of the rule: אִין כּוֹתְבִין מִגִּילָה, one may not write sections of the Torah separately. In order to circumvent this, Sefardim who follow his ruling, write these *pesukim* in three columns, with just two or three words per line, called *sirugin*, which is permitted. Rav Moshe Sternbuch disagreed and argued that the inclusion of the

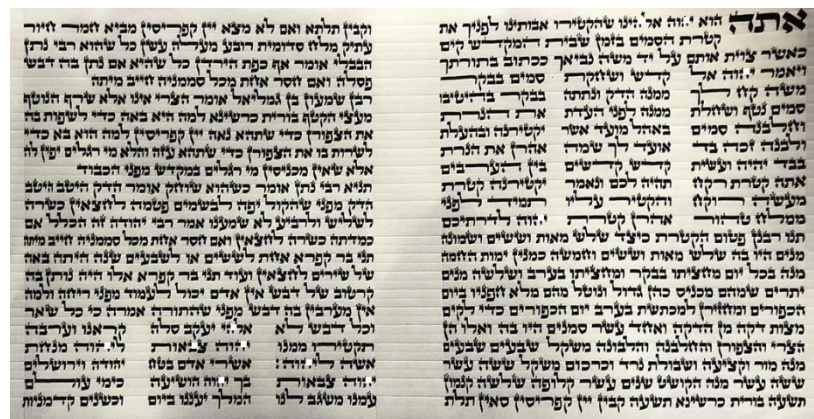
Talmudic texts indicates that there was no intention to write *kisvei hakodesh*. The leniency of *eis laasos* applies, as it is required for the acknowledged *segulah* and is therefore permitted to write it regularly (*Teshuvos VeHanhagos* 4:18).

PLACEMENT OF THE INCENSE ALTAR

When the Torah introduces the instruction to make the incense altar, it describes its position as opposite the Holy of Holies, in between the *shulchan* on the right, on the north side and the *menorah* on the left, on the south side (*Shemos* 30:6). The Ramban poses the question that the incense altar was among the inner vessels. Befittingly, the Torah should have mentioned it together with the *shulchan* and the *menorah*, which are discussed in *parshas Terumah* (*Shemos* 25:23-40), as indeed the Torah mentions them together by the actual construction in *parshas Vayakhel* (*Shemos* 37:25). The Ramban answers that the reason for mentioning the incense altar after the *Mishkan* and all its vessels and offerings, is because of what the Torah says at the completion of everything: “It shall be sanctified with My glory ... and I will dwell among the Bnei Yisrael (*Shemos* 29:43-45). It is now stated that He would yet be dedicated to them, for they would make an altar for the burning of incense, to burn it for the “glory of HaShem,” and this was the “secret” that was transmitted to Moshe Rabbeinu – that the incense inhibits the plague.

THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF THE MISHKAN

Why does all the work of the *Mishkan* culminate with the altar for the burning of the incense? The Ramban explains that ending with the incense altar reveals it as the ultimate purpose to which the entire erecting of the *Mishkan* was intended to reach, to serve as a dwelling place for the Divine Presence among the Bnei Yisrael. However, that very presence created the possibility for dishonoring that Presence (i.e., Hashem’s “glory”) and thereby becoming subject to *Midas HaDin*, the Attribute of Strict Justice. Such was the fate of Nadav and Avihu. HaShem therefore provided the nation with a shield against this danger: the incense altar and its service which have the power to quell HaShem becoming incensed (angered). The incense altar instruction comes at the conclusion of the entire passage concerning building the *Mishkan* precisely because it is a consequence of the *Mishkan*’s role as the *Shechניה*’s earthly abode. The incense altar stood opposite the *Shechinah*’s resting place in the *Mishkan*, thus intimating that it is the *Shechinah*’s dwelling place that created the need for an incense service. Ramban explains the significance of this “glory” filling the *Mishkan* in his introduction to *Parshas Terumah*. He writes that the significance of the *Mishkan* is that the glory that rested upon Har Sinai at the time of Matan Torah should rest on the *Mishkan*, but unlike at Sinai, in a concealed manner. Thus, the glory that originally appeared to the people at Sinai, remained constantly with Yisrael in the *Mishkan*. The golden *Keruvim* represented the fire of Har Sinai, and the Voice of HaShem originating in Heaven was heard by Moishe as though it was emanating from between the two *Keruvim*.



Pesukim in Pitum HaKetores written “sirugin” with just three words on a line.

THE TORAH BELONGS ON HIGH

Rav Moshe Shapiro delves into the meaning of the “glory of HaShem” in relation to the incense altar (Reflections and Introspection on the Torah, *Tetzaveh*). The Ramban concluded that this was the secret revealed to Moshe Rabbeinu, referring to a passage in Shabbos 88b. The Ministering Angels had opposed *Matan Torah* on the basis that the Torah would become degraded by non-compliance because of the strong temptations that exist in this world. The Torah was holy and belonged in spiritual spheres. Moshe Rabbeinu answered: “Have you descended to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Do you have a father and mother?” In other words, these things written in the Torah do not apply to you. The angels accepted his answer, and each gave a gift to Moshe. Among them was the Angel of Death, who also gave him a gift – the mystery of the incense. Moshe Rabbeinu employed it during the plague that threatened the nation during the incident of Korach. At the behest of Moshe, Aharon took the incense and stood between the dead and the living, and the plague ceased (*Bamidbar* 17:11-13, *Rashi*).

THE TORAH OF DOWN BELOW

The angels seem justified in their claim that the Torah, as words of HaShem, belongs on high. They realized that the Torah referred to earthly matters, but their intent was the internal aspect of Torah, the depth and spirituality of Torah. The external meaning is merely a cloak; words of Torah refer only to the underlying meaning. Moshe Rabbeinu revealed to them that these matters are the Torah itself. The subject of Pharaoh, the enslavement to Egypt, the honoring of father and mother, all of which relate only to life in this world, are the essence of Torah. All the words of Torah have the same sanctity. The angels only viewed the Torah in its pure spiritual form as it was in Heaven. The earthly world was created to give man an opportunity to achieve even greater spiritual heights than angels. HaShem created the world with freedom of choice, between good and evil, and the earthly form of Torah reflects that challenge. After, the angels realized that the Torah of the earthly world was another dimension where even greater spirituality could be achieved.

THE ANGEL’S GIFT

This explains another point. Every intelligent person understands that the angels do not have savings from which to distribute gifts. They are what they are, and they have only themselves. From where can they give gifts? Rather, their gifts are themselves. When they gave gifts to Moshe, they gave to him part of their very being, because they understood that in the same way as Torah exists below, part of themselves inevitably exists below with those who accept the Torah. The gift of the Angel of Death was the mystery of the incense, which in essence is the mystery of how to overpower him. The Angel of Death symbolizes HaShem’s agent in the exercise of free choice. The purpose of the Angel of Death’s creation was to seduce, but no one should listen to him. The intent was for the seduction to exist, and for man not to accept it. The Talmud states: “He is the Evil Inclination, he is the Prosecutor, and he is the Angel of Death” (*Bava Basra* 16a). Thus, the Angel of Death was created not to actualize himself, but to remain unrealized potential, a quashed option. He attains actualization as the Angel of Death only through sin. That angel as the *nachash*, enticed man and thereby brought death to the world. His true inner will is for man not to listen to him, and in essence, then, his actual task is to bring life – this was the purpose of his creation. In this lies the mystery of life, which is what the Angel of Death conveyed to Moshe Rabbeinu by revealing to him the mystery of the incense.

OVERPOWERING THE SEDUCTION

When HaShem created man, the breath of life that the Creator blew into the nostrils, is what transformed the dust of the ground into a living being. Every pleasant aroma emanates from life, and conversely, every foul odor emanates from death and decay. The breath of life in man’s nostrils is what enables him to detect good smells whose source is life and bad smells whose source is death. Man is constantly challenged by his free choice in the conflict between the physical and spiritual, between good and evil. The Angel of Death, the *Yetzer Hara*, internalizes himself and becomes part of our very lives. The sweet aroma from *ketores* helps us overpower his seduction. *Ketores* also contains the foul-smelling *chelbanah*, galbanum, which has to be *ground* down finely and mixed with the ten other ingredients. It then loses its own vile odor and strengthens the overall fragrance. *Yalkut Me’am Lo’ez* writes (*Shemos* 30:34): *Ketores* was an enlightened remedy to purify people from sin. Whoever smelled the fragrance of the incense when it was being burned on the altar would have thoughts of *teshuvah*. He would learn to appreciate the finer sweet-smelling things in true life and thereby overpower the lure of the *Yetzer Hara*. His heart would be purified of all evil thoughts and from the defilement of the Evil Urge. This is why the incense altar was referred to as a *mizbe’ach*, which denotes slaughter, even though no sacrifice was slaughtered on it. This was the place where the *Yetzer Hara* was slaughtered, because the incense had the power to break and subjugate the power of the evil inclination (*Zohar Chadash*, *Shir HaShirim* 12, *Zohar*, *Vayakhel*).

SLAUGHTER OF THE ANGEL OF DEATH

The *Chad Gadya* song, which we sing at the end of the *Pesach Seder*, concludes with the slaughter of the Angel of Death. Again, the expression slaughter denotes his decapitation, the separation of his spiritual upper part of the body from the lower physical half. This denotes the slaughter of the *Yetzer Hara* in the Ultimate Future. *Sanhedrin* 93b teaches that the Messianic King will judge through his sense of smell. He will be able to detect the pleasant aromas emitted by the good in life.