

The Spice of Unity

The special message of the ketores—and the modern day application.

The Furniture

This week's Torah portion focuses on the theme of unity.

Tetzaveh continues the discussion of the sacred structure that began in last week's portion, Terumah. But there's a clear difference between the two.

Terumah describes the physical elements—the Ark, the Table, the Menorah, and the structure itself, including the beams and the coverings.

Tetzaveh, on the other hand, shifts to a completely different aspect: the special clothing worn by the priests. The Torah details the eight garments worn by the High Priest, the anointing oil, and the process of preparing the priests for their role.

Then, at the very end of the portion, an unexpected detail appears: another item used in the sanctuary—the Incense Altar.

A question arises: if all the sanctuary's vessels were listed in Terumah, why wasn't the Incense Altar included there? Why does the Torah wait until the end of Tetzaveh to introduce it?

Since the structure of the Torah is intentional, this delay must have meaning. As our sages says, "*Acharon acharon chaviv,*

The last is the most cherished.” The fact that the incense offering is placed here suggests that it holds special significance, even greater than all the other services performed in the sanctuary—and later, in Jewish history, in the Holy Temple.

So before going any further, let’s take a closer look at this incense offering—an element of Temple worship that carried a unique and powerful symbolism.

Everyone Should Get a Turn

The incense offering was brought in the Temple twice a day—once in the morning, before any other services began, and again in the evening, after everything else had been completed.

When the priest would enter to offer the incense, no one else was allowed to be inside the sanctuary. He had to be completely alone.

Each morning, a lottery was held among the priests to determine who would perform the various Temple services that day. But the incense offering had its own special lottery—one that was only open to priests who had *never* performed it before. If someone had been chosen for the incense offering once in their life, they were never allowed to do it again.

Why? The Talmud explains: *“Because it brings wealth.”* It was well known among the priests that offering the incense was a good omen for prosperity.

Where did this idea come from? At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, when Moses blesses the Twelve Tribes, he says

of the Tribe of Levi: *“They shall place incense before You.”* This clearly refers to the incense offering, which was the responsibility of the priests—who all came from the Tribe of Levi. Immediately afterward, the verse continues: *“May the Lord bless his resources.”* From this, the sages learned that the incense offering was associated with wealth and success.

So now we’re left with the big question: *What makes the incense offering so unique?*

Eleven vs. Ten

To understand this better, let’s take a closer look at the incense itself. The ketores was made from a blend of eleven different spices. But this number is puzzling. In Judaism, ten is considered the perfect number—so where does eleven suddenly come from?

Kabbalah explains that eleven represents *the Other Side*—the forces of negativity in the world. G-d created evil as a counterbalance to goodness, giving people the ability to choose between right and wrong. We even see this in the Torah, where Esau—the embodiment of opposition to holiness—had eleven chieftains among his descendants. In other words, eleven symbolizes the opposite of holiness.

So what was the deeper meaning of the incense? The mitzvah of ketores involved taking these eleven spices, grinding them into a fine powder, and offering them up together as one unified blend.

Now, one of the spices mentioned explicitly in the Torah is

chelbenah, which, according to Rashi, had a bad smell. But if the goal was to create something with a pleasant fragrance, why include an ingredient that stinks? Rashi explains that this teaches us an important lesson: just as the ketores isn't complete without the foul-smelling spice, the Jewish community isn't complete without every Jew—including those who might not be the most “fragrant” in terms of their actions or character.

We all know that ten represents a complete Jewish community—a *minyan*. But then there's the eleventh person, the one who doesn't quite fit in. Maybe he's physically unkempt, maybe he's socially awkward, maybe he's just hard to be around. He's the person people tend to avoid.

And yet, the Torah teaches that the power of the ketores—the reason it had such a special spiritual impact—was that it included *all* the spices together.

Sure, other mitzvot also emphasize unity. Take the lulav and etrog, for example. Each of the four species represents a different kind of Jew, and we bring them together to show that only through unity can we fulfill the mitzvah. But there's a key difference: with the lulav and etrog, each element remains distinct. You can still tell them apart.

The ketores, however, works differently. The spices are ground into a fine powder and mixed together so thoroughly that they lose their individual identity. Only then does it become incense. Only then does it have its full spiritual power.

And that's the lesson for us. When Jews unite in a way where no

one is singled out, where there's no way to tell who is the "bad-smelling" one—*that's* when we bring true delight to G-d.

It's like when children get together to buy their parents a gift. Even if some of them didn't actually pitch in money, they still say, "*This is from all of us.*" No one argues over who contributed what. And for the parents, *that* unity—the fact that their children are acting as one—is the greatest gift of all.

The Corresponding Prayer

Our sages teach that daily prayers were established to correspond to the sacrifices that were once offered in the Temple.

Back then, the altar was used three times a day, and in its absence, we pray three times a day. The morning prayer, *Shacharit*, corresponds to the daily morning offering. The afternoon prayer, *Mincha*, corresponds to the afternoon offering.

But what about the incense offering? Is there a daily prayer that parallels the ketores?

Perhaps we can say that just as the incense was offered in the morning before the first sacrifice, we also have something meant to come before our morning prayers. The Rebbe strongly encouraged people to recite a simple phrase before starting the day's prayers:

"I hereby accept upon myself the commandment to love my fellow as myself."

This declaration, made first thing in the morning, is like our own

daily incense offering. Before turning to personal requests, before asking anything from above, we begin with a commitment to love others.

And it's easy. Anyone can learn to say this one sentence by heart. You can practice it in the car on the way to work, and in a moment, you've done something that unites you with every other Jew in the world.

And just as incense was offered at the end of the day as well, there's a tradition to conclude the day with a similar idea. Before going to sleep, as part of the nighttime *Shema*, many people say:

"Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive all those who have hurt me."

So we begin the day with *"I accept,"* and we end the day with *"I forgive."* And perhaps *that* is the greatest symbol of the ketores