

## Parashah Sixty-Seven

Exodus 30:1–10; Malachai 1:11-2:7; Revelation 8:1–5

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notes by Tim Hegg

### *The Altar of Incense*

Our *parashah* this Shabbat deals exclusively with the altar of incense: “Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense...” The altar of incense is one cubit square (1 cubit = approx 18-21 inches), standing two cubits high. It was made of acacia wood (שטים) overlaid with gold. Like the Altar of Sacrifice, the table for the Bread of the Presence, and the Ark, the Altar of Incense was fitted with rings and poles for carrying.

The placement of the Altar of Incense is stated to be “in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you.” The veil is said to be “near the ark of testimony” but the Hebrew has לִפְנֵי הַפָּרֹכֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־אֹרֶן הָעֵדוּת, (literally) “before the *parochet* which is upon the ark of the testimony.” Rashi notes that the description of its placement was so that it would not be moved away from the veil. The Talmud notes (b.Yoma 33b) that this description marks its placement between the menorah and the table. The point is surely that its placement was to connect it with the Ark of Testimony, the idea being that the incense burned daily was to be vitally connected to the once-a-year activity (on Yom Kippur) when the *cohen hagdol* would apply the blood to the *kaporet* or mercy seat. In this the lesson is learned that the atonement made at Yom Kippur was continually accepted by HaShem throughout the year, the incense being a constant reminder that the Almighty was willing to dwell among the children of Israel on the basis of this atonement that He had accepted.

It is not difficult to see how this foreshadowed the saving work of our Messiah Yeshua. For though His atoning death was a one-time event, its atonement is constantly applied to His people through His constant intercession. In this picture the intercessory work of Messiah is linked to His sacrificial death. “He always lives to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 7:25).

We should also note that the Altar of Incense was to have horns on its four corners, like the Altar of Sacrifice. The “horn” (קֶרֶן, *keren*) in the Hebrew culture was a symbol of “strength.” For instance, Hannah, in her prayer of thanksgiving to HaShem (1Samuel 2) says: “My horn is exalted in HaShem” (v.1, cf. v. 10), meaning that her strength

had been realized in His promise to her that she would, indeed, have a son. “Horn” is regularly used in the Psalms as a symbol of strength (Psalms 18:2; 75:4-5; 89:17,24; 92:10; 98:6; 112:9; 132:17; 148:14).

The message, then, that we should learn is that the Altar of Incense, with its continual fragrance before the Almighty, had strength or power. Indeed, HaShem willingly acted toward Israel on the basis of the very atonement symbolically present in the burning incense. And this speaks directly to its ultimate fulfillment in the intercessory work of Yeshua as our Great High Priest. For it is by His constant intercession that we have ready access (through Him) to the Father. HaShem’s favor toward us is the proof that Messiah’s work is powerful, for it satisfies the infinite holiness of the Father. In His gracious acts toward us who are sinners, His justice never is diminished, for the work of Yeshua in His intercession is powerful to save.

The *haftarah* also emphasizes this aspect of the incense, for it is in the burning of the incense (along with the other sacrifices) that HaShem’s Name is seen to be great. Surely the greatness of our God is manifest in the world around us, for He is the Maker of the heavens and the earth. This is a regular point made in the Psalms (Psa. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 135:6; 136:5; 146:6). But His greatness is seen in even more significant ways when one recognizes the power of His grace in making atonement for sinners. For though the creation required His speech, and the Torah required the writing with His finger, redemption was accomplished “with an outstretched arm” (Ex 6:6; Deut 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8; 1Kings 8:42; 2Kings 17:36; 2Chr 6:32; Ps 136:12; Jer 27:5; 32:17,21; Ezek 20:33-34), symbolic of a great exercise of power and energy.

Our Apostolic section makes an interesting application of the Altar of Incense. Here, in Revelation 8:1-5, the incense put upon the golden altar is specifically said to be the prayers of the pious ones: “Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel’s hand.”

Here we see that the intercessory work of the high priest, symbolized in the Altar of Incense, is combined with the prayers of the true believers as they petition HaShem. This is a very important insight: our prayers reach the Almighty because they are “intermingled” with the prayers of our *cohen hagadol*, Yeshua. Paul hints at this when he writes in Romans 8:26ff, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our

weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Through the Ruach HaKodesh, our petitions and heart-felt-needs are brought into the very presence of the Almighty by the intercessory work of our High Priest, Yeshua.

Here, then, is a beautiful picture of the intersection of our need for diligence in prayer and the faithfulness of our Savior in His intercession for us. It is not an "either-or" but a "both-and." We are not blessed only because Yeshua works on our behalf, nor are our blessings solely dependent upon our faithfulness. It is in the intersection of our obedience and His faithfulness that blessing comes to us. And since He is faithful to intercede for us, we will persevere and we will grow in our obedience to Him. The one guarantees the other. "For He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it (i.e., bring it to completion) with a view to the very day of Messiah Yeshua's appearance" (Philippians 1:6).

Note the strict prohibition against burning "strange incense" upon the Altar of Incense or offering any kind of sacrifice on it (v.9), "You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a drink offering on it."

What exactly is "strange incense?" We know that the sons of Aaron were struck dead by the Almighty because of "strange fire" to the Lord (Lev. 10). The Hebrew is קִטְוֹת זָרָה, *k'toret zarah*. The Sages understand this to mean incense provided by an individual and not made specifically for the purpose (Rashi) or incense made with unauthorized ingredients (Ibn Ezra; Ramban). But *zarah* is the common word for "stranger (usually of idolators)," and thus "strange incense" most likely means "incense used for pagan worship." This might fit the description of "strange fire" offered by Nadav and Avihu, in that it appears they were mixing pagan worship into the service of the Tabernacle.

But notice also that the offering of any sacrifice upon the Altar of Incense is prohibited. What should we understand by this? Simply that the Altar of Incense was to foreshadow the intercession of Yeshua *after* His sacrifice, not an ongoing sacrifice. That is to say, Yeshua died once for all time, never to die again. The Roman Catholic teaching that the Messiah is constantly dying is not only unbiblical, it totally misses the point of His death in the first place. Yeshua died once for all time and in that death obtained eternal redemption for all of His

people. Note Heb 9:12 – “and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” If there were sacrifices offered on the Altar of Incense, this would ruin the picture and the foreshadowing of Yeshua’s death for us as acted out in the once-a-year Yom Kippur sacrifice.

Furthermore, the prohibition of “strange incense” teaches that the intercession symbolized by the incense is of a unique quality and cannot be duplicated or copied. All other forms, regardless of how “beautiful” they may be, are not accepted. This speaks to the uniqueness of Yeshua’s person and work. There is one way and only one way to find full acceptance before HaShem, and this is only through His Son, our Messiah Yeshua. Throughout the symbolic teaching of the Tabernacle, this fact is emphasized over and over again. God desires to dwell among His people, but He can do so only as His people are enabled to approach Him in holiness. Represented by the *cohen hagadol*, the people of Israel come into the presence of God through the sacrificial cleansing and atonement. But all of the regulations and prescriptions teach us that there is only one way for this to happen, and it is God’s way. All other attempts or designs will be rejected. Yeshua said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

Consider, then, the mystery of this picture: Yeshua, the eternal Messiah, acts as our *cohen hagadol*, takes our prayers and our concerns before the Almighty in the majesty of His person, on the merits of His own sacrifice, and with full confidence that His every request will be granted. It is in this that we have bold confidence to approach the “throne of grace” (Heb 4:16), for we know that we have received grace “in the beloved one” (Eph 1:6) and that at God’s “throne of grace” we will receive His mercy and help in the time of our need.

*Therefore let us draw near with confidence  
to the throne of grace, so that we may  
receive mercy and find grace to help  
in time of need. (Heb 4:16)*

*He predestined us to adoption as sons through Yeshua Messiah to  
Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,  
to the praise of the glory of His grace,  
which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Eph 1:6)*