

THE COPPER ALTAR

The Outer *Mizbe'ach* and the Heavenly Fire

Was King Shlomo's outer altar made of copper or was it made of stone? The altar in The Second Beis HaMikdash was certainly made from stone and was four *amos* larger, as described in the Mishnah *Middos* (3:1). This issue is central to the debate between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yose in *Zevachim* 59a concerning the copper altar mentioned in the *pasuk* describing King Shlomo's Beis HaMikdash dedication ceremony. "On that day the King sanctified the interior of the courtyard that was before the House of HaShem ... there he brought the Olah offerings ... because the copper altar that was before Hashem was too small to accommodate the *olah* offerings ..." (*Melachim* I 8:64). The previous *pasuk* relates that the peace-offering that Shlomo brought was 22,000 cattle together with 120,000 sheep, a total of 142,000 *korbanos*. How could the altar accommodate such a large number of *korbanos*? The *pasuk* refers to a copper altar, but that could be understood to mean Moshe's much smaller altar. Did Shlomo perform this service of offerings on the floor of the courtyard, or did he construct a new larger altar?

THE ORIGINAL MIZBE'ACH

After the completion of the Temple building, Shlomo brought up the remains of the *Mishkan* from Gibeon. During the years since the Bnei Yisrael entered the Land, the *Mishkan* built by Moshe in the desert had been stationed in Gilgal, Shiloh and Nov, and after the destruction of Nov in Shaul's time, it had been in Gibeon (*Divrei Hayamim* I 21:29). Now that the *Mishkan* would no longer be used, Shlomo had it brought to Yerushalayim and stored away in the Temple precincts (*Rashi, Melachim* I 8:4). Did Shlomo start to use Moshe's copper altar in the First Beis HaMikdash as indicated by its mention in the above *pasuk*? Let us explore the different sources.

COPPER AS A FIGURE OF SPEECH

There is a parallel passage in *Divrei Hayamim* II (7:7) relating the account of the inauguration of the First Beis HaMikdash by King Shlomo. The *pasuk* reads: "Shlomo sanctified the inside of the courtyard which lay in front of the House of HaShem, for there he brought *olah* offerings ... because the copper altar which Shlomo had made was unable to accommodate the *olah* offerings ...". It is very similar to the *Melachim* version, but here it explicitly says that Shlomo made a copper altar. Furthermore, when the building of the Beis HaMikdash is described, the *pasuk* states clearly: "He made a copper altar whose length was twenty cubits and its width was twenty cubits and its height was ten cubits (*Divrei Hayamim* II 4:1). Similarly, in *Yechezkel*, the *pasuk* relates that six Divine messengers spread through the city and came and stood by the copper altar (*Yechezkel* 9:2). *Shabbos* 55a queries why it is called a copper altar seeing that the altar in the Beis HaMikdash was not made of copper, but of stone. The Gemara answers that the allusion to copper identifies the location where the *Levi'im* accompanied the sacrificial service with copper musical instruments. Tosafos (*Shabbos* 55a, s.v. *mizbach*) likewise explains that it was called a copper altar in *Divrei Hayamim* to teach us that a stone altar that has *shirah* sung before it, gets the same halachic status as other copper vessels of the Beis HaMikdash. *Rashi* justifies the name "copper altar" saying that since Shlomo's stone altar was a replacement for Moshe's copper altar, the *pasuk* calls it a copper altar.

THE HEAVENLY FIRE

Zevachim 61b teaches that the fire descended from heaven upon the copper altar for Moshe and remained there until the days of Shlomo. This fire continued to burn always and during travels a large copper vessel was placed over the fire so that it would not burn the covering in which the altar was carried. The fire that came down in the days of Shlomo, did not depart until Menasheh came and removed it. This clearly indicates that Shlomo built a new altar, because if Moshe's copper altar continued in use, no new fire would have been needed (*Artscroll Divrei Hayamim* II, p.351). The above debate on *Zevachim* 59a clearly assumes that on the day that Shlomo's altar was built, Moshe's altar was withdrawn.

CONSECRATION SERVICE

The above *machlokes* between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yose hinges on the ability of the altar to process the enormous numbers of animals at the inauguration. Rabbi Yehudah takes the *pasuk* literally, meaning that Shlomo sanctified the floor of the courtyard so that offerings could be burnt on it. The Gemara cites



Kohanim throw animal limbs of korbanos onto the fire from the edge of the slope – Credit: Machon HaMikdash

an event that took place some four years before the inauguration, when Shlomo, at the beginning of his reign, accompanied by a large entourage, went to Giveon to bring offerings of gratitude to HaShem. It relates that Shlomo brought one thousand *olos* on the altar there on that day (*Melachim I* 3:4). It is mind boggling to imagine such a large number of sacrifices on Moshe's altar, which only had one square *amah* in the center to burn the offerings. Assuming that he had twelve hours during the day in which to make all these offerings, a quick calculation shows that each offering was consumed in less than a minute. However, at the inauguration we are told that Shlomo offered 142,000 animals and that works out at a fraction of a second for each. We can understand that the Heavenly Fire consumed the limbs of these animals in a flash, but the logistics of preparing that number of animals, even if assisted by a large number of Kohanim, is unimaginable. The Gemara is concerned about the comparative size of Shlomo's stone altar in relation to Moshe's altar. However, Rabbi Yehudah held that Moshe's altar measured ten by ten *amos*, as the five *amos* mentioned by the Torah are taken from the middle of the altar. The site of the fire would then be six by six *amos*, as two *amos* are deducted from each side for the horns and the Kohanim's walkway. The area for burning is then 36 square *amos* and if 1,000 *olos* could be burnt in one day on Moshe's altar, then pro-rata, only 11,000 could be offered on Shlomo's altar, much less than the required 142,000. Rabbi Yehudah was therefore justified in asserting that Shlomo sanctified the floor because the altar was too small. However, Rabbi Yose holds that Moshe's altar was only five by five *amos*, leaving only one square *amah* in the center for the fire. We can therefore understand that if 1,000 animals could be offered in a day on a one square *amah* space, then an altar measuring twenty by twenty, or 400 square *amos*, could easily handle 142,000 *korbanos*, as the pro-rata figure would be 400,000 *korbanos*.

BRASS, BRONZE AND COPPER

There may be another angle as to why the copper altar retained its original name even after being built as a stone altar. Rashi comments on the instruction in *parshas Terumah* to build the altar out of *shittim* wood, which was to be covered with copper. Rashi gives the reason for the use of copper: לְכַפֵּר עַל עֲזִיזוֹת מִצַּח שְׁנֵאֲמַר: וּמִצֶּחֶךָ נְחֹשֶׁת, "to atone for arrogance, as it says: 'And your forehead is copper'" (*Yeshayah* 48:4). A person sins because of his brazenness contrary to the will of HaShem – he symbolically raises his forehead when it ought to be bowed in shame or humility. It is interesting to note that the word "brazen" has its origin in the metal "brass", which is a copper/zinc alloy and also "bronze", a copper/tin alloy. Copper, bronze and brass are shiny and hard, giving rise to the word "brazen." Copper is among the boldest of metals since it resists corrosion, because as it oxidizes it forms a thin stable layer of green copper oxide, which seals and protects the underlying metal from corrosion. Bringing an offering on the altar is indicative of one's subjugation to the will of HaShem, recognizing his brazen sinful action.

RAV SAADIA GAON'S COPPER ALTAR

The Ralbag (*Melachim I* 8:24) asserts that Shlomo built a stone altar, but it was called a copper altar because it was plated with copper on the outside. *Shiltei HaGiborim* (chapter 26) says something similar but adds that the stones were surrounded by cedarwood boards coated with copper. This would be something like the altar of Shiloh, which Rabbi Nassan describes in *Zevachim* 61b as a hollow structure of copper and filled with stones. Rav Yerucham Fishel Perla, expounds on *Sefer HaMitzvos* of Rav Saadia Gaon, who enumerates the *mitzvah* of building a copper altar as one of the *Taryag mitzvos* (*Parshah* 55/56). Since Moshe's copper altar was not for future generations, it should not have been included in the count. Rav Perle cites the above *Shiltei HaGiborim* and asserts that the Shiloh structure must have been used by Shlomo for his Beis HaMikdash as well when he constructed his altar and therefore it was correct to call it a copper altar, despite it being filled with stones.