

Parshat Tetzaveh

Chesed Based on Torah

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At the end of our Parsha we are commanded to make the Golden Altar, used to offer *ketoret* (spice-offering, incense). Contextually, this seems to be misplaced, as the vessels of the Mishkan were already discussed in Parshat Teruma? Additionally, we are commanded (Shemot 30:6) to put this Altar opposite the place of the Aron, in front of the *Parochet*. Why is this vessel singled out for such placement?

The Netziv of Volozhin (Bamidbar 24:6) lays down a principle that will help us understand this. In Shir Hashirim (4:13) Bnei Yisrael are compared to spices. The Netziv explains that spices are a metaphor for *gemilut chasadim*, whereas oil is used to represent Torah learning. Oil is something that has no scent of its own, yet it absorbs the smell of any substance with which it is mixed. So, too, the Torah is beautiful when learned and internalized by the Jewish people. In contrast, spices are intrinsically beautiful, just like acts of kindness – a universal concept accepted and respected by Jew and non-Jew alike. This is the reason that the *ketoret* has no fixed limit in the Torah, just like *gemilut chasadim* is neither measured nor contained by limit.

Using this principle, we can understand the Gemara in Masechet Yoma (39b), where R. Yehoshua b. Korcha says that an old man told of smelling the fragrance of *ketoret* from the walls of Shiloh (the home of the Mishkan when the Jews first entered the land). Why was Shiloh singled out for smelling of the *ketoret*? After all, the Mishkan resided in Shiloh for only 300 years, as opposed to Yerushalayim, which was the seat of the Mikdash for over 800 years?

The Netziv (Bereishit 48:19) explains based on a pasuk in Tehillim (78:67), "He despised the Tent of Yosef." Why should Hashem abandon the Mishkan? It was because the tribe of Yosef at the time lacked in their Torah learning, although simultaneously they were thriving in *gemilut chasadim*. The merit of their deeds was great, yet they lacked the kedusha of the Torah necessary to help uplift the nation above idol worship. This is the reason that Hashem moved the seat of the Divine Presence to Yehuda, who was entrenched in Torah. Thus, the walls of Shilo smelled of the *gemilut chasadim* of Yosef, yet Hashem still abandoned the site owing to the lack of Torah.

We find this very message embedded in the incense Altar. On the one hand, the command to make the Altar is found separate from the Aron and all the other vessels, expressing the independence of *gemilut chasadim* from Torah, independent and unique. However the *ketoret* must be based on Torah precepts, as not all *chesed* is intrinsically beneficial, as we see by the tribe of Yosef. In fact, when describing incest with one's sister, the Torah uses the term "*chesed*" – the far extent that unguided *chesed* can lead to. It is necessary for the Torah to be inherent in the kindness, and for that reason we are commanded to place the *Mizbach Haketoret* opposite the Aron – the Torah.