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The Spice of Unity

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Tetzaveh

The Spice of Unity

This week's Torah portion emphasizes the value of unity.

The Parshah of Tetzaveh is a continuation of the building of the Mishkan narrative that we began reading last week in the portion of Terumah. And these two Torah portions are different in one clear way.

In Terumah, it talks about the "furniture" of the Mishkan: the ark, the table and the Menorah, the structure of the Mishkan itself—the wall beams, the ceiling, and so on.

In Tetzaveh, however, it talks about the clothing worn by the Kohanim, the priests. The Torah specifies the eight garments worn by the Kohain Gadol, the High Priest, as well as the anointing oil and how the Kohanim were prepared for service in the Mishkan. And then, at the end of the Parshah, the Torah "suddenly" describes another piece of furniture in the Mishkan: the Mizbach HaKetores, the Incense Altar.

The Rebbe asks: Apparently, the command to build the Mizbach HaKetores should have appeared in the Torah portion of Terumah, together with all the other vessels. Why did the Torah choose to postpone this command to the end of Parshas Tetzaveh?

It's known that the order of the Torah is also Divinely ordained. And thus, the fact that the Torah chose to postpone the writing of this mitzvah until the end of our Torah portion—in a manner of "Acharon, acharon chaviv," or "The last is the most cherished," as our Sages say—indicates that there is something unique about this mitzvah of ketores, incense, which indeed is greater than all the other services performed in the Mishkan, and later in Jewish history, in the Beis Hamikdash.

So let's digress and talk about incense a little bit—the incense that was offered up as a sacrifice of sorts every day in the Beis Hamikdash.

The ketores was burned in the Beis Hamikdash twice every day—once in the morning at the start of the day, before any services were conducted, and again at the end of the day after all the services in the Beis Hamikdash were completed.

When the Kohain would offer up the ketores, it would be forbidden for anyone else to be present in the Heichal, the large inside sanctuary, at the time. Only the Kohain offering the ketores would be present, alone in the Heichal.

Now in the Beis Hamikdash, they would organize a lottery of sorts every morning for the Kohanim on that day's service details. Whoever would be picked by the lottery system would get to be part of the service of that day.

However, offering up the ketores was subject to a separate drawing in which there participated only those who never got to offer ketores even once in their lives. Anyone who had done it before, even once, could never again participate in the drawing.

Why was this so? The Talmud (Tractate Yuma 26a) says, "Because it enriches." It was known among the Kohanim that offering up the ketores was an omen for wealth. And why was that so? Because, as it says at the end of the Book of Devarim, in the Torah portion of V'zos Habrachah, that when Moshe Rabbeinu blessed the Twelve Tribes, he said the following about the Tribe of Levi: "They shall place incense before you."

This, obviously, refers to the ketores, which was offered up by the Kohanim, who came from the Tribe of Levi. And immediately after that, it says, "May the L-rd bless his army," which means that his possessions shall be blessed—from which we learn that the ketores is a good omen for wealth.

So now the question is still, what is so special about ketores ?

To preface, Ketores was made out of a blend of 11 different spices. Now, this number inspires great wonder: Since when is 11 a significant number in Judaism? Ten, I could understand, is always seen as the perfect number. So where does 11 suddenly come from?

The Kabbalah teaches that the number 11 is the number of "the Other Side," meaning the evil that G-d put into the universe so as to give a choice between evil and good. For example, in the Torah we find that there were 11 chieftains who descended from Eisav, the evil brother of the good Yaakov. So this number symbolizes the opposite of holiness.

So what the mitzvah of ketores really is all about is to take these 11 spices and grind them up together until they become a powder, and this powder is then offered up as incense.

Now, one of the spices explicitly mentioned in the Torah is "chel'binah," which Rashi defines as a type of aromatic bough whose smell is bad. So if you're trying to put together material that will have a pleasant smell, why would you need to include something that emits a bad smell? So Rashi continues and says, "To teach us that we should not take lightly the joining of our fasting and prayer services by Jewish sinners to be counted among us."

Now, as we all know, the number ten symbolizes a community, a complete group of Jews. But after ten comes 11—the number with the “bad smell,” the person with an offensive air about him. He’s the person that no one wants around, whether because he physically is unkempt and doesn’t smell good, or because he’s obnoxious and repulsive.

In any case, people stay away from such a person. So along comes the Torah and teaches us that in order for the ketores to be kosher, and have its power and its good omens, this is only when it includes all the spices together.

True, there are other mitzvos, like lulav and esrog, that symbolize different kinds of Jews, and we put them all together to remind us that only when they are all joined together is it possible to fulfill the mitzvah. But with the mitzvah of lulav and esrog, each of the four species remains intact—we can still see and recognize each one.

With the ketores, on the other hand, we need to grind it all up together and make one powder out of all 11 spices in which none of them can be individually recognized—in which they all become one new entity entirely, and only then can it be called ketores.

And so, when Jews unite in such a way, to the point that it’s impossible to distinguish which one is the one emitting a foul smell, then and only then do we cause “nachas,” contentment, to G-d. Just as every parent knows that when the kids get together and buy a present for their parents, even though some of them didn’t actually contribute any money toward the present, still they say that “this is present from all of us.” They don’t start a fight over who actually donated what. And it is this unity that is the greatest gift of all for the parents; it is this behavior that causes parents much nachas.

Now, our Sages tell us, “The prayers were established to correspond to the sacrifices.”

In the absence of the Holy Temple and the three times the altar was used each day, we pray three times a day. The prayer of Shachris, the morning prayer, corresponds to the morning Tamid sacrifice, the sacrifice brought every single morning. Minchah, the afternoon prayer, corresponds to the afternoon Tamid brought every afternoon.

But what prayer do we say every day that might correspond to the offering of ketores?

We might say that just as the ketores was offered up in the morning before the morning Tamid sacrifice, likewise we have something similar before our morning prayers today. And this is something that the Rebbe very much requested to popularize—that everyone recite, “Harein mikabel alai mitzvas asei, shel v’ahavta l’rayacha kamocho”—I hereby accept upon my self the positive commandment of ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

When a Jew accepts upon himself first thing in the morning, before he even begins his morning prayers, to love the other as he loves himself, this corresponds to the ketores.

And it's not hard to do. Everyone can learn to say this phrase by heart. It's just one sentence. You can practice it in the car on the way to work, and in a moment, you've done something that's unified you with every other Jew in the whole wide world.

And also at night, before you go to bed, the last action of the day (like ketores) should be what we traditionally say as part of the nighttime Shema prayer—the prayer, “Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive all those who angered me.”

Thus, we begin the day with “I hereby accept,” and end the day with, “I hereby forgive.” And it is this embrace of the other that perhaps is the greatest symbol of the ketores.

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