

Parashat Tetzaveh, 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

*The Meaning of Ketoret*

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The final chapter of our Torah portion, Parashat Tetzaveh, contains the *mitzvah* to construct the *mizbeach haketoret*, the incense altar:

You shall make an altar for bringing incense up in smoke; you shall make it out of acacia wood. It shall be one cubit long and one cubit wide, a square, and two cubits high; its horns shall be [one piece] with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top, its walls all around, and its horns; and you shall make for it a golden crown all around. (*Sefer Shemot* 30:1-3, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Three chapters earlier, Parashat Terumah presents the commandment to build the *mizbeach hanechoshet*, the copper altar upon which *korbanot* (animal sacrifices) were offered:

And you shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide; the altar shall be square, and its height [shall be] three cubits. And you shall make its horns on its four corners; its horns shall be from it, and you shall overlay it with copper. And you shall make... all its implements of copper. (27:1-3)

The placement of these passages raises an essential question: “Why is the *mizbeach haketoret* found in our *parasha*, instead of in Parashat Terumah?” As Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, a *rosh hayeshiva* of Yeshiva University makes quite clear, this is an exegetical challenge with deep historical roots:

The conclusion of *parshat Tezaveh* delineates the laws and role of the *mizbeach ha-ketoret*. Many of the commentators (Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Seforno, Meshech Chochmah, Haamek Davar on Shemot 30:1) were puzzled by the fact that the Torah did not previously

incorporate this crucial component in its otherwise comprehensive chronicle of the *mishkan* in *parshat Terumah*. ([http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2005/parsha/rros\\_tetzaveh.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2005/parsha/rros_tetzaveh.html))

In his Torah commentary, *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619) examines the differences that obtain between the *mizbeach hanechoshet* and the *mizbeach haketoret*. In so doing, he helps us understand why they are not juxtaposed to one another in Parashat Terumah. He notes that while both altars were constructed to enable those who violated various laws of the Torah to attain expiation, they focus upon two completely different aspects of our being:

The *mizbeach hanechoshet* comes to atone for different physical matters, as the body has [metaphorically] stumbled on the stone of sin...[and] the animals that are offered [on this altar] are the equivalent of the animal-like soul in man (*nefesh habehamit sh'b'adam*) [that commits such sins]. This animal-like soul, therefore, needs to realize *kapara* (atonement) through the medium of an animal sacrifice (*nefesh temurat nefesh*) ...as if the sinner had offered himself [upon the altar].

... the *neshama* [the higher-level soul of a human being that spiritually dwarfs the *nefesh habehamit*] also needs atonement, as it has become besmirched in the body that has stumbled [in sin]. It, however, cannot achieve *kapara* by offering the soul of an animal sacrifice, as these souls [the animal's and humankind's *neshama*] are not equivalent to one another... Therefore, the Living G-d commanded us to construct the *mizbeach haketoret*... in order to atone for violations of the spirit of man that [has the potential] to rise to the highest heights [of the Heavens] — just like the smoke of the incense [itself]... (Translations and brackets my own)

Rav Luntschitz's analysis of the fundamental dissimilarity between these two altars (*mizbachot*) helps us understand why they are not found in proximity to one another: The *mizbeach hanechoshet* assisted in the process of achieving *kapara* for violations of physically based prohibitions (*guf*), while the *mizbeach haketoret* helped obtain forgiveness for violations of the spirit (*neshama*). Since these *mizbachot* address such divergent facets of humankind, it is little wonder they are not found in the same *parasha*.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the Rav by his students and followers, explains the depth-level significance of *ketoret* in a manner that complements Rav Luntschitz's interpretation:

The incense represents the hidden and the intimate, the *mysterium magnum* [great mystery] of creation and the *mysterium tremendum* [terrifying mystery] of the Divine Presence in creation and beyond... *Ketoret*, incense, tells us a great story of the human craving for God, the quest and yearning for the *makor* [Ultimate Source], the beginning of all. *Ketoret* tells a marvelous story of the tragic human waiting for ecstatic unity with the Almighty... (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, page 205, brackets my own)

For the Rav, *ketoret* "...tells us a great story of the human craving for God, the quest and yearning for the *makor*," and, "a marvelous story of the tragic human waiting for ecstatic unity with the Almighty." In sum, *ketoret* symbolizes humankind's desire to achieve *devekut* (attachment and communion) with the Almighty, the highest rung on the spiritual ladder of existence. As the celebrated *pasuk* states: "*V'atem hadveikim b'Hashem Elokeichem chayim kulchem hayom.*" ("But you who cleave to the L-rd your G-d are alive, all of you, this day," *Sefer Devarim* 4:4) With Hashem's help and our fervent desire may we, too, be accounted among those who are *hadveikim b'Hashem*, now and forevermore. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:  
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.