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בס"ד

Parashat Tesaveh Part II An Important Detail Regarding the Incense Altar

1. The Problem

In the many chapters the Torah devotes to Tabernacle details (Exod. 25–40), it refers to the group of major furnishings, with individual mention of each article, eight times. Except in the first of this series of citations, the furnishings uniformly appear in the following sequence: ark, table, lampstand, incense altar, sacrificial altar, laver and its stand. In the first reference to these items (Exod. 25–27), however – the one consisting of instructions for their construction – there is a difference of great significance from the other seven listings: the incense altar is neither mentioned nor alluded to. Instructions for construction of that article (in Exod. 30:1-10) appear after discussion of several “extraneous” subjects. In all subsequent listings of the major furnishings the incense altar is mentioned after ark, table and lampstand and before the sacrificial altar. This is the expected sequence, given that the incense altar is a gold-plated vessel located in the outer sanctum of the Tent, together with the gold-plated table and golden lampstand, all of which follow mention of the gold-plated ark, which resides in the inner sanctum. The sacrificial altar, on the other hand, is bronze-plated and is “outside,” in the courtyard, and therefore uniformly follows the articles of gold.

The laver and its stand (30:17) are also omitted in the first discussion concerning the furnishings. Their omission, however, is not of equal significance to that of the incense altar because the laver did not play an intrinsic role in sanctuary service as did the other vessels on the list. The laver’s function was to provide water to facilitate the priests’ preparation for their service by washing their hands and feet, not an actual service in itself. It is generally assumed that a priest who bathed his body before a service was not required

to use the laver. In any event, omission of the laver and its stand does not alleviate the question concerning the incense altar.

In the first listing of furnishings, the sacrificial altar is introduced as *הַמִּזְבֵּחַ*, “And you shall make *the* altar” (Exod. 27:1). Use of the definite article implies that at that point the sacrificial altar was the only altar in the Tabernacle program. The definite article is not repeated when that altar is cited in the seven subsequent listings of major Tabernacle vessels. Obviously, this is because the second citation of the sacrificial altar is after the incense altar was introduced.

True, the derivation of the word *מִזְבֵּחַ* (altar) is from the root that denotes “slaughter” and, technically, a *mizbe-ah* could be translated as the altar upon which slaughtering is performed. There was only one such accoutrement in the Tabernacle, since it was forbidden to do slaughtering on the incense altar. The term *mizbe-ah* was applied to an incense altar because it is a raised stand upon which cultic service that involved burning of a substance was performed, rendering it similar in this respect to the other altar. Nevertheless, regardless of derivation, since an incense altar is invariably called a *mizbe-ah* and is so referred to in its many attestations in association with the Tabernacle, the term “altar” is part of its name. Use of the definite article in *הַמִּזְבֵּחַ* cannot be explained by resorting to what in this instance would be an overly technical word quibble.

In addition, the incense altar is not introduced until after the instructional section concerning Tabernacle, furnishings, priestly vestments and induction is brought to a close. It should be noted that before the instructional section is concluded, the Torah provides

instructions for the daily *tamid* sacrifice that is performed by the priests morning and afternoon on the sacrificial altar (29:38-42). That closes an “envelope” that was begun with instructions for the lampstand service two chapters before (27:20-21), framing the subsection of instructions that concern the priesthood. At that point it appears that the lampstand and the sacrificial altar were the only two major articles of daily priestly service, which explains their placement at the beginning and end of the subsection; the incense altar, which also is an item of daily priestly service, was not yet part of the program.*

Furthermore, in the few verses following the regulations for the daily *tamid* (29:42b-46), the Torah closes the larger section of Tabernacle instructions that it began in Exodus 25. In these verses the Torah anticipates Hashem’s prophetic inspiration emanating forth from the Tabernacle to Moses and the Israelites, and His glory sanctifying it. It speaks of His indwelling in the midst of the Israelites and being their G-d as well as of their acknowledgement that He took them forth from Egypt for the purpose of dwelling in their midst. Thus, the closing is linked to the beginning of the instructional section, which articulates the Tabernacle’s purpose using similar phrases, creating an outer “envelope” that closes the large pericope of basic instructions. The closing verse also speaks of the Exodus in such a manner that it connects with the opening of the Decalogue, apparently implying that the Tabernacle is an enrichment of the lawgiving, providing an additional layer of holiness. It is at this point that a new paragraph prescribes instructions for the incense altar.

The obvious question presents itself: Why was the incense altar omitted from the formal instructional section to be presented after the section’s closing, virtually as an addendum, but subsequently consistently found in its expected location among the furnishings?

2. Interpretations

We will cite some of the prominent traditional explanations and several modern ones. While there is much to learn from them, none appears compelling.

1. The Talmud differentiates between the incense altar and the other major sanctuary furnishings in that the

function of each of the latter cannot be validly performed without use of the relevant article. For example, a sacrifice is unacceptable if performed without the sacrificial altar or on a blemished altar; lamps are not to be kindled without the lampstand and if they were kindled the service is not considered fulfilled. Incense kindling, on the other hand, can be performed even without the incense altar (*b. Zebah. 59a*). Thus, the *Meshekh Hōkhmah* is of the opinion that the incense altar was not taught together with the other major furnishings because it is a dispensable item.

However, legally valid as this distinction may be, it does not explain why in its first attestation the sacrificial altar should be spoken of with the definite article, as though it is the only altar in the Tabernacle program. Even if the incense altar was not absolutely essential for the incense service for which it was prescribed, it was a second altar that was part of the program. Why should a prescribed furnishing be mentioned only after the instructional section was closed? And why in every subsequent listing does the incense altar appear in its expected sequence? In peshat, it may be that the legal distinction reflects the textual anomaly, not that it is its cause. (In the coming paragraphs, as we question various proposed solutions, we will not burden the reader by repeating the same questions each time, although they may apply.)

2. The Rambam explains the purpose of the incense to be the elimination of the unpleasant odors that would result from the sacrifices, providing an agreeable fragrance to sanctuary and vestments, so as to preserve respect for the sanctuary (*Guide for the Perplexed 3:45*). Although incense burning was a requirement and an actual service, it was not considered to possess a fully positive worship function. Based on this interpretation, some commentators have suggested that the primary instructional section was limited to the furnishings that possessed positive worship functions.

However, a required service that is designed to remove disagreeable odors is still a required service and it does not follow that it may explain its omission from the instructional section. In addition, the wording of the incense altar passage, especially the insistence on placing it “before the *parokhet* that is by

the ark of testimony, before the *kaporet* that is upon the testimony, where I will meet with you” (Exod. 30:6) is much too positive a formulation to allow the “minimalist” interpretation of it.

3. Hizquni’s approach is based on the fact that in the passage regarding construction of the sacrificial altar (27:1-8), the nature of what was to be offered on it was not provided. Only later, in conjunction with details for the priestly installation ceremony, are sacrifices prescribed for it (29:38 ff.). Without this background in place, the laws pertaining to the incense altar – the prohibitions to perform burnt offerings or grain offerings on it as well as to pour libations on it – would not be fully appreciated. Consequently, the Torah withheld mention of it until after instructions for the priestly installation. However, why should an article that is intrinsic to the section being legislated be omitted and placed after the “concluding” verses that close the pericope, giving that article the appearance of an addendum?

4. The Ramban writes that the incense ritual, although performed twice daily, represents the assuaging of Hashem’s anger when Israel provokes Him. The incense altar was introduced only after mention of His glory associated with the sanctuary and His dwelling in the midst of Israel because those statements imply the awesome responsibility of avoiding a sacrilegious act, while acknowledging the possibility of it. However, the statements of the Tabernacle’s purposes at the beginning of the enterprise are very similar to the statements at the closing of the instructions that the Ramban is quoting and they would also imply the critical responsibility to avoid a sacrilegious act and the possibility of it.

5. Sforno states: “This altar is not mentioned with the other furnishings in *Parashat Terumah* since its purpose was not to cause Hashem to dwell in our midst as was the purpose of the others...nor was it intended to bring down His glory to the sanctuary as was the case with sacrifices...This altar’s purpose was to honor Him for favorably accepting His nation’s service in the daily sacrifices and to give Him praise with incense offering.” However, his definition of the incense altar’s purposes appears to be arbitrary and not based on the verses. Even if granted, why should the incense altar be relegated to an addendum status after the conclusion of the construction section?

6. M.D. Cassuto interprets the Tabernacle, that is, the tent that consists of the Holy and the Holy of Holies, as symbolic of the “heavenly temple.” For the most part, it was modeled on what was the almost-standard depiction of the heavenly temple in the neighboring cultures of the time. Accordingly, he answers the question we are dealing with as follows. Altars are structures designated for humans to serve their deities with and are not found within heavenly temples. Consequently, an altar would not have been expected within the tent of the Tabernacle, as that portion of a sanctuary was supposed to resemble the heavenly temple. For an unstated reason, in the Torah the incense altar was mandated to be inside the sanctum. As such placement was incongruent with the model, it was left for the end. The sacrificial altar, being outside the sanctum, could be described in its proper sequence, as the courtyard does not reflect the heavenly temple.

However, this is not merely a matter of being left for the end. The incense altar was essentially omitted from the instructional section and placed after the section’s conclusion, apparently not to be part of the sanctuary program at first. And after all is said and done, the Torah did veer from the standard model and in such cases the Torah does not avoid “normalizing” its innovation. Furthermore, the incense altar was only excluded from its “proper” location in the first series of furnishing attestations.

7. N. Sarna’s explanation follows. Regulations for the seven-day priestly installation ceremonies followed the instructions for construction. For this week the incense altar was not to be functional since the incense cloud that it generated was symbolic of G-d’s active presence and, in his words: “The cloud of glory is said to descend on the Tabernacle and to suffuse it only after the structure is entirely completed and only at the end of the seven days of ceremony (Exod. 40:34-36; Lev. 9:23). That phenomenon expresses divine satisfaction and acceptance of the shrine and signifies its divine legitimation as the house of worship. Hence, it would have been premature to produce the cloud of incense at the installation of the priesthood.” Thus, it was placed shortly after the priestly installation directives.

However, citation of the incense altar in the instructional section in its “proper” place would not

necessarily imply premature production of the cloud of incense. And the initiation of service concerning the various furnishings was dependent on subsequent directives. Besides, is it likely that the cloud created by the incense altar, stemming from smoke, is identical with G-d's cloud of glory?

8. Some have viewed the purpose of the incense service to be a vehicle to accomplish *kapara* (expiation) for Israel. In Numbers 17:11, when G-d struck Israel with a plague, Moses instructed Aaron to place fire from the altar in a pan, add incense and rush to the people to make *kapara* for them as the *negef* (plague) had begun. In our Exodus context, following the instructions for the incense altar is the passage concerning taking a census, which is extensively focused on both *kapara* and avoiding *negef*. The census passage is located between the instructions for the incense altar and those for the laver and its stand, the last of the furnishings. Such an unusual interposition between furnishings indicates a linkage between incense altar and census. Thus, these commentators assume, in order to keep like subjects together, the incense altar passage was omitted from its "natural" location earlier to be placed in proximity to the census passage.

There is a common denominator here. But is it of such significance that highlighting the association overrides the appropriateness of prescribing instructions for the incense altar in its relevant section and in its logical

sequence? And of course the question of the definite article with the sacrificial altar remains.

We will propose a solution to the basic question after discussing the census in our coming study on *Parashat Ki Tissa*.

Endnote

* For the purpose of creating a structural framework around the priestly instructions it seems that it would have been more appropriate for the "envelope" that opened with the lampstand service to have closed with the incense altar's daily ritual. Both are golden articles located in the outer sanctum, while the sacrificial altar is a bronze article located in the courtyard. Furthermore, daily incense altar service is explicitly linked with daily lampstand service, the two constituting a pair in the Torah's instructions: "Each morning when he [Aaron] tends the lamps he shall burn it [the incense], and when Aaron kindles the lamps at twilight he shall burn it" (Exod. 30:7-8). Finally, in all subsequent enumerations of sanctuary furnishings the incense altar immediately follows the lampstand. Using the sacrificial altar to close the envelope is an indication that at this point the incense altar had not as yet been part of the sanctuary program, a view we will propose after addressing the census in our coming study on *Parashat Ki Tissa*.

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