

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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**The Incense Altar**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

**A. WHY IS IT MENTIONED LAST?**

Last week we examined the Ark, the first vessel listed in the commands to build the Mishkan. This week we will study the last - the incense altar (*Shemot 30:1-10*). (The basin, which we are commanded to build at the beginning of parashat Ki Tisa, is not a vessel that is actually used in the Temple service; rather, it is allows the Kohanim to prepare for the actual service.) This very phenomenon - the fact that the incense altar is the last vessel which we are commanded to make - is what will concern us.

The incense altar is located inside the Mishkan, between the menorah (along the southern wall) and the table (along the northern wall), facing the entrance to the Holy of Holies. We would therefore expect to find it mentioned at the beginning of parashat Teruma, in chapter 25, together with the table and the menorah. To make matters even more puzzling, the command to build the incense altar appear long, long after the commands to build the other vessels (ending with the sacrificial altar - which is located outside the Mishkan - in 27:1-8). Between these two sections there are many other commands (i.e. the whole of parashat Tetzaveh), some of which are not even connected with the activities of building the Mishkan (such as chapter 29, which deals with the sanctification of the Kohanim during the seven days of consecration and the command concerning the daily sacrifice). The question becomes even more disturbing in light of the fact that in all the other six places where the incense altar is mentioned throughout the rest of Sefer Shemot, it always appears after the table and the menorah and before the sacrificial altar. (See 31:7-11, 31:11-19, 37:10-38:1, 39:36-39, 40:4-6, 40:22-29.) The Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Chizkuni and Seforno all address this question in one way or another.

Let us formulate this question differently, in a way not mentioned by the commentaries. This new formulation may lead us in the direction of the answer we seek.

The command concerning the construction of the Mishkan is contained in one lengthy monologue that starts at the beginning of parashat Teruma (25:1-2): "And God spoke to Moshe saying, Speak to Bnei Yisrael that they take me a contribution..." Where does this monologue end? At the conclusion of the section regarding the daily sacrifice we have a pronounced and festive conclusion to all the commands concerning the construction of the Mishkan (29:43-46):

"I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael and it shall be sanctified with My glory, and I shall sanctify the Tent of Meeting... and I shall dwell amongst Bnei Yisrael and shall be unto them a God, and they will know that I am the Lord their God Who has taken them out of the land of Egypt to dwell among them; I am the Lord their God."

These are clearly concluding verses, general in nature (i.e., they no longer deal with the daily sacrifice described previously). But principally it is important to note that they echo the opening of this monologue, which is a stylistic means of signaling the boundaries of a literary unit in the Torah. Let us compare:

**BEGINNING:**

A. (25:8) And they shall make for Me a sanctuary,

B. And I shall dwell in their midst.

C. (25:22) And I shall meet with you there.

**END:**

A. (29:43-44) And it shall be sanctified with My glory... and I shall sanctify the Ohel Mo'ed.

B. (29:45-46) And I shall dwell amongst Bnei Yisrael... to dwell in their midst.

C. (29:43) And I shall meet there with Bnei Yisrael.

Although this section signals a conclusion, a review of the rest of parashat Tetzaveh and the beginning of parashat Ki Tisa shows that two whole chapters - 30 and 31 - still deal with the command of the construction work for the Mishkan. Do these chapters represent a direct continuation of the lengthy

monologue that precedes them? Let us examine the content of these two chapters and their relationship with that monologue:

1. THE INCENSE ALTAR (30:1-10). This parasha continues the lengthy and unbroken monologue without any sign of separation (other than the "festive conclusion" of chapter 29):

a) The opening of this parasha ("And you shall make an altar...") is identical with the openings of the parshiot of the other vessels ("And you shall make a table," "And you shall make a menorah of gold").

b) The construction of the incense altar is identical to that of the Ark and the table - shittim wood covered with gold, with rings and poles for carrying added on.

c) Location: between the table and menorah.

d) The service performed with the incense altar resembles that of the sacrificial altar and the menorah. There are even numerous linguistic and halakhic parallels between the daily sacrifice and the daily incense:

#### DAILY SACRIFICE:

A. (29:39) You shall offer the one lamb in the morning

B. and you shall offer the other lamb towards evening.

C. (29:42) A continual sacrifice for all generations... before God.

#### DAILY INCENSE:

A. (30:7) Aharon shall burn upon it incense each morning, when he prepares the lamps.

B. (30:8) And when Aharon lights the lamps towards evening he shall burn incense upon it,

C. a continual incense before God for all generations.

It is therefore difficult to understand why this parasha is placed after the festive closure that preceded it.

The section of the incense altar (#1) is followed by six more sections, each opening with a separate speech by God to Moshe ("And God spoke to Moshe, saying..."):

2. THE HALF-SHEKEL (30:11-16)
3. THE FASHIONING OF THE BASIN (v.17-21)
4. THE ANOINTING OIL FOR THE VESSELS AND KOHANIM (v.22-33)
5. MIXING THE INCENSE AND PLACING IT BEFORE THE ARK (v.34-38)
6. THE CALL TO BETZALEL (31:1-11)
7. THE MITZVA OF SHABBAT (31:12-17).

Only at the end of chapter 31, following this list of commands appended to the general command concerning the construction of the Mishkan, do we find the verse that concludes all these commands collectively:

"And He gave to Moshe, when He had finished speaking to him on Har Sinai, two stone tablets of testimony written with the finger of God." (31:18)

This represents the fulfillment of what God had originally said to Moshe on Har Sinai, at the start of the forty days and forty nights:

"And you shall put inside the Ark the TESTIMONY WHICH I SHALL GIVE TO YOU." (25:17)

Here, again, there is a conclusion to the section which is reminiscent of the beginning.

Is there any common theme joining these six short parshiot (2-7), each of which opens with a new command from God and none of which, for this reason, is an organic part of the long command concerning the construction of the Mishkan? The answer is that none of them is directly connected with the command to build the Mishkan, but nevertheless they are all related to this subject in different ways. Sections 2-7 constitute a series of appendices to the section of the construction of the Mishkan.

This brings us back to the parasha of the incense altar. On the one hand, it is clear that this parasha, too, belongs to the section of appendices: it is placed after the "festive conclusion" of the commands to build the Mishkan, and therefore heads the list of appendices. Further proof for this is the fact that if we follow this order of counting, then the SEVENTH appended parasha is the mitzva of Shabbat, which is certainly intentional.

On the other hand, the incense altar differs from the six other appendices following it in that it is not introduced with the words, "And God spoke to Moshe." As such, it forms part of the continuing monologue that began at the start of parashat Teruma. (This duality is expressed by the fact that the annual Babylonian cycle of Torah reading connects it with the previous section, while three-year cycle practiced until 800 years ago in Eretz Yisrael links it with the appendix section.)

Hence we deduce that although the incense altar is to be grouped with the other "vessels of service," there is something special about it that sit aside from them and requires that it be placed in a kind of appendix adjacent to the main command. Early and later commentators alike have sought this unique quality of the incense altar, and their conclusions may be categorized in two groups, each of which can be further subdivided into two. Some point to a characteristic that DIMINISHES the importance of the INCENSE ALTAR in relation to the other vessels of the Mishkan, or one that diminishes the significance of the MITZVA OF INCENSE in relation to the other services performed in the Mishkan. Others relate the uniqueness of the incense altar to its ADDED significance, or to the special significance of the service of the incense.

#### B. MESHEKH CHOKHMA: THE INCENSE ALTAR IS LESS SIGNIFICANT

We shall begin by turning our attention to the "diminishers," and first among them those who conclude that there is diminished significance attached to the incense altar itself. We learn in the Gemara ([Zevachim 59a](#)):

"Rav Gidal said in the name of Rav: If the altar is absent, incense is burned in its place."

In other words, the mitzva of incense can be fulfilled even in the absence of the altar by burning the incense in the place where the altar should be. No such provision is made with regard to the other vessels of the Mishkan: without the sacrificial altar there can be no sacrifices; without the table there can be no showbread, and without the menorah the mitzva of lighting the lamps cannot be fulfilled. It is for this reason, writes R. Meir Simcha Hacohen of Dvinsk in his commentary Meshekh Chokhma (30:1), that the incense altar appears as an appendix:

"Since [unlike the other vessels] the incense altar is not necessary for the fulfillment of its associated mitzva [i.e. the incense], it is written at the end of all the laws of the vessels and constructions that are NECESSARY preconditions for God to rest His glory in the holy Mishkan, showing that the [construction

of the] incense altar is an independent mitzva [and not a precondition for daily service]."

In his third comment on [Shemot 40:5](#), the Meshekh Chokhma tries to locate a biblical source for Rav Gidal's ruling. But we may claim that it is precisely the placement of the command to build the incense altar that teaches us that it is dispensable! Indeed, this is the conclusion of R. Moshe Galanti (Rabbi of Jerusalem during the second half of the 17th century) at the end of his book, *Korban Chagiga*.

#### C. SEFORNO: THE INCENSE SERVICE IS LESS SIGNIFICANT

R. Ovadia Seforno (30:1) sees both the incense altar and the service performed upon it as being of secondary importance in the Mishkan. The other vessels were meant to "bring the Shekhina of the Holy One to dwell in our midst," which is not, in his view, the purpose of the incense altar. He explains (25:23-25, based on [Ibn Ezra 25:22](#)) that the Mishkan and the vessels placed in it symbolized hospitality towards an "honored guest" who dwelled amongst Bnei Yisrael. The Ark (the "seat" of the Shekhina), the table and the menorah are objects commonly found in a household, and their placement in the Mishkan "was meant to bring the Presence of the Holy One to dwell in our midst." But the incense altar is not included in this category of "household items" that are customarily prepared for an honored guest. (Since there is no intrinsic value to the presence of the incense altar within the Mishkan, we can understand why the service of the incense can be performed without it.)

The Seforno also draws a distinction between the incense service and the sacrificial service. The purpose of latter is "to bring down the vision of His glory into the Mishkan" - an active and overt encounter between God's glory and man, an encounter that takes place in God's "home." According to the Seforno, this was not the case concerning the incense altar, which was meant "to honor God FOLLOWING his visit." It would seem that what the Seforno is hinting at is the custom of "mugmar" (mentioned in [Mishna Berakhot 6:6](#)), where a type of incense was burned at the end of an important meal to introduce a pleasant fragrance. (It should be noted, though, that this custom is known to us only from the period of Chazal, and it is therefore doubtful whether the biblical mitzva of incense can be explained in terms of the etiquette of a later period.)

It appears, according to the Seforno, that neither the incense altar nor the incense service is directly related to the (dual) purpose of the Mishkan: they do not assist in the permanent dwelling of the Shekhina in the Mishkan, nor do they form part of

the human effort "to bring the vision of His glory into the house" through the sacrifices. Like "mugmar" at a human meal, the incense in the Mishkan is an addition, of secondary significance. Hence, it is no wonder that the parshiot of the incense altar and the incense service are not included in the monologue commanding the construction of the Mishkan, but are rather mentioned as an appendix to that command.

#### D. IBN EZRA: THE INCENSE ALTAR IS MORE SIGNIFICANT

The Ibn Ezra takes the opposite approach to those we have examined thus far: he believes that the incense altar is not listed along with the table and menorah because it has a MORE elevated status than them. He brings two proofs:

##### 1. The height of the incense altar (two amot):

"The altar is taller than the table by half an amah, perhaps taller than the menorah [whose measurement of height is not mentioned], and at the same height as the keruvim, which stretch their wings upwards." (P.A. 30:2)

Here the Ibn Ezra hints at a parallel between the incense altar and the Ark: although the Ark is also an amah-and-a-half tall (25:11), the two keruvim are perched upon it, stretching their wings upwards. The place of the incense altar was "before the covering that is upon the testimony" (30:6), i.e. parallel to the keruvim. The wings of the keruvim and the top of the altar are of corresponding height, and both are taller than the table and menorah.

##### 2. The parasha of the incense altar concludes with the words, "It is a holy of holies UNTO GOD" (30:10), whereas the sacrificial altar is called only "a holy of holies" (29:37). The Ibn Ezra (P.K. 30:10) notes the discrepancy and explains:

"The holiness of the incense altar is 'TO GOD' for it is [particularly] honored, and NOTHING BUT THE ARK is more honored than it."

From both comments there arises a special parallel between the Ark and the incense altar.

In his commentary "Tzeror Ha-mor" (30:1), R. Avraham Sava (15th-16th century Spain and Morocco) develops this idea by explaining that both the Ark and the incense altar are a response to the sin of the Golden Calf (and perhaps future sins). "The Ark atones for the sin, and the incense stops the plague and removes God's anger from Israel" (see [Bamidbar 17:9-13](#)). Therefore, these two vessels form bookends for the command to construct the Mishkan.

#### E. A NEW COMPOSITE APPROACH

I would like to suggest a new understanding, built on both of the approaches we have discussed. Although they contradict one another, there may be points of contact between them.

What is the reason for the mitzva of incense? From the Midrash Tanchuma (Tetzaveh, 14) and some of the commentaries it appears clear that the purpose of the mitzva is to offer up a sweet fragrance before God. The problem with this is that we are not told anywhere that the incense is for fragrance! The term "a sweet fragrance" appears several times in the Torah - all in reference to the SACRIFICES, not the incense. However, in one place the reason for the incense is almost spelled out, and we may learn what is left unsaid from what is said. Regarding the service of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, we read ([Vayikra 16:2](#)):

"Speak to Aharon your brother that he not come at all times into the [Holy of Holies] so that he will not die, for I shall appear in [or by means of] the cloud upon the covering [of the Ark]."

The "cloud" here does not refer to the cloud of God's glory, such as that which covered the Mishkan on the day of its inauguration ([Shemot 40:34-38](#)). Rather, it refers to the cloud of incense offered by the Kohen Gadol in the Holy of Holies he entered there once a year ([Vayikra 16:12-13](#)):

"And he shall take a censer full of burning coals from upon the altar before God and he shall fill his hands with sweet incense beaten fine, and bring it inside the veil. And he shall place the incense upon the fire before God, so that the cloud of incense will cover the covering that is upon the testimony, that he shall not die."

In many places the Torah describes the revelation of God to a person from within a cloud. When God initiates the revelation, He covers Himself in a cloud. However, when man initiates the revelation, he must spread a man-made cloud (of incense) between himself and God. Since God is revealed in the Mishkan "above the covering from between the two keruvim which are upon the Ark of testimony" ([Shemot 25:22](#)), that is where man must spread a cloud of incense, as in the verse above.

It would seem this is also the reason for the incense offered daily. Proof for this assertion can be found in the repeated emphasis on the place of the incense altar - "And you shall place it before the veil which is upon the Ark of testimony before the covering that is upon the testimony, where I shall meet with you" ([Shemot 30:6](#)) - and the place of the incense offering - "And you shall put some of it before the testimony in the Ohel Mo'ed where I shall meet with you" (ibid. 36).

The special connection between the incense altar and the Ark is clearly emphasized in all these verses. We may add that the incense is related not just to the Ark but to the ENCOUNTER that takes place between God and Moshe above the Ark's covering. This encounter is not a once-a-year affair; it is possible every day. Therefore "the incense shall be perpetually before God," covering the Ohel Mo'ed and serving as a barrier of cloud before the curtain of the Holy of Holies and before the covering of the Ark.

Hence the service of the incense is unlike the other services performed in the Mishkan: it is not a "necessary precondition" like they are, and a person does not thereby serve God. On the contrary: in offering up the incense, man functions as an agent of God. He creates a screen of cloud between himself and the place of God's revelation, and his action is meant to facilitate for himself (or for others) this encounter with God.

And so we return to the question of the location of the parasha of the incense altar. On the one hand, it is the conclusion of the command to build the Mishkan. Since the main purpose of the Mishkan is the continued revelation of God, the command begins with the Ark - the place of God's revelation - and ends with the incense altar - man's action which facilitates this revelation. On the other hand, the Seforno is correct in noting that the incense altar is unlike the other vessels in the Ohel Mo'ed, for its purpose is not "to make the Shekhina dwell in our midst," nor is the incense service like the offering of sacrifices. Therefore this parasha is not placed among the other vessels of the Mishkan but rather as an appendix.

The incense and the altar upon which it is offered have added importance over and above the other services and vessels because of their direct connection with God's revelation. On the other hand, they are of lesser significance in relation to the rest because they are not the means of man's service before God in the same sense that the sacrifices and other services are. In order not to confuse these two different categories of service, the Torah specifically commands, "You shall not offer upon [the incense altar]... a burnt sacrifice or a meal sacrifice, and you

shall not pour a drink offering upon it" (30:9). Thus the uniqueness of the mitzva of incense explains the special position of the parasha dealing with the incense altar - a position with dual significance.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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