

# United We Stand

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Parshas Tetzaveh/Purim

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## The Parsha's Path

*Adapted, revised, and expanded from a d'rasha I gave in Plainview last year.*

When we look at the Torah's instructions for building the Mishkan, there is a glaring anomaly regarding the placement of the *Mizbe'ach HaKetores*, the incense altar.

In Parshas Terumah, we get the blueprints for the inner vessels. Chapter 25, verse 10 describes the Aron, the chest that carried the Torah. Verse 23 details the table for the Showbread. Verse 31 outlines the Menorah. And right after that, we would logically expect to find the incense altar. After all, the incense altar was front and center in the Sanctuary. You walk in, and on your far right is the Table of Showbread, on your far left is the Menorah, and right there in front of you is the Incense Altar. Shouldn't it be mentioned alongside the other vessels that shared that same physical space?

Instead, it's not there at all. The command to build the incense altar is tucked all the way at the very end of Parshas Tetzaveh, after the Torah finishes describing every other part of the Mishkan and the inauguration of the Kohanim. Why is it pushed all the way to the end? Maybe there's something about the incense that isn't quite as basic and foundational as everything else — even if it is no less important.

### Making Space vs. Honoring the Space

Ramban explains that the purpose of most of the vessels and services in the Mishkan was to bring G-d's presence down to us. For example, Chazal tell us that when praying, if one wants to be wealthy they should tilt themselves North, towards the Table of Showbread. The Table of Showbread symbolized G-d as the source of physical prosperity, and focusing on that helped bring that prosperity into one's life. If one wants to achieve enlightenment and spirituality, they should turn South when they pray, towards the Menorah. The Menorah and its light symbolized G-d as the source of wisdom and spiritual illumination, and focusing on that helped tap into it. Of course, the Aron which housed the Torah was the

ultimate vehicle of bringing down the Shechinah, which powered everything else.

So, all of these things were prerequisites for creating a House of G-d. Once you have these, you have what you need to bring G-d's presence into the world. But then G-d's presence comes. That's where the Incense Altar comes in. We offer incense not to bring G-d's presence down to us, but to honor G-d's presence. In the words of the Ramban, "they were still obligated to build an incense altar to burn incense for the glory of G-d." You need the table and the lamp to make a place for G-d, but once He arrives, you have to burn incense to honor Him.

It's like when a husband and wife get married. The husband prepares their new apartment with all these nice furnishings, and then he brings his new bride into his home. It's all very nice and suitable, but if he's a smart groom he'll also go out and buy her some flowers. The flowers aren't for her to be able to live there — they're because she's there.

### The Ultimate Synthesis

But why incense? What makes a pleasing scent the ultimate bouquet of flowers for G-d?

Consider the underlying qualities of physical pleasures, like food. Food is a source of instant gratification, but it's also very limited. It gratifies the person who consumes it, but then it's gone, and nobody else can benefit from it. Spirituality and intellectual pursuits are the exact opposite. They're not consumable — they can be shared and spread with everybody — but they also don't provide instant gratification. They're not nearly as accessible or easy to enjoy, as great as the payoff is for working for them.

Smell is different. Smell provides both instant gratification and it can be shared by everyone. While it may not be as objectively essential as food or as deeply transformative as intense spiritual study, it manages to combine the best of both worlds. It offers something instantly pleasant for everyone in the room. It synthesizes the physical and the spiritual, rising in some ways above both of them, while being neither of them at the same time.

This is what makes the Incense Altar the perfect welcome gift for G-d. When we offer up incense, we are taking the physical bounty G-d has given us and the

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spiritual bounty G-d has given us, and drawing the best from both worlds to make something entirely new, something that is universally pleasing.

## The Scent of Chesed

In his commentary *Haamek Davar*, the Netziv beautifully grounds this idea in our daily lives by explaining that the *Ketores* represents the trait of *gemillus chassadim* — acts of loving-kindness.

When you think about it, *chesed* is the human equivalent of a fragrance. When you perform a genuine act of kindness — helping a neighbor, hosting a meal, or offering your time to someone in need — you are taking physical actions and elevating them. Like a scent, an act of *chesed* provides instant, tangible comfort to the receiver, yet it is fueled by a profound, shareable spiritual grace that uplifts everyone involved. It bridges the gap between the material and the spiritual.

Perhaps this is why the incense is associated throughout the Torah with peace and prosperity. When G-d brings a plague on the people, Aharon offers incense and stops it. According to the Mishnah, whoever offered incense became wealthy. By bringing out the best of both worlds through *gemillus chassadim*, the incense brings ultimate peace.

## Becoming the Incense

This message is perhaps more crucial now than ever before. The Jewish people often seem torn between two worlds. One is the world of the Menorah — full of the illuminating light of Torah, with all of its intense wisdom and beauty — but often inaccessible and unappreciated by the outsider. Another is the world of the Shulchan — full of material prosperity and productivity, but often too individualistic and unable to uplift the masses.

It goes without saying that each world on its own is a sorely lacking form of Divine service. But even when the two worlds exist in tandem, they often fail to produce a product that can be shared and appreciated, a scent that can uplift the world. A life where both physicality and spirituality are rooted in G-dliness can make a space for G-d, but it is still too exclusive to sufficiently bring honor to G-d.

Our mission is to draw from both worlds, bring out the best of them, and create something new — a pleasing fragrance. With one foot firmly in Torah and another foot active in the material world, we must use both to engage in *gemillus chassadim*. We must be living examples of the G-dliness in both realms, and in doing so, bring honor to G-d in a greater way than ever before.

This is the mission of every Jew. Yes, we must first and foremost live lives devoted to Torah, as well as rooting our physical reality in Divine recognition. But then we must go beyond that — merging the two into a life of kindness, pleasantness, and peace. A life that brings out the best of both worlds and spreads the glory of G-d.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that a major emphasis of Purim is *gemillus chassadim* — both through *mishloach manos* and *matanos l'evyonim*, we increase a spirit of peace, friendship, and positivity for both the giver and the recipient (yes, there is also the Torah aspect through *megillah* reading and the physical aspect of *seudah*). This is, arguably, a uniquely central aspect of Purim by design. Purim is the culmination of all of the other Festivals (the Jewish year for the Holiday cycle is counted from Nissan; the first holiday is Pesach). The other Festivals were all designed to help strengthen our awareness and appreciation of G-d in our lives and for us to transform ourselves accordingly, just like the other *keilim* in the *Mishkan*. On Purim, we reach the point where even when G-d is hidden from view and the world seems to be run by chance, we perceive Him clearly in our midst, and through that we feel empowered to bring Him glory through *gemillus chassadim*, just like through the Incense Altar. Just as Mordechai remained steadfast in his loyalty and Esther, acknowledging her mission from G-d, risked her life for her people, on Purim we all go out of our way to express our recognition of G-d's presence and bring Him glory through our *gemillus chassadim*. May this spirit of giving permeate our lives throughout the year, thereby making us a *rei'ach nicho'ach laH'*, bringing glory to His Name while bringing peace to our nation.

## Goal of the week

Commit to one new act of *gemillus chassadim* to make part of your regular routine.

*This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Yisroel Zev ben Menya Rochel, Masha Sarah bas Tziviah Leah, and Gavriel Margoliot ben Malka.*

*Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.*

***Have A Great Shabbos !!***

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