

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Korach **An Iron Dome of Love**

I'm speaking to you from Jerusalem. The Holy City. Everything is quiet now, but last night a rocket slammed into an apartment building in Bat Yam. Police say six people were killed in the city including two children. Seven more are missing and emergency services are searching through the rubble of destroyed buildings.

As the rescuers search through the ruins of those charred buildings, we need to search through our *neshamas*, our souls. Our *neshamas* are open now; open in sadness, but also open in hope and trust in Hashem - Who is all love and kindness. Our hearts are open to teshuva, to repentance. To fix, to improve.

On Shabbos night, at 2 in the morning, the sirens began their mournful wail, and we too rushed to our shelter for the second time that night. My three-year-old grandson, Dovid, said to his father, "Daddy, soon their batteries are going to run out from all the sirens and they will all die."

They asked Rav Dov Landau, Rosh Yeshiva of Slabodka, "What should a father say to his children? They are afraid." Rav Landau answered, "A parent should tell them that Hashem runs the world. Tell the children that Hashem loves us and has mercy on us."

They asked him if everything would be okay. The Rosh Yeshiva replied, "Of course. Hashem loves us and we will continue doing good things so that He will continue to love us and shower us with kindness."

When Rav Landau was asked how we should strengthen ourselves in mitzvahs, he replied, “Do only good things, only sweet things.” They asked, “What is meant by ‘sweet things?’”

“That it should be pleasant to hear,” Rav Landau added. “Such as speaking kindly to one another.”

Everything should be sweet and not sharp like a bitter drug. Sweet. Hashem will help. The “battlefield” is not only in Iran, it’s not only in Bat Yam. It is in our hearts and is in our homes.

A kind word shoots down a missile. Letting go of resentment stops the enemy from enriching fissile material. Averting one’s eyes when necessary, causes a terrorist to avert his eyes and miss his target.

Going easy on your children, on your spouse, on the person next to you in shul, creates an Iron Dome of Love that no enemy of the Jewish People can ever even hope to pierce.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Korach, Datan and Aviram, and 250 leaders of Israel rebel against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. The rebellion results in their being swallowed by the earth. Many resent their death and blame Moshe. G-d's "anger" is manifest by a plague that besets the nation, and many thousands perish. Moshe intercedes once again for the people. He instructs Aharon to atone for them and the plague stops.

Then, G-d commands that staffs, each inscribed with the name of one of the tribes, be placed in the Mishkan. In the morning, the staff of Levi, bearing Aharon's name, sprouts, buds, blossoms and yields ripe almonds. This provides Divine confirmation that Levi's tribe is chosen for priesthood and verifies Aharon's position as *Kohen Gadol*, High Priest. The specific duties of the *levi'im* and *kohanim* are stated. The *kohanim* were not to be landowners, but were to receive their sustenance from the tithes and other mandated gifts brought by the people. Also taught in this week's Torah portion are the laws of the first fruits, redemption of the firstborn and various laws of offerings.

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Korach

A Nation Rising Up Like a Lion

Many say that the current military conflict between Israel and Iran for a non-nuclear regime is similar in magnitude and importance to wars that we learn about in the Tanach. The name it has been assigned is “The Jewish nation, which arises like a lion.” According to Torah sources, what is the meaning and significance of being compared to a lion and other such creatures?

Rabbi Yehuda ben Teima says, “Be as brazen as a leopard, as light as an eagle, as swift as a gazelle, and as strong as a lion — to do the will of your Father in Heaven.”

The teaching by the great Torah Sage on our *daf* is actually a *mishna* taught in Pirkei Avot (5:20). Here we are taught to internalize four “animal” traits to enable each person to maximize his individual potential to do the will of Hashem.

One explanation for the mention of these four traits, associated with four aspects of a person’s ability to serve Hashem, is offered by one of the major classical commentaries on *The Mishna*, Rav Ovadiah from Bartenura. “Be *bold* like a leopard (which he describes not as a leopard, but as an “unnatural” crossbreed of a wild boar and a lioness) implores a person *to not be embarrassed* to ask his rabbi for further explanation if the student does not understand the Torah teaching sufficiently — “One who is embarrassed will not learn,” teach our Sages. “Be light like an eagle,” he explains, is to review what you have learned, and, if you really try, you will find that *you will not be weary* from the toil of your repeated study. “Run like a gazelle” means *to persevere* in your efforts to fulfill as many mitzvahs as you can, in the best manner possible. “Be brave like a lion” is to *conquer* any innate, inner inclinations you may have that tempt you to transgress the way of the Torah.

Another approach is offered by Rabbeinu Yaakov the son of the Rosh — also known as the *Tur*. (Orach Chaim 1) He relates each of the character traits that are lauded in the *mishna* to four main parts of a person's body. “Be bold as a leopard” teaches that a person should *embolden his mind* and determination to not refrain from doing Hashem's will, although he may encounter fools and dolts who delight in making fun of his fervent mitzvah fulfillment and Torah study. “Be light like an eagle,” the *Tur* explains, means to “fly in the heavens,” above it all, as it were, without seeing negative and improper sights. One should guard his *eyes* to be careful to not view anything that might lead to transgress the way of the Torah. It is well known that the sight of something inappropriate is the beginning of the transgression. “Run like a gazelle,” he writes, instructs a person that his *feet* should be used only for running to do good deeds and mitzvahs. “Be brave like a lion” is an instruction to strengthen one's *heart* — the seat of emotion — to want to strive more and more to improve his following the way of Hashem. Be *lionhearted*. The *Tur* lines up the four essentials in the *mishna* with four parts of a person: mind, eyes, feet and heart — all to be used properly and to the fullest in the service of Hashem.

Rabbi Yechiel Michal Epstein — also known by his work called *Aruch Hashulchan*, an invaluable codification of all branches of halacha — suggests an alternative reason for there being four distinct teachings in the *mishna*. He notes that there is a concept that man is comprised of the four basic “elements”: fire, air, water and earth. The four traits in the *mishna* correspond to these fundamental building blocks: boldness corresponds with fire, which is very brazen and mighty; lightness with air, which is very lightweight and ethereal; running with water, which flows back and forth; and bravery/courage with the earth, which is strong and hard. Rabbi Epstein writes that he humbly asserts that the *mishna* means to teach the need for a person to constructively use all of these four elements of his physical being *only* for the sake of doing the will of Hashem, and not, G-d forbid, for any negative reason.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger cites a source who makes a fascinating observation in the *mishna*, providing a deeper understanding of the call to be *az* — brazen or bold. Let us look at the entire *mishna*. “Rabbi Yehuda ben Teima would say: ‘Be brazen like a leopard, light like an eagle, fleeting like a deer and mighty like a lion — to do the will of your Father in Heaven. He would also say, ‘The brazen — to *gehinnom*, the bashful — to *Gan Eden*. May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, that the Beit Hamikdash will be built speedily in our days — and grant us our portion in Your Torah.’” Note the apparent

contradiction regarding the quality of the character trait called *az*, brazenness. This is why the *mishna* concludes, “May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, that the Beit Hamikdash will be built speedily in our days — and grant us our portion in Your Torah.”

Rabbi Akiva Eiger continues his explanation: Towards the end of the *mishna* we see that brazenness is an extremely negative trait: “The brazen — to *gehinom*”, whereas at the beginning of the *mishna* we are taught that it is positive to be brazen — be brazen like a leopard. It must be that this trait is generally bad, but can be positive if used in the correct way at the correct time. For example, in our times, before Mashiach, it is good to not be timid about speaking up to ask questions in order to learn Torah. A person who is embarrassed, lest he be seen as ignorant for asking questions in order to understand the Torah, will not learn Torah, explain our Sages. A person should be bold in seeking greater Torah knowledge and wisdom. In the future, however, in the time of Mashiach, the world will be filled with knowledge of Hashem and his Torah. Then, there will be no need to be brazen in order to understand and acquire the Torah, and any sign of brazenness will be considered negative and lead to *gehinom*, away from Hashem, as it were.

A parenthetical note: One may recall the words that we wrote as “Talmud Tips” for Eruvin 100b, where the *gemara* states, “*Even if the Torah had not been given, we would be able to learn modesty from the cat and we would have learned to not steal from the ant.*” The Ben Yehoyada points out that once the Torah was given, we are to learn these and other positive character traits only from the Torah, and not from animals. Animals also possess negative qualities, which one might be influenced by, whereas the Torah is pure righteousness and goodness. Here, too, the four traits mentioned in the *mishna*, although associated with animals, are learned only from our pure and holy Torah.

- ***Pesachim 112a***

Q & A

Questions –

1. Why did Datan and Aviram join Korach?
2. Why is Yaakov's name not mentioned in Korach's genealogy?
3. What motivated Korach to rebel?
4. What did Korach and company do when Moshe said that a *techelet* garment needs *tzitzit*?
5. What warning did Moshe give the rebels regarding the offering of the incense?
6. Did Moshe want to be the *kohen gadol*?
7. What event did Korach not foresee?
8. What does the phrase *rav lachem* mean in this week's Parsha? (Give two answers.)
9. What lands are described in this week's Parsha as "flowing with milk and honey"?
10. When did Moshe have the right to take a donkey from the Jewish community?
11. What did Korach do the night before the final confrontation?
12. What sin did Datan and Aviram have in common specifically with Goliath?
13. Before what age is a person not punished by the Heavenly Court for his sins?
14. What happens to one who rebels against the institution of *kehuna*? Who suffered such a fate?
15. Why *specifically* was incense used to stop the plague?
16. Why was Aharon's staff placed in the middle of the other 11 staffs?
17. Aharon's staff was kept as a sign. What did it signify?
18. Why are the 24 gifts for the *kohanim* taught in this week's *Parsha*?
19. Who may eat the *kodshei kodashim* (most holy sacrifices) and where must they be eaten?
20. Why is G-d's covenant with the *kohanim* called "a covenant of salt"?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 16:1 - Because they were his neighbors.
2. 16:1 - Yaakov prayed that his name not be mentioned in connection with Korach's rebellion (*Bereishet* 49:6).
3. 16:1 - Korach was jealous that Elizafan ben Uziel was appointed as leader of the family of Kehat instead of himself.
4. 16:1 - They laughed.
5. 16:6 - Only one person would survive.
6. 16:6 - Yes.
7. 16:7 - That his sons would repent.
8. 16:7,3 - *Rav lachem* appears twice in this week's Parsha. It means "much more than enough greatness have you taken for yourself (16:3)" and "It is a great thing I have said to you (16:17)."
9. 16:12 - Egypt and Canaan.
10. 16:15 - When he traveled from Midian to Egypt.
11. 16:19 - Korach went from tribe to tribe in order to rally support for himself.
12. 16:27 - They all blasphemed.
13. 16:27 - Twenty years old.
14. 17:5 - He is stricken with *tzara'at*, as was King Uziyahu (*Divrei HaYamim* II 26:16-19).
15. 17:13 - Because the people were deprecating the incense offering, saying that it caused the death of two of Aharon's sons and also the death of 250 of Korach's followers. Therefore G-d demonstrated that the incense offering was able to avert death, and it is sin, not incense, which causes death.
16. 17:21 - So people would not say that Aharon's staff bloomed because Moshe placed it closer to the *Shechina*.
17. 17:25 - That only Aharon and his children were selected for the *kehuna*.
18. 18:8 - Since Korach claimed the *kehuna*, the Torah emphasizes Aharon's and his descendants' rights to *kehuna* by recording the gifts given to them.
19. 18:10 - Male *kohanim* may eat them and only in the *azara* (forecourt of the *Beit Hamikdash*).
20. 18:19 - Just as salt never spoils, so this covenant will never be rescinded.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

KRIAT SHEMA AL HAMITAH (PART 17)

Kriat Shema al Hamitah then continues with a series of verses from Tanach that revolve around Hashem's mercy: "May the angel who redeems me from all evil bless the lads, and may my name be declared upon them, and the names of my forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they proliferate abundantly like fish within the land." (Beresheet 48:16)

Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno (1475-1549) is famous for his magnificent commentary on the Torah. It offers brilliant insights and elucidations and is considered to be a timeless masterpiece. He makes a poignant comment about the phrase "and may my name be declared upon them, and the names of my forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak." Rabbi Sforno says that when a person behaves in a praiseworthy manner, people tend to draw a comparison to the person's righteous descendants, and to point out how similar they are. It is truly uplifting to be compared to one's righteous parents!

Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (1713-1793), was the illustrious chief rabbi of Prague, and the author of several scholarly works that are regarded as indispensable to Jewish scholarship. He was also a close personal friend of Emperor Josef of Austria. When Rabbi Landau died, the emperor asked his son whether he was as wise as his late father. "No," answered the son. "I am much less than him."

"That is not the proper way to answer," replied the emperor. "You should have answered that your father was much greater than you. By saying that you are less than your father, you are casting aspersions on that brilliant man!"

Conversely, Sforno points out that, unfortunately, the opposite is equally true. When a person behaves in a less than desirable way, those around them make a comparison with the person's wicked and immoral ancestors.

To paraphrase the Chazon Ish (*Emunah u'Bitachon* chapter 4), "If a parent disciplines their child with anger, the child will learn that anger is an important trait to have and use. Yet, in fact, anger is a horrible trait to acquire and use! However, children do not understand this, as they merely mirror what they see."

Nevertheless, there are occasions when copying a negative quality of a parent can actually work in the child's favor. Many years ago, there was a Yeshiva for Ba'alei Teshuva in Teveria. One of the fathers was furious that his son was learning there and was becoming religious. So, one morning he arrived unannounced at the Yeshiva in order to compel his son to return home. His son refused to cooperate, and the infuriated father accosted the Rosh Yeshiva and started berating him. The Rosh Yeshiva took the irate father into his study in an attempt to explain to him exactly what his son and the other students were accomplishing in the Yeshiva. The father angrily told the Rosh Yeshiva "not to waste his time." He insisted that he knew exactly what Yiddishkeit was. He had grown up in a very religious family in Eastern Europe, but he had "seen the light" and had jettisoned any semblance of anything overtly Jewish by the time he arrived in Israel. And now he was absolutely livid that his son was rebelling against him, choosing to return to everything that the father had given up. "I want my son to follow in *my* ways!" he bellowed.

"But he is," the Rosh Yeshiva calmly pointed out. "You rebelled against your father, and your son is now rebelling against you!"

When Yaakov Avinu blesses Yosef's two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, he poetically declares that they should "proliferate abundantly like fish within the land." What is so special about fish that Yaakov blessed Ephraim and Menashe to be "like fish"? Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch writes, with his customary eloquence, "That is, in a separate habitat in depths beyond the range of the human eye. In other words, the children of Yaakov will live quiet, happy lives in the midst of mankind, but set apart as if in a separate habitat to which those around them cannot follow them, and the significance of which the others cannot surmise."

Within the turmoil of this chaotic and unpredictable world, there is only one real, lasting source of refuge and tranquility for us, Hashem's children: To remain completely immersed in His Torah.

**To be continued...*

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Korach: Growing the Fringes (Part 2/2)

In Part I of this essay, we explored the words tzitzit and gedilim, offering a possible way of understanding the nuanced difference between these two apparent synonyms. In this second installment, we explore additional words associated with tzitzit by sharpening their etymologies and showing exactly what they literally mean. The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah §18:3) expounds on the juxtaposition of the pericope concerning Korach's rebellion to the pericope related to tzitzit by explaining that Korach argued that a tallit made entirely of techeilet is exempt from the commandment of tzitzit, while Moses argued it is obligated (see Menachot 41b). It is only appropriate therefore to begin this week's essay with a discussion of a word for tzitzit used specifically in the context of techeilet before we discuss the words tallit and kruspidin.

When outlining the commandment of *tzitzit*, the Torah prescribes that a single *petil* of *techeilet* should be included among the *tzitzit* string attached to the corners of the four-cornered garment (Num. 15:38). The root PEH-TAV-LAMMED, from which *petil* derives, denotes “snug attachment” or “twistedness” (like *tzamid patil*, which saves the contents of a tightly-closed pottery vessel from contracting ritual impurity, see Num. 19:15). When a string is braided or otherwise twisted into existence, its constituent fibers are snugly held in place.

A variant of this word appears in Biblical Hebrew when Judah gave Tamar his *petil* as a guarantee that he will pay her for services rendered (Gen. 38:18). Some commentators (like Ibn Janach, Rabbi Avraham Maimuni, Rashbam) explain that this refers to his “belt” (by which he snugly closes his pants) or his “cloak” (Radak). But others explain that this *petil* referred to Judah's *tallit/tzitzit* (see Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan's *Bereishit Rabbati* to Gen. 38:25 and Rabbeinu Chaim Paltiel to Gen. 38:18 in the name of Rashbam, although see Nachmanides to Gen. 38:18 who rejects this). In Mishnaic Hebrew, another inflection *petilah* is used in reference to a “wick,” which in some ways is just a string that is fastened in place to be used for holding a fire (*Shabbat* 2:4-5, *Beitzah* 4:4, *Keilim* 3:2, see also *Sanhedrin* 7:2 where *petilah* seems to refer to a “lead rod”).

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Gen. 30:8, Num. 15:38) sees the core meaning of the root PEH-TAV-LAMMED as relating to “separateness.” In the context of *tzitzit*, the single string of *techeilet* represents something that is at once attached to the larger *tzitzit* edifice, but also separated and independent from it because it alone is dyed with *techeilet*. Rabbi Hirsch adduces this understanding of the root PEH-TAV-LAMMED by comparing it to its phonetic counterparts BET-DALET-LAMMED (*havdalah*, “separation”), BET-TAV-LAMMED (*betulah*, “virgin,” i.e., a woman who has been *separated* out from the normal course of events), BET-TET-LAMMED (*batel*, “cancelled/nullified” something which has been separated and excluded from the realm of the relevant). Needless to say, these connections are based on the interchangeability of the letters PEH and BET, as well as the interchangeability of the group of letters TAV, TET, and DALET.

The name Naphtali that Rachel gave to the second-born son of her handmaiden Bilhah is explicitly connected to the root PEH-TAV-LAMMED, as Rachel commented that by bringing to Jacob another son, she has now “intertwined” her own fate with the fate of her sister Leah who had already borne several sons to Jacob (Gen. 30:8).

The term *tallit* (tallis in traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation) first occurs in Rabbinic Hebrew, making its first appearances in the Mishnah (*Nedarim* 3:5, 4:1, *Kiddushin* 4:14, *Bava Metzia* 1:1, *Meilah* 5:1, 6:4, *Keilim* 28:7, 29:1-2, *Ohalot* 8:5, *Zavim* 4:7). But it is clear from context that rather than referring specifically to the stringed fringes of a four-cornered garment like *tzitzit* does, the word *tallit* actually refers to the four-cornered garment itself. In fact, another Mishnaic Hebrew word that means something like “wash cloth” is derived from *tallit* — *matlit* (*Shabbat* 24:5, *Bava Kamma* 10:10, *Keilim* 10:4, 27:6, 27:12, 28:6, *Negaim* 11:5-6, *Taharot* 9:9). Nonetheless, as Rabbi Eliyahu HaBachur already noted in his *Sefer Tishbi*, in rabbinic parlance the word *tallit* refers to a special four-cornered garment that has *tzitzit* and is worn during prayer [HaBachur (there) also asserts that the grammatically-correct plural form of the word *tallit* is *taliyot* (as does Rabbi Tanchum HaYerushalmi in *HaMadrach HaMaspik*), not *talitot* and certainly not the more popular Yiddish misnomer *talleisim*)]

Where does the word *tallit* come from?

Rabbeinu Bachaya (*Kad Ha'Kemach* s.v. *tzitzit* and in his commentary to Num. 15:38) explains that the term *tzitzit* refers to the fact that when a person wears *tzitzit*, he ought to be careful to avoid sinning because he is supposed to be cognizant of the fact that Hashem "sees" him (relating to the "peeking" meaning of TZADI-YOD-TZADI discussed in Part I). On the other hand, the term *tallit* alludes to Hashem as being uplifted and raised above all, just like Daniel described Him as *netilat min ara* — literally, "lifted from the earth" (Dan. 7:4).

Rabbi Nosson Shapiro (*Matzat Shimurin* fol. 11b) offers a kabbalistic explanation that sees the word *tallit* as derived from the Aramaic word *talyuta* used by Targum Onkelos in reference to a young person coming of age (Gen. 8:21), but exactly what he says is beyond my level of expertise.

Rabbi Nosson of Rome (in *Sefer Ha'Aruch*) offers two etymologies for the word *tallit*: firstly, he cites in the name of Rav Matzliach Gaon that the term *tallit* refers to the fact that the garment in question is "place upon (on top of)" one's other clothes. According to this, *tallit* is related to the word *natal* in the sense of "lifting (see Targum to Gen. 50:13).

Alternatively, he explains *tallit* as related to the trilateral root TET-LAMMED-LAMMED, *tillel* in Late Biblical Hebrew (see Neh. 3:15) and Biblical Aramaic (Dan. 4:9). Rabbi Ernest Klein (in his etymological dictionary of Hebrew) also follows this approach of seeing the word *tallit* as related to *telalim* meaning "shade/shadow/covering." That term is cognate with the Hebrew *tsel*, which means same thing. This cognancy reflects the interchangeability of the letters TZADI and TET. As is his wont, Dr. Alexander Kohut in *Ha'Aruch Ha'Shaleim* claims that the word *tallit* derives from Persian, but this theory has not gained much traction.

When Targum renders the Biblical Hebrew words *tzitzit* and *gedilim* into Aramaic, it uses the term *kruspeda* (singular) or *kruspidin* (plural). Rabbi Binyamin Mussafia (in *Mussaf Ha'Aruch*) clarifies that this term is actually an Aramaic loanword based on the Greek *kraspedon* (κράσπεδον). The word refers to the "fringe/edge/hem" of a clothing, or even to an embroidered "border." Essentially, *kraspedon* refers to the appended extremity or prominent extension added to a core frame. Classicalists have traced the etymology of *kraspedon* as a portmanteau of the Greek *karé* ("head/top/peak") and *pédon* ("foot/bottom/edge"). As Rabbi Shaul Goldman explains this etymology, the

very term *kraspedon* is meant to imply that the most prominent feature of a four-cornered garment is not at the top nor at its center, but on the fringe strings that protrude outwards from the garment's bottom/edge.

Interestingly, there is an Amoraic sage named Rav Kruspedai who is cited four times in the Babylonian Talmud. In one of the more famous passages of the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a), Rav Kruspedai teaches that on Rosh HaShanah, Hashem opens three books (the Book of the Completely Righteous, the Book of the Completely Wicked, and the Book of the 'Medium' People), to judge people based on their actions. In another passage, Rav Kruspedai teaches that the Rebellious Son can only occur during the three months when the boy is between the ages of thirteen and thirteen and a quarter (*Sanhedrin* 69a). For more citations, see *Keritut* 24a and *Niddah* 46a.

They tell a story about the late Rabbi Avraham Genachovsky, who once found himself riding a public bus, when an immodestly clad woman sat next to him. Not wanting to embarrass her directly, yet uncomfortable with the situation caused by her attire, the rabbi simply turned to her and said, "I have *kruspidin*..." The woman, unfamiliar with the term, mistakenly assumed it was the name of a contagious disease and fled from the seat in panic. In truth, the rabbi had told no lie — *kruspidin* is the Greek-based Aramaic word used in the Targum for *tzitzit*, the ritual fringes worn by Heaven-fearing Jews on their four-cornered garments. But the clever ambiguity of his wording allowed the great sage to defuse the situation without confrontation. Rabbi Zev Berlin (son-in-law of Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman) adds that he heard that the incident occurred in a hired van, not a public bus, and that the woman in question not only left her seat in the van but she alighted the van altogether, and Rabbi Genachovsky reimbursed the driver for causing her spot to become empty.

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.” (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)

Ketores: Incense

Mitzvos #103 and #110; *Shemos* 30:7 and v. 37

The *ketores* incense service is especially dear to Hashem (*Midrash Tanchuma* §15). Just as incense is experienced by the sense of smell, which is the most elevated of the human senses because it benefits the soul, it is similarly elevated among the offerings to Hashem. Since it greatly arouses Hashem’s favor, it brings a blessing of wealth to the kohen who offers it. Its recipe is exclusive to the *Beis HaMikdash* and we are prohibited from producing it for ourselves.

Although the Torah lists only four of the spices in the *ketores*, it implies that there are seven more of smaller quantity, which the Sages identified. Together, they produce the choicest of scents (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:14). It is noteworthy that one of the spices, a bitter gum resin called galbanum (*chelbena*), produces an unpleasant smell. The Sages inferred from this that a public fast of repentance, such as that of Yom Kippur, must similarly include the wicked (*Kereisos* 6b). This is because the more distant a person is from Hashem, the more Divine favor and compassion are aroused when he repents (*Maharsha*).

Ketores means something that rises in a pillar of smoke (see *Kereisos* 6b). The word *ketores* also means “bond” in Aramaic (*Zohar Chadash, Shir HaShirim* 13b). One of the reasons for this is that it bonds Hashem with His people. When the Kohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holies during the Yom Kippur service, he places *ketores* before the Aron, on which are carved two *keruvim* in a perpetual embrace, in representation of the marriage-like relationship between Hashem and His people. Placing the *ketores* there serves to recall and strengthen this bond, and thereby gain atonement for our faults during the past year (see *Taamei HaMitzvos* by Rav Menachem HaBavli).

Since it is an intensely intimate and holy service, it is dangerous when performed inappropriately, as was the case with the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu. Despite their saintliness and good intentions, offering *ketores* cost them their lives. So too, the 250 men who joined Korach in contesting Aharon's choice as Kohen Gadol all died when offering *ketores* inappropriately.

On the other hand, when a plague swept across the Jewish people soon thereafter, it was specifically the *ketores* that halted the Angel of Death. The *ketores* "bonded" the hands of the Angel of Death, as it were (*Sifsei Kohen*). It has the power to nullify forces of impurity and to spare from death, damage, and impure thoughts. The scent of the *ketores* removes the pollution of the *yetzer hara* from a person's body and directs his heart toward his Father in Heaven (*Zohar, Vayakhel* 218b, cited in *HaMitzvos HaMevuaros*).

The *ketores* is not just a service but also an essential part of the *Beis HaMikdash*. *Sefer Chinuch* explains that one of the main purposes of the *Beis HaMikdash* is to attach our hearts to Hashem and it was therefore necessary for it to be grand and awe-inspiring. The *ketores* was essential to this purpose because its intensely pleasurable scent filled the *Beis HaMikdash* and wafted far away, thus instilling within the Jewish people love and awe of Hashem.

We may suggest that the pleasant scent of the *ketores* drowned entirely any unpleasant smells of the burning offerings. Not only that, but it combined with them and they rose together before Hashem as a pleasant aroma.

When we recite the passage of *ketores*, Hashem regards it as if we offered it in the *Beis HaMikdash*. We should think about its meaning and accompany its recital with feelings of love so that we will merit its blessing and protection.

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