

Thoughts on Ketores, Incense by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

In Shemos 30:34-36 we are told of the ketores, incense offering that was to be brought. We are told to take spices, Tzari, onchya, galbanum, spices and pure frankincense of equal weight. We are to make this mixture into incense according to the art of spice-making and are to blend it well. The Gemara in Krisus 6a gives us more of the details about this incense. 368 manehs [measure of weight] were made, one maneh for each day of the solar year and three extra were designated for Yom Kippur. Of each maneh designated for its day, half was offered in the morning and half was offered in the afternoon. From these verses, Chazal had a Mesorah that there actually were eleven spices. On these verses Rashi gives us the details of how Chazal understood that eleven spices went into the mixture. The mesorah also tells us exactly which spices went into this mixture. This incense offering was a very important part of our daily service in the Bais Hamikdash.

The concept of incense for religious ceremony was not ours alone. It seems that incense has been used since the very beginning of human history. Probably when Adam Harishon was given fire, the concept of an aroma being given off when things were burned spread throughout the world. After all, almost every culture has the idea of incense for religious and healing purposes. It was discovered early in our history that certain aromas heighten the sense of smell. When early man gathered around the fires the sensory pleasure of certain woods and herbs must have been discovered. From this experience people must have decided to dedicate certain fragrances to their deities by adding specific herbs to fire. The idea of certain aromas being conducive to meditation also must have been discovered early on. Since burning incense had the power to descent an area, the idea of incense was used to remove unpleasant odors as well as to spiritually purify an area after death or illness.

From earliest times in human history we have evidence of plants and spices that made the best incense being traded for their value. We know that frankincense from the Arabian Peninsula was traded extensively and used by Egyptians, Assyrians and Persians. The Romans copied this idea when they came into contact with cultures further east. It is no accident that, lehavdil, the three wise men brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby that they thought was the Messiah. These spices were in fact comparable to gold and indeed fit for a king. The Native Americans burned herbal mixtures and made smoke for their

ceremonies and healing rituals. While in the Western Hemisphere different plants were used such as cedar sage and tobacco but the basic concept is the same. The idea of smoke dispelling negative energies is still held onto by many Native Americans who still practice many of these ancient ceremonies till this day. Aromatherapy, a modern technique to heal and help one feel better in all ways, is clearly an application of the above ideas.

Rabbeinu Bachaya, in his commentary on Chumash, quotes the statement of Chazal regarding Galbanum. We know this plant had a very unpleasant odor. Chazal understand from its inclusion in our incense offering that our public fasts must include even the sinners among us to be complete. Rabbeinu Bachaya adds that the reason for this is that Hashem's name is magnified even more when evil ones do teshuva and not only the Tzaddikim. This is similar to the Mitzvah of the four species on Sukkos where the lowest among us are represented by the *arava*, willow branch together with the Esrog which represents the Tzaddik as is explained in the well-known Midrash. Rabbeinu Bachaya also explains that the word *memulach* in verse 34 can mean mixed or salted. Both ideas were applied to the ketores. Salt of Sodom was added and the mixture was done so thoroughly that each spice became completely unrecognizable. Similarly, a sailor is called a *malach* [with a ches] because the sea water was salty and the sailor mixed up the water in the process of moving the ship.

Although we do not have the Bais Hamikdash today, we still get some benefit of the ketores. Just as with the other *korbonos*, sacrifices, we have the concept of substituting the bringing of the offerings with our lips, so too we have this idea by Ketores. When we recite portions from the Torah and from the writings of Chazal about the offerings it is as if we brought them. Chazal understood this from the fact that the Torah states 'This is the Torah of the *Chatas*, sin offering, Torah of the *Olah* burnt offering, etc.' Actually this idea goes back to Avraham Avinu. In Bereishis 15: 8-13 that Hashem promised to give Eretz Yisroel to Avraham and his descendents. He was told to take three calves, three female goats, three rams, a turtle-dove and a pigeon. Rashi explains, based on the Gemara in Megilah, that Avraham did not doubt Hashem's word, chas veshalom. He wanted to know by which merits his descendents will attain the rights to Eretz Yisroel as their homeland. Hashem told him that it would be in merit of the sacrifices. When the Bais Hamikdash would be destroyed, then the study of all of our sacrifices would provide the merit.

Based on the above quotations of Chazal, Rav Pinchus Zabitchi explains that just as recitation of the sacrificial portions is as if they were brought, it is certainly

true of ketores. He quotes midrash Tehillim that Dovid Hamelech stated that when we have no altar or Kohen Gadol, our prayers should be a substitute as it states in Tehillim 141:2 ‘ My prayers be established like the ketores of evening. There was a special quality to the ketores. One reason the ketores was special was because it was brought on its own altar exclusively in the Bais Hamikdash itself and not in the courtyard where the altar for sacrifices was located. The ketores uplifted the soul because it was perceived by the sense of smell, the most spiritual of all of the senses. The ketores cleansed away heavenly anger and judgments.

We recite the portions of the ketores as part of our davening. When we recite it we should bear these above mentioned ideas in mind, though there are variations between Nusach Ashkenaz and Nusach Sefard as to exactly where in the davening and how often. Some even have a minhag to recite the ketores from parchment. In any case, the idea of the recitation and its benefits is applicable to all Jews. In merit of our recitations of the ketores portions, may we merit to experience the ketores in our rebuilt Bais Hamikdash speedily in our day. Amen