

# The Secret Power of the Ketoret

Of all the ceremonies and offerings that occurred in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), the *Ketoret* (incense) is one of the most mysterious in its power to effect forgiveness on behalf of those who had sinned.

We are introduced to the great nature of *Ketoret* with a veiled reference in the story of Avraham remarrying after the death of his wife Sarah. Avraham we are told “proceeded and took a wife whose name was Keturah” (*Bereishit* 25:1). The Torah does not disclose the identity of Keturah; however, Rashi does, and tells us that Keturah is actually Hagar, Avraham’s concubine from when Sarah was alive, and mother of Yishmael, Avraham’s son. Why was she referred to as Keturah, rather than her true name Hagar? Rashi explains this name actually denotes her righteousness, “because her deeds were as beautiful as *Ketoret*.”

Rashi elsewhere (*Bemidbar* 7:20) mentions the *gematria* (numerical value of the letters) of the word *Ketoret* is 613, which is the number of *mitzvot* in the Torah.<sup>162</sup>

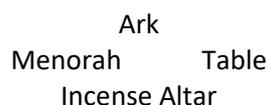
With this in mind let us try to understand the depth behind the pleasing fragrance that was the *Ketoret*, the spiritual power that was released with its burning, and its value with regard to all the *mitzvot* in the Torah.

The actual word *Ketoret*, explains Rashi (*Shemot* 25:6), is a reference to the fashion in which the smoke from the burning incense would ascend in a straight column of smoke into the air. This would enable people to see the rising smoke from afar and remember that the *Ketoret* was being burnt.

*Hashem* instructed Moshe Rabbenu (*Shemot* 30:1) to make a *mizbei’ach* (altar) on which to burn the incense. The dimensions of this altar were to be one *amah* (cubit) by one *amah*, and two *amot* high. It was to be covered in gold with four *karnot* (horns) protruding upwards from its four corners, and two poles, which were placed in rings on two of the corners, allowing the *mizbei’ach* to be carried.

## The *Ketoret* Faces the Torah

The location of the incense *mizbei’ach* in the *Mishkan*, explains R. -Samson Raphael Hirsch, gives insight to the role it played in Jewish life. Its -position was between the *shulchan* (table), and the *menorah* (oil lamps), facing the *aron* (ark) from the outside:



With the *shulchan* representing physical sustenance, and the *menorah* representing spiritual light, the golden incense altar that was placed between them, “symbolized the union of the physical and spiritual resources granted to man by virtue of the Torah as represented by the *aron*.”<sup>163</sup> So the Torah in the *aron* gave power to the physical and spiritual vessels, the table and *menorah*, which united with the incense altar, and then redirected back to the Torah in the *aron*.

The *Ketoret* which was burnt on the incense altar, concludes R. Hirsch, symbolizes the “Jewish people’s emotional and inner life, which springs from the union of the material and spiritual. A danger exists that the people would follow their own hearts and make errors in material and spiritual matters.” To prevent this, they were commanded to place the incense altar in a straight line facing the Torah in the ark, which would make *Benei Yisrael* realize that they could “only draw their ideals from the Torah.”

---

<sup>162</sup>. Provided that the letter “*kuf*” (the first letter of the word *Ketoret*) is replaced by the letter “*daled*,” using the *At-Bash* system of *gematria*, whereby the first and last letters of the *Aleph-Bet* are interchanged, and so too the second with the second to last, etc.

<sup>163</sup>. *The Hirsch Chumash, Shemot* 30:1.

## Following the Exact *Ketoret* Recipe

A twice-daily offering of incense was to be brought by Aharon the High Priest on the *mizbei'ach*. *Hashem* warned Moshe that *Ketoret zarah* (foreign *Ketoret*) should not be brought on the *mizbei'ach* (*Shemot* 30:9). According to Rashi, this prohibition refers to any individuals who desire to bring voluntary incense donations on the *mizbei'ach*, which were not actually commanded by God. Onkelos disagrees and says that this *Ketoret zarah* is referring to *Ketoret* made of different ingredients than those specified by the Torah, whilst *Targum Yonatan* interprets the prohibition as incense brought by a non-Jew.

This prohibition of no foreign incense other than the ones prescribed, explains R. Hirsch, excludes “all arbitrary formation of the highest ideals of life.” As Jews, we have only one highest ideal of our lives, namely, total commitment to *Hashem's* will as revealed to us in the Torah, which was housed in the *aron* opposite the incense altar. Hence all offerings, *olah*, *minchah*, and *nesakhim* (burnt offerings, meal offerings, and libations), are excluded from this golden incense altar, as they symbolize only partial progress, or preparation, towards perfection, whereas the incense altar symbolizes complete perfection. This may help us understand its being made of gold, rather than copper like the other *mizbei'ach*.

## The Smell Factor

The *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* (*mitzvah* 103) explains that the root reason of the *mitzvah* to burn the incense was to make the “glory of the Temple great, and that its excellence and awe would impress all the people.” A person’s heart can be influenced in a number of ways, but it is well known, explains the *Chinukh*, that “scent is something a person’s spirit enjoys and desires, and can lift a person’s heart.” As such, the scent of the *Ketoret* was the “best that could be possibly made by human beings.”

The *Ketoret* was made of various “*samim*” (“spices”). The word *Ketoret* is actually juxtaposed with the word “*samim*” in the verse (*Shemot* 30:7) where it says “Upon it shall Aharon bring the spice incense up in smoke.” R. Hirsch (*Shemot* 30:34) explains that the word “*samim*” is related to the words “*tzmam*” and “*zmam*” and accordingly refers to ingredients that even a small amount of which was “highly potent.”<sup>164</sup> As such, says the *Sefer Ha-Chinukh*, the fragrance from the *Ketoret* traveled from “*Yericho* to *Yerushalayim*.” The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 39b) even goes as far as to say, that the smell of the *Ketoret* was so powerful, brides in Jerusalem did not even need to wear perfume because the scent of the *Ketoret* would permeate them and their clothing!

The human sense of smell is very powerful, and is linked most strongly to the faculty of memory. The *Gemara* (*Berachot* 43b) asks “from where is it derived that we recite a blessing over fragrance?” The *Gemara* answers that it is based on the verse “*kol ha-neshamah tehallel Kah*” – “Let every soul praise *Hashem*” (*Tehillim* 150:6). “What is something from which the soul derives pleasure? You must say that this is fragrant smell.” As such, people would thereby smell the *Ketoret* and feel closeness to *Hashem* anytime they were in Jerusalem or even further out in *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>165</sup>

## *Ketoret* Ingredients

While the written Torah (*Shemot* 30:34) only lists four of the spices in the *Ketoret*, the *Gemara* (*Keritot* 6a) adds another seven spices to the ingredients, making a total of eleven spices that were blended together to make the *Ketoret*. The full number of eleven spices, explains Rashi (*Shemot* 30:34), is hinted at in the verse (*Shemot* 30:34) listing the four ingredients in the following way: the word “*samim*” (spices) is plural, implying two; stacte, onycha, and galbanum are an additional three, which is a total of five. The word *samim* is then mentioned a second time, which doubles the number five to ten, and with the final spice of frankincense we now have eleven spices.

Of the eleven spices, one had a foul smell, the *chelbenah* (galbanum). However, when this ingredient was added to the other eleven spices it helped in making the entire mixture smell wonderful. Rashi learns a moral lesson from the inclusion of the unpleasant *chelbenah* in the *Ketoret*: just as sinners whose actions are unpleasant, so too we should still include those individuals in our fasts and prayers, so that they should be part of our people. As such, the

---

<sup>164</sup>. R. Hirsch in *Bereishit* 11:6 connects the root *s-m-m* (which means great power as concentrated in a small quantity), and *tz-m-m* (which means to gather and press together) and *z-m-m* (which means to devise a great achievement from limited means or humble beginnings with far-reaching consequences). So the *Ketoret* “*samim*” connects to all three roots. It was a small concentrated quantity, which was crushed together, and which had within it tremendous power that had a profound effect.

<sup>165</sup>. The word “*rei'ach*” (smell) is related to the word “*ruchani*” (spiritual), as smell is a spiritual pleasure. This is because unlike other physical pleasures such as eating and drinking, smell does not enter the body in a physical form (*Arukh Ha-Shulchan* O.C. 216:1). Interestingly, commentators point out that Adam and Chavah, by -eating from the *Eitz Ha-Da'at* (Tree of Knowledge), sinned with all their senses in the Garden of Eden, except for the sense of smell. So the sense of smell has remained unblemished and pure since then.

*Gemara* adds (*Keritot* 6b), “Any fast in which the sinners of Israel do not participate is not a fast, for the *chelbenah* had a foul smell, yet the Torah listed it with the ingredients of the *Ketoret*.”

### The *Ketoret*-Menorah Connection

The verses that describe the timing when the *Ketoret* was burnt on the *mizbei'ach* are linked to another aspect of the *Mishkan*, namely the lighting of the *menorah* (*Shemot* 30:7–8) – “Upon it shall Aharon bring the spice incense up in smoke, every morning when he cleans the lights of the *menorah*, should he bring it up in smoke. And when Aharon kindles the lamps in the afternoon he shall bring it up in smoke, continual incense before *Hashem* for your generations.”

What is the connection between the burning of the *Ketoret* and the preparing of the *menorah* lights? According to the *Gemara* (*Yoma* 14b), the morning offering of the incense took place in the midst of the preparation of the *menorah*. According to the *Chakhamim* (Sages), the *menorah* lamps were cleaned in two stages – first five were cleaned, then the *Ketoret* was burned, and then the final two lamps were cleaned. Apparently the preparing of the *menorah* and the burning of the *Ketoret* purposefully intertwined. How so?

According to R. Hirsch (*Shemot* 30:7–8) the *menorah* and the *Ketoret* represent the coming together of two ideals: the nation’s work of the spirit, and the perfection of deeds. As R. Hirsch explains, “According to Judaism we are made up of two aspects: intellect and moral perfection of conduct. In the Jewish conception of holiness of life, genius is no license for non-observance of the laws of morality. On the contrary, supreme morality is the test of the supreme intellect, and only in it and by it is the nobility and purity of the intellect demonstrated and proven.”<sup>166</sup>

### The *Ketoret* Saves Lives

After the rebellion of Korach, with the loss of so many lives, the Torah describes the anger of *Benei Yisrael* towards Moshe and Aharon (*Bemidbar* 17:6): “The entire assembly of the Children of Israel complained on the morning after, against Moshe and Aharon, saying, ‘You have killed the people of *Hashem*!’” Immediately after this rebellion, *Hashem* warned Moshe and Aharon to separate themselves from the people, as He wished to destroy them.

The response of Moshe to stop this potential destruction was to burn the *Ketoret* (17:11–12). Moshe instructed Aharon to “take the fire pan and put on it fire from the altar and place incense, take it quickly to the assembly and provide atonement for them...the plague has begun.” Aharon did as he was instructed and the plague subsided – “He placed the incense and provided atonement for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.” How did Moshe know that the incense had the power to stop plagues?

The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 89a) explains that while on Mount Sinai, the Angel of Death had revealed to Moshe Rabbenu the secret power of burning incense – while a plague is raging, Moshe should stand between the living and the dead, burn the incense, and the plague will stop.

What is the possible source of *Hashem*’s forgiveness by the use of *Ketoret*? A possible answer to this question is found in the *Midrash* (*Shemot Rabbah*, *Pekudei* 51:4). The *Midrash* elaborates on the view that the *Mishkan* serves as testimony that the Jewish people were forgiven for the sin of the Golden Calf:

R. Yitzchak said: This can be illustrated by means of a parable: To what may it be compared? To a king who took a wife and loved her exceedingly; however after some time, he became angry with her and he left her. Her neighbors would say to her, “He is not returning to you again.” After some time, he sent her a message and said, “Clean my palace and make the beds for on such and such a day I will come back to you.” When the specified day arrived, the king came back to her and became reconciled with her and entered the palace to be with her and ate and drank with her. Nevertheless, her neighbors did not believe that the king had truly reconciled with her; however, when they smelled the scent of her fragrant spices, at that moment they knew that the king had truly reconciled with her.

So, too, the Holy One blessed be He loved Israel and brought them before Mount Sinai and gave them the Torah and called them kings, as it says: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests” (*Shemot* 19:6). Yet, after only forty days, they sinned by making the Golden Calf. At that time, the nations said: [*Hashem*] will never again be reconciled with them, as it says: The nations had said, “They will no longer sojourn [here]. The anger of *Hashem* has divided them, caring for them no longer” (*Eikha* 4:15–16).

However, as soon as Moshe went to plead for mercy on their behalf, the Holy One blessed be He forgave them immediately, as it is stated: And *Hashem* said, “I have forgiven because of your words” (*Bemidbar* 14:20).

---

<sup>166</sup>. This may be the reason, R. Hirsch explains (*Shemot* 30:7–8), that *Parashat Tetzaveh*, which discusses the consecration of the *kohanim*, begins with the *mitzvah* of the *menorah*, and concludes with the offering of the exalted *Ketoret*. Both together, in close combination, make the *kohen* a *kohen*.

Moshe then said, “Master of the World, indeed, I am appeased because I am convinced that You have forgiven Israel, but make it known before the eyes of all the nations as well, that You have nothing in Your heart against Israel.” The Holy One, blessed be He, then said to him, “By your life! I am going to cause My Presence to rest in their midst,” as it says: They shall make a sanctuary for Me...so that I may dwell among them (*Shemot* 25:8). Consequently, the nations will know that I have forgiven Israel. It is therefore stated: the Tabernacle of Testimony, for it is a testimony for Israel that the Holy One, blessed be He, forgave them for the sin of the Golden Calf.

### ***Hashem Forgives Benei Yisrael***

So the *Ketoret* was part of the service of the *Mishkan*, which as the *Midrash* explains, was the mechanism by which *Hashem* forgave *Benei Yisrael* for the *Cheit Ha-Egel* (sin of the Golden Calf). By instructing us to build the *Mishkan*, *Hashem* allowed His Presence to be located among *Benei Yisrael* at all times. And it was the *Ketoret* that was the visible symbol of this reconciliation between *Hashem* and *Benei Yisrael*. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Pekudei* 6), adds: “When the nations of the world saw the scent [i.e., the smoke] of the *Ketoret* rising in a straight column, they knew that the Holy One blessed be He had reconciled with them.” The burning of the *Ketoret*, explains the *Be’er Mayim Chaim* (*Mishpatim* 2:4), signifies an especially close relationship between God and the Jewish people.<sup>167</sup>

How is it exactly that the offering of *Ketoret* causes *Hashem* to change His attitude towards us? The good deeds of the righteous are often metaphorically compared to the scent of incense. As we saw earlier, Rashi (*Bereishit* 25:1) tells us that Hagar is referred to as Keturah because “her actions were as pleasant as *Ketoret*” (see also *Bemidbar Rabbah* 13:14: “The deeds of the sons of Yehuda were as pleasant as the scent of *Ketoret*”). Avraham was also compared to a barrel of perfume (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:3:3) because of his deeds of kindness. The basis for this comparison is that just as a scent brings benefit to all those in its vicinity, without those people detracting from the substance of the scent, so too the people in the vicinity of a righteous person benefit and learn from his good deeds without detracting from his merit.

Thus, when a righteous person offers *Ketoret* to *Hashem* it serves to recall before *Hashem* that person’s kindness and mercy. This is what prompts *Hashem* to reconsider His attitude of strictness towards the world and to arouse His own attributes of kindness and mercy.

This, then, was the secret that the Angel of Death told Moshe. Offering the *Ketoret*, like the prayer of the righteous, has the power to reverse the disposition of *Hashem*. A plague comes about as an -expression of *Hashem*’s anger with the people, and the *Ketoret* is able to transform this anger into Divine mercy.<sup>168</sup>

May our own contemporary recital of the *Ketoret* serve to -similarly bring God’s kindness and mercy to our world.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup>. Whereas all other offerings are brought to atone for a sin in one way or another, the *Ketoret* is brought only out of joy (*Tanchuma*, *Tetzaveh* 15).

<sup>168</sup>. Perhaps this too is why *Chazal* saw fit to analyze the *gematria* of the word *Ketoret* the way they did – by inverting the first letter of the word via the *At-Bash* system into a *daleth*. This hints at the hidden secret of the *Ketoret*’s power; it causes an “inversion,” or reversal, of *Hashem*’s attitude towards us.

<sup>169</sup>. I would like to thank R. Henschel Levine for his assistance with this article.