

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Tetzaveh**  
**February 20, 2016**

**פרשת תצוה**  
**י"א באדר א' תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 27:20-30:10

In this *parasha*, God describes to Moshe the *mizbe'ach haketoret* (the incense altar) and the clothing and anointing process of the *cohanim* (priests).

The קְטֹרֶת—*ketoret*—incense offering was a blend of aromatic spices and other ingredients that, when burned, gave off a wonderful smell. Some suggest that the command to offer incense was to purify the air and to perfume it, in order to mask the bad odors from the sacrificed animals. Others say that the command to offer incense was to ward off evil spirits and demons. Maimonides [12<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt/Spain] in his *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:45 writes, "There is a well-known saying of our Sages, 'In Jericho they could smell the incense that was burned in the *Beit HaMikdash*—Temple.' This provision likewise tended to support the dignity of the *Beit HaMikdash*. If there had not been a good smell, let alone if there had been a rancid smell, it would have produced in the minds of the people the reverse of respect; for our heart generally feels elevated in the presence of some good odor, and is attracted thereby, but it abhors and avoids bad smell."

According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, the mystical tradition associates *ketoret* with the Aramaic word קטר, meaning "bind" or "knot." The incense thus reflected an underlying harmony and inter-connectivity in the universe, as it united together the core essences of all forces — life, matter, and spirit — according to the recipe prescribed in the Torah.

The correct blend of sweet spices and of aromatic condiments used in making the incense offering was a carefully guarded secret at the time of its offering, fully known only by the compounders of the incense offering so as to prevent its replication in the worship of foreign gods. The *cohanim* (priests) of the House of Avtinas who were charged with preparing the incense during the Second Temple period kept the technique and exact proportions secret, for which they were censured by the rabbis. The long discussion in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Yoma* 38a sheds light on what happened to the recipe for the *ketoret*:

THEY OF THE HOUSE OF AVTINAS WOULD NOT TEACH ANYTHING ABOUT THE PREPARATION OF THE INCENSE. Our Rabbis taught: The house of Avtinas were expert in preparing the incense but would not teach [their art]. The Sages sent for specialists from Alexandria of Egypt, who knew how to compound incense as well as they, but did not know how to make the smoke ascend as well as they. The smoke of the former ascended [as straight] as a stick, whereas the smoke of the latter was scattered in every direction... The Sages sent for them [the House of Avtinas], but they would not come. Then they doubled their hire and they came... The Sages said to them: What reason did you have for not teaching [your art]? They said: They knew in our father's house that this House is going to be destroyed and they said: Perhaps an unworthy man will learn [this art] and will serve an idol with it. And for the following reason was their memory kept in honor: Never did a bride of their house go forth perfumed and when they married a woman from elsewhere they expressly forbade her to do so lest people say: From [the preparation of] the incense they are perfuming themselves. [They did so] to fulfill the command: 'You shall be clear before Hashem and before Yisrael.'

The Talmud goes on to sing the praises of descendants of the House of Avtinas. These stories remind us of one more aspect of loss with the fall of the Second *Beit HaMikdash*. They also remind us of the upstanding and committed people who served Hashem in all different ways in Temple service.

Shabbat shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think that *Ketoret* was part of the Temple service?
- Were the House of Avtinas right or wrong in keeping the *ketoret* recipe secret? Why?
- Do you agree with Maimonides' claim that smells make a difference in how we feel? What else in the atmosphere may make such a difference? Why do you think this is so?