



The final verses of Parashat Tetzaveh introduce the *mitzva* to offer *ketoret*, incense, on the altar in the *Mishkan*. This ritual, which was conducted twice each day, involved pouring spices on a fire-pan of simmering coals, which created a cloud and generated a pleasant fragrance that filled the area of the *Mishkan* (and, later, the *Beit Ha-mikdash*).

Maimonides presents the following theory to explain the purpose underlying the daily *ketoret* offering (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:45):

Since many beasts were daily slaughtered in the holy place, the flesh cut in pieces and the entrails and the legs burnt and washed, the smell of the place would undoubtedly have been like the smell of the slaughterhouses, if nothing had been done to counteract it. They were therefore commanded to burn incense there twice every day, in the morning and in the evening, in order to give the place and the garments of those who officiated there a pleasant odor. There is a well-known saying of our Sages, "In Jericho they could smell the incense" [burnt in the Temple]. This provision likewise tended to support the dignity of the Temple. If there had not been a good smell, let alone if there had been a stench, it would have produced in the minds of the people the reverse of respect; for our heart generally feels elevated in the presence of good odor, and is attracted by it, but it abhors and avoids bad smell.

In his view, the *ketoret* served – at least in part – to "support the dignity of the Temple," to make the site appealing to visitors. If the Temple would bear the stench of slaughtered animals, it would be virtually impossible for pilgrims to feel inspired and spiritually aroused by its sanctity and the experience of frequenting the representative abode of the *Shekhina*. The Torah therefore instructed the *kohanim* to offset the odor through the daily *ketoret* offering, which helped ensure that people's visit to the *Mikdash* would be a pleasant and awe-inspiring one, which they would want to repeat on a regular basis.

The Maharam Shick (1807-1879), in his work on the 613 commandments, noted that Maimonides' approach to the underlying purpose of the *ketoret* may help explain an otherwise peculiar comment in the Gemara regarding this ritual. In Masekhet Yoma (26a), the Gemara writes that performing this ritual bestowed the blessing of wealth upon the officiating *kohen*. Offering the *ketoret* was thus understandably a coveted role, and

for this reason, the Gemara writes, a measure was enacted that no *kohen* would perform this ritual more than once a lifetime, in order to allow all *kohanim* access to this unique "power" of the *ketoret*.

Why would this ritual be invested with such power?

The Maharam Shick explained that since, as Maimonides explains, the *ketoret* served to endear the Temple to *Am Yisrael*, to make the pilgrimage experience a pleasant, meaningful and inspiring one, the *kohen* who performed this ritual was deserving of immense reward. Making Jewish laws, rituals and traditions beloved to one's fellow Jews is among the greatest of achievements, for which God blesses one with peace and prosperity.

Torah Jews today, like the *kohanim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, bear the responsibility of "offering the *ketoret*," of ensuring that Torah tradition is "aromatic" and pleasing to our fellow Jews, and not something repulsive. Of course, just as the *kohanim* would never suspend or modify the Temple rituals so as to avoid filling the *Mikdash* with the stench of slaughtered animals, so must we never as much as entertain the possibility of introducing changes in the Torah to make it more appealing to our unaffiliated or disenchanted brethren. Eternal truth cannot and must not be altered in the interest of winning adherents. We are, however, enjoined to fill the *Mikdash* of Jewish faith, learning and practice with the pleasing aroma of the *ketoret*, to show our nation the beauty, depth and wisdom of the Torah, and thereby attract more members of our nation to join us in the authentic worship and service of the Almighty.