

Tzetzavah

Oils, Incense and Satan

Aaron should offer the Ketores incense in the morning; when he arranges the candles should he offer it. When Aaron lights the candles in the evening, he should offer the Ketores continually before Hashem.

Shemos 30:7–8

“Oil and incense bring the heart joy,”¹ wrote Shlomo. The Vilna Gaon² explains that the allusion here is to the oil of the Menorah in the Temple, and the incense of the *Ketores*, also discussed in our Parsha. What is the connection between these two items, and what it is about them that brings such joy to the heart?

Our Sages teach,³ “One who sees olive oil in his dream can expect the *meor* [light] of the Torah, as the verse tells us, ‘Command the Jewish people to take for You pure olive oil.’”⁴ In order to make sense of this gemara, we first need to define the *meor* of Torah. While not a direct definition, we do discover much from the words of R. Chiya.⁵ “R. Chiya bar Abba said, “The verse says, “If only they would abandon Me, and still keep My Torah,” for by busying themselves with the Torah, the *meor* that it has will bring them back to their good state.”⁶ The *meor* of Torah emerges as the part of the Torah that brings us back to being good.⁷ It does not change us into something good, but rather turns us back into the good beings that we were when we started out.

Moshe saw that the Jewish people were being threatened, so he insisted that Hashem save them. He even told Hashem that if He doesn’t save the Jewish people, then “erase me from your book.”⁸ Now, despite the fact that this act of Moshe’s was one of the most noble ever done by a man, Moshe suffered a bit from it. For, “The curse of the righteous man, even if it

1 Mishlei 27:9

2 Commentary to Mishlei there

3 Brachos 57a

4 Shemos 27:20

5 Introduction to Eicha Rabassi

6 See *Even Shisiya* of R. Yochanan Bechofer (p. 24, n. 25), where he quotes the late R. Yaakov Weinberg as explaining that although the mitzvot of a person who does not believe in a Creator are inherently meaningless in the sense of religious connection, and thus to convince a Jewish atheist to do “just one mitzvah” would be a complete waste of time, this is not the case, for, in fact, the mitzvahs of such a person nevertheless have some value in that the *meor* of that mitzvah can reach them on a soul level.

7 See *Pnei Menachem* to Vayakhel-Pikudei / Shekalim 5755, s.v. *vihanisim*, p. 247.

8 Shemos 32:32. Rosh Hashanah 16b tells that this book that he would have been erased from was “the book of life.” See also Targum Yonason, Sforno, and *Chizkuni*, who say this as well. However, Rashi there says that it means “the whole Torah.” See Gur Aryeh who explains Rashi further.

was conditional [and the condition was not fulfilled], it nevertheless comes true.”⁹ Thus, Moshe’s name was erased from this week’s Parsha, and was never mentioned in it.¹⁰ This is not just a game. Moshe showed his connection to the possibility of being erased from the “book,” which we will attempt to explain in a moment. Once that was a possibility in the world of potential, and Moshe connected to that, it had to play out in the world of the actual. And thus, Moshe lost something. But what did he lose? Moshe, by offering a “what-if scenario,” it seems, was suggesting that there was a chance that the Jewish people would not have it in them to change back to their pure state. They had worshiped the Golden Calf, and Moshe wanted them to be cleansed, so he asked this of Hashem. But when he told Hashem what he would like to happen to him should things not go the way of the Jews, this indicated that he saw that as a possibility. His faith in his people was not as complete as it could have been.

The Parsha of Tetzaveh is one that speaks of the Menorah. R. Tzadok of Lublin¹¹ explains that Aaron, as he lit the Menorah, ignited along with it the souls of the Jewish people. The lighting of the Menorah, which Aaron did in place of Moshe, was the symbol of the inspiration that we receive from our leaders. To inspire others means to know that deep down inside, they have what it takes. It is about connecting others to the *meor* (light) that *returns* us to the good, rather than *changes* us. There is no option for failure because we know that deep down inside, the human being is pristine and untouched. It’s just about connecting with that part of oneself. Moshe said, “If You do not save them, then what am I worth in the scheme of things? I will influence no one, and will be erased.” And this came true in a minor way. Moshe was removed from the Parsha that talks about the lighting of the Menorah, for that was a power that he lost.¹²

The person who doubts whether others can be influenced, the one who doubts whether his children can really be good people, will, unfortunately, often see his worst prophecies fulfill themselves. Faith in others and the ability to lead them comes from the absolute certainty that they are completely good at the core. If a person who is essentially good seeks forgiveness, he or she must be forgiven. There is no qualifying phrase, “...and if not, erase me.”

And thus, the building of the *Ketores* (incense) Altar, though one of the pieces of “furniture” that ought to have been dealt with in last week’s Parsha – along with all the rest of those sort of items – is left for our Parsha. The *Ketores* is really a fascinating service. The Gemara¹³ tells

9 Makkos 11a

10 *Zohar Chadash* 60b, and *Zohar* vol., 146a. R. Bechaye to Shemos 32:32; *Baal Haturim* to Shemos 27:20; *Daas Zekenim* to Shemos 32:34; *Pirush Harash al Hatorah* to Shemos 27:20.

11 *Pri Tzaddik*, Tetzaveh

12 For other reasons that Moshe was left out of this Parsha specifically, see *Kobeles Yitzchak* to Tetzaveh, who quotes the Vilna Gaon saying that on the majority of years, the seventh of Adar, which is the anniversary of Moshe’s death, falls on the week of Tetzaveh. The same is asserted by *Meor Einayim* at the end of Tetzaveh, as well as by R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz in his *Avodas Yisrael* to Vayechi, s.v. *liyishbuascha*. See also *Paneach Raza* and *Shach al Hatorah*. See also *Megaleh Amukos* (ofen 55), who notes that the *gematria* of the *nistar* of Moshe (wherein each letter would be itself spelled out; i.e., *mem* is spelled out as “*mem, mem,*” *shin* would be “*shin, nun,*” etc.) is 101, which is the exact number of verses in this Parsha. This Parsha is the very essence of the hiding of Moshe.

13 *Kreisos* 6b

us that all fast days, days when Jewish people are repenting, require wicked, sinful Jews to join the rest of us in our prayers. At the beginning of Yom Kippur, just before Kol Nidrei, we invite the sinners in a public announcement, for they are absolutely integral to our atonement. The Gemara learns this from the *chelbna*, which in English translates as “galbanum.” The *chelbna* smelled horrible. It was pungent and potent, but it was, nevertheless, integral to the *Ketores*, which was not kosher without it. This smelly thing actually had the property that it made everything else smell stronger, and sweeter. From the *chelbna*, we learn to include the wicked.¹⁴ But why? Why should the atonement of essentially good people be held up because there are no really bad ones in the room?

Atonement, as we explained earlier, is the awareness that our natures are good. We need to know that we are never really ruined by sin, only distanced from our natures. People who are righteous, and have only made a couple of slip-ups, are likely to think that they are good people as a result of most of their actions. Thus atonement, to them, would seem like identifying with their actions. But that is not the case. While one’s actions *are* one’s accomplishments, one also needs to know that deep down, we are all connected to our Creator, regardless of our behavior. We all started out good, and remain that way deep down inside. This is the secret of atonement. Therefore, the repentance of a person who is nearly perfect needs to also look like that of the sinner – he needs to have a bad guy nearby to remind him that “just as that guy could only be here if deep down inside he was really good, so too, I am repenting to get in touch with that deep part of me, not just to rid myself of a couple of deeds.”

The recipe for the *Ketores*, fascinatingly, was a secret that was given over to Moshe by the Angel of Death, say our Sages.¹⁵ When Moshe went up to Heaven to bring the Torah down to us, the angels were so swayed by his convincing pitch that man should get the Torah that they not only withdrew their claims *against* the idea of our receiving the Torah, but they, in fact, were proactive, and presented gifts to Moshe!¹⁶ But what gift can an angel really give, wonders R. Moshe Shapiro.¹⁷ In fact, he explains, the angel, who *is* his mission, can give only himself, for he has no possessions, or information, or power that is not his very essence. The very essence of the evil inclination, who is the Angel of Death, and the Satan,¹⁸ is that everything can be made sweet. His essence is the secret of the *Ketores*.¹⁹

14 See also R. Shmuel Brazil’s amazing *Bishvili Nivra Haolam*, p. 63, where he points out that the Talmudic expression (Sanhedrin 37a), “Each man is required to say, “The world was created just for me,”” starts with the very letters *chelbna*. Each person is “*chayav lomar, ‘Bishvili nivra haolam’*” – the first letters of each word are *chelbna* to show us that even the person who feels as though he is the smelly one, the *chelbna* is, nevertheless, required to know that he is worth creating the entire world for.

15 Shabbos 89a

16 See Tehillim 68:19

17 *Afikei Mayim*, Shavuos, 42. See also my *Vaani Bahashem Atzapeh* to Tehillim 68:19

18 Bava Basra 16a

19 See also Yalkut Reuveni to Bereishis 32:27, quoting the Rema MiFano, who explains that the angel of Esav asked to be sent away to sing to God at the very moment that Yaakov conquered him, because that is his whole praise. The angel of Esav, the wicked one who challenges us and is identified with the Satan, the Angel of Death and the evil inclination, is only here so that we should beat it, and make it sweet. Then, it is his time to sing to Hashem. A similar approach is recorded in R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz’s *Avodas Yisrael* in the name of the

The wicked Haman of the Purim story has a name with a numerical value of ninety-five. This is the same value as *chelbna*.²⁰ We are to know that even the wicked Haman had some good in there.²¹ This is why we have to be drunk enough to be able to say “blessed is Haman,”²² for there is some spark way down in there that is holy.²³ That is the message of the *chelbna*. That even the distant is also rooted in the divine.

The other main issue that Tetzaveh deals with is the clothing of the Kohen Gadol. After the sin of Adam, Hashem gave him and Chava clothing. That clothing was the same as the clothing of the Kohen Gadol.²⁴ (This does not mean that they both necessarily looked exactly identical, but rather, that they represented the same thing.) Just as these garments were the first things that Hashem gave Adam and Chava to help them overcome their sin, so, too, does the clothing of Aaron atone for sins.²⁵ This is what is worn by the Kohen Gadol. In fact, we are told that Avraham was, himself, a Kohen Gadol. The *Chiddushei Harim*²⁶ explains that when we say each day in our prayers that Hashem is the “protector of Avraham,”²⁷ what we mean is that He protects that part of Avraham that is still inside of each Jew. That part is never touched. Aaron lit the Menorah, and the Menorah was the centerpiece of the Chanukah miracle. The Chanukah miracle was the highest level that Menorah lighting could reach, and was the essence of its mission. The gift of lighting the Menorah was expressed by the Chanukah story.²⁸ The oil that was never touched bore the “signature of the Kohen Gadol.”²⁹ *Chiddushei Harim* explains that this hints to the “signature of Avraham,” which is that part of the soul that is connected to Avraham and can never be made impure. Just as the oil could not be ruined, and the Menorah could not be extinguished, neither can the holiness of the Jewish soul. The clothes of Adam were worn by Avraham the Kohen Gadol, and then by Aaron. They all reminded us that even sin cannot really touch the deepest part of us, and that we are never disconnected.

Aaron wore the special clothing, and performed the service of the Menorah as well as that of the *Ketores*. He was a man whose defining traits were “loving peace, pursuing peace, loving

Sefer Olas Hachodesh. See also R. Avraham Schorr’s *Halekach Vihalibuv* 5763 to Vayakhel, p. 140.

20 *Megaleh Amukos*, Veeshanan, 191

21 *Shaar Hakavanos, drushei Purim* (104:4); *Etz Chaim, shaar hapurim* (6, p. 110, column 3, s.v. *haga tzemach*); *Reyach Duda'im* of Bnei Yissaschar to Megillah 13a, s.v. *ushmuel amar*.

22 Megillah 7b

23 See also R. Yaakov Hillel’s *Amudei Horaah* to the Chida’s *Moreh Bietzva*, 9, 307.

24 *Baal Haturim* to Bereishis 3:21. See also *Zohar Chadash* quoted in Yalkut Reuveni to Tetzaveh.

25 Arachin 16a explains in detail what each of the items atones for. See also the medieval commentary of R. Elyakim of Magentza (Jerusalem, 1965) to Yoma 72b, where he explains that the clothing of the Kohen Gadol is now in Rome, and since they are unharmed, they therefore still atone for the Jewish people. See, however, Chasam Sofer’s commentary to Gittin 8a.

26 *Sfas Emes*, Chanukah, 646

27 Shmoneh Esrei

28 See Ramban to Behaaloscha

29 Shabbos 21b

mankind and bringing them close to Torah.”³⁰ He was the one who lit the Menorah, bringing us close to the *meor* of the Torah, which reminds us that we are really pure at our cores, and he was the one who lit the *Ketores* at that same time.

“Just as a person must have faith in God, so too, is he obligated to have faith in himself,” wrote the saintly R. Tzadok of Lublin.³¹ When we discover the joy of the oil and the *Ketores*, the joy that is deep inside of us, that knows how connected we are to the Divine, to Eternity and to the Torah, then we can have the faith in ourselves that we are expected to. Only when we learn that if we put in the effort, there is not any option at all to fail – there is no option of “and if not, then erase me” – only then will we truly feel that joy.

30 Avos 1:12

31 *Tzidkas Hatzaddik* 154