

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Tetzaveh

The Golden Mizbeach

ועשית מזבח מקטר קטורת

You shall make an altar for offering the incense (30:1)

WHY IS THE GOLDEN MIZBEACH IN OUR PARSHA?

Then final topic discussed in our Parsha is the golden *Mizbeach* upon which the *ketores* was offered twice daily as part of the avodah in the Mishkan. The Rishonim have already noted that here does not seem to be the intuitive place for discussing this *Mizbeach*. Our parsha is devoted primarily to the *bigdei kehunah* – the garments worn by the kohanim, while the Mishkan and its *keilim* were discussed in the previous Parsha – Terumah. Why is the golden *Mizbeach* not discussed together with them?

Numerous answers have been offered to this question. Not surprisingly, the Meshech Chochmah has a unique approach. He suggests that this “deferred presentation” of the golden *Mizbeach* to the end of our Parsha reflects an exceptional feature of this *Mizbeach*. As a rule, the halacha is that if a vessel of the Mishkan is not in its place, the *avodah* associated with that vessel cannot be performed. Hence, for example, in the absence of the *Menorah*, there can be no kindling of the lights, and in the absence of the *Shulchan*, there can be no *Lechem Hapanim*. The exception to this rule is the golden *Mizbeach*. The Gemara states:¹ – *מזבח שנעקר מקטירין קטורת במקומו* – If the *Mizbeach* has been removed, we offer *ketores* in the place where it normally stands.” In other words, while the mitzvah of *ketores* involves offering it on the golden *Mizbeach*, the *Mizbeach* is not critical to this *avodah* and, if need be, the *ketores* can be offered without it.

This, says Meshech Chochmah, is why the golden *Mizbeach* is discussed at the very end. The Torah first discusses all the items which are critical to the performance of the *avodah*, i.e., the Mishkan and its vessels as well as the *bigdei kehunah*, and then concludes by discussing the one vessel which is not critical to its primary avodah of the *ketores* – the golden *Mizbeach*!

¹ Zevachim 59a.

REVERBERATIONS IN THE NAVI

As he frequently does, the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to show how this idea, which is rooted in the Chumash, reverberates later on in the *Nevi'im* as well; for ultimately, the Torah *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim* comprise an integrated unity.

In Melachim-1,² the pasuk describes *korbanos* which Shlomo Hamelech arranged to be brought in the Beis Hamikdash:

עלות ושלמים על המזבח אשר בנה לה ונקטיר אותו אשר לפניהם

[He had] burnt offerings and peace offerings brought on the Mizbeach that he had built for Hashem, and had incense burnt with it before Hashem.

We note that with regards to the *korbanos*, the pasuk mentions explicitly that they were brought “on the *Mizbeach*,” while the *ketores* is referred simply as being offered “before Hashem,” with no mention of the *Mizbeach* upon which it was offered! With this, the pasuk is bearing out the distinction mentioned in the Gemara, namely, that in contrast to the offering of *korbanos* where the presence of the *Mizbeach* is crucial, the essential requirement for offering *ketores* is only that it be “before Hashem!”

ONCE A YEAR

In addition to the daily offering of the *ketores*, the golden *Mizbeach* performed a specific function once a year. On Yom Kippur, there were two sin-offerings whose blood was sprinkled, first on the *Aron* in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, then on the *Paroches* and subsequently on the corners of the golden *Mizbeach*.³ This annual avodah is referred to in the final pasuk of our Parsha,⁴ which reads:

ובכפר אהרון על קרנתיו אתה בשנה מדם חטא היברים אחת בשנה יכפר עלייו לדורותיכם קדש קדשים הוא לה

Aharon shall atone on its corners once a year, from the blood of the sin-offering of the atonements once a year he shall atone on it for your generations, it is holy of holies to Hashem.

There is a basic difficulty with this pasuk, for the second half appears to simply be a repetition of the first half, stating that once a year blood is sprinkled on the corners of the *Mizbeach*!

Upon closer inspection, however, we note something very interesting. The first half of the pasuk places the mitzvah (“shall atone”) before its timing (“once a year”), while the second half reverses this order, stating first “once a year” and then “he shall atone.” As such, the pasuk forms a sort of “halachic palindrome.”

What is behind the change in order?

2 9:25.

3 See *Vayikra* 16:14-19.

4 Pasuk 10.

AHARON'S UNIQUE STATUS

The Meshech Chochmah explains that the background to the double reference in the pasuk lies in a fascinating comment of the Midrash,⁵ which states that whereas as a rule, the Kohen gadol may enter the *Kodesh Hakodashim* only once a year on Yom Kippur, Aharon's situation was different:

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך למשה... בכל שעה שהוא רוצה להיכנס בנים, רק שיכנס בסדר זהה

Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, to Moshe, 'Whenever he (Aharon) wants he may enter, provided he enters with the following order (of korbanot)'.

In other words, in contrast to kohanim gedolim of future generations, Aharon was granted the opportunity of performing the *avodah* specified in *Parshas Acharei Mos* – known to us as “the *avodah* of Yom Kippur” – at any time!⁶

Returning to our pasuk, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the two references to atonement do not represent a repetition at all, but rather are referring to two different time-frames, that of Aharon and that of future *kohanim gedolim*.

VERBS AND NOUNS

We noted that in the first half of our pasuk the verb (“shall atone”) is mentioned before the time (“once a year”), while in the second half the order is reversed. What is behind this reversal?

- When the verb is mentioned first, it can serve to indicate that the scope of the verb extends beyond the noun which follows. For example, the Torah says⁷ “לא תתחסם שור בדישו — *you shall not muzzle an ox while it threshes.*” The Gemara⁸ states that since the words “*lo tachsom*” came first, the meaning is expanded to denote “*מכל מקום* — *under any circumstances.*”⁹
- In contrast, when the noun comes first, it serves to limit the verb that follows to the noun.

With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah brings us back to our pasuk.

The first half reads:

ובפר אהרון על קרנתיו אחת בשנה

Aharon shall atone on its corners once a year

5 *Vayikra Rabbah* 21:7.

6 See Meshech Chochmah *Parshas Acharei Mos* (16:3) for a discussion as to why it was appropriate for Aharon to perform this *avodah* more than once a year.

7 *Devarim* 25:4.

8 *Bava Metzia* 90a.

9 This includes even before the ox has started threshing (*Bava Metzia ibid.*).

In mentioning “Aharon,” the Torah is referring to his unique status. As such, the verb “he shall atone” is mentioned *before* stating “once a year.” For although Aharon was *required* to perform this avodah once a year like every other Kohen gadol, nevertheless he was *allowed* to perform it at any time of the year! This broader scope is reflected in the pasuk placing the words “he shall atone” first.

In contrast, the second half of the pasuk reads:

מִדְםָ חַטֹּאת הַכְּפָרִים אַחֲת בָּשָׁנָה יְכַפֵּר עַלְיוֹ לְדוֹרִתֵיכֶם

From the blood of the sin-offering of the atonements once a year he shall atone on it for your generations

As the pasuk mentions, these words reflect the halacha as it applies to the Kohen Gadol “for your generations!” As such the words “once a year” are mentioned *before* the verb “shall atone”, thereby limiting the avodah to that time, for indeed, subsequent Kohanim Gedolim are not allowed to perform this *avodah* more than once a year.¹⁰

In this exquisite section, the Meshech Chochmah takes a pasuk concerning which, if we had any comment at all, we might perhaps have noticed that it seems repetitive and then moved on. Through fusing the world of Midrash with the discipline of exacting *parshanut*, the pasuk is opened up to reveal two tiers: the halachah as it applies to the Kohen gadol generally, and as it applied to Aharon specifically.

10 Meshech Chochmah, Vayikra 16:3.