

Parashah Sixty-Seven

Exodus 30:1–10; Malachai 1:11–2:7; Revelation 8:1–5

notes by Tim Hegg

The Altar of Incense

Our *parashah* this Shabbat deals exclusively with the altar of incense: “Moreover, you shall make an altar as a place for burning incense...” The altar of incense is one cubit square (1 cubit = approx 18-21 inches), standing two cubits high. It was made of acacia wood (שטים) overlaid with gold. Like the Altar of Sacrifice, the table for the Bread of the Presence, and the Ark, the Altar of Incense was fitted with rings and poles for carrying.

The placement of the Altar of Incense is stated to be “in front of the veil that is near the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is over the ark of the testimony, where I will meet with you.” The veil is said to be “near the ark of testimony” but the Hebrew has לִפְנֵי הַפָּרֹכֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל-אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת, (literally) “before the *parochet* which is upon the ark of the testimony.” Rashi notes that the description of its placement was so that it would not be moved away from the veil. The Talmud notes (b. *Yoma* 33b) that this description marks its placement between the menorah and the table. The point is surely that its placement was to connect it with the Ark of Testimony, the idea being that the incense burned daily was to be vitally connected to the once-a-year activity (on Yom Kippur) when the *cohen hagadol* would apply the blood to the *kaporet* or mercy seat. In this the lesson is learned that the atonement made at Yom Kippur was continually accepted by HaShem throughout the year, the incense a constant reminder that the Almighty was willing to dwell among the children of Israel on the basis of this atonement that He had accepted.

It is not difficult to see how this foreshadowed the saving work of our Messiah Yeshua. For though His atoning death was a one-time event, its atonement is constantly applied to His people through His constant intercession. In this picture the intercessory work of Messiah is linked to His sacrificial death. “He always lives to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 7:25).

We should also note that the Altar of Incense was to have horns on its four corners, like the Altar of Sacrifice. The “horn” (קֶרֶן, *keren*) in the Hebrew culture was a symbol of “strength.” For instance, Hannah, in her prayer of thanksgiving to HaShem (1Samuel 2) says: “My horn is exalted in HaShem” (v.1, cf. v. 10), meaning that her strength had been realized in His promise to her that she would, indeed, have a son. “Horn” is regularly used in the Psalms as a symbol of strength (Psalms 18:2; 75:4-5; 89:17,24; 92:10; 98:6; 112:9; 132:17; 148:14).

The message, then, that we should learn is that the Altar of Incense, with its continual fragrance before the Almighty, had strength or power. Indeed, HaShem willingly acted toward Israel on the basis of the very atonement symbolically present in the burning incense. And this speaks directly to its ultimate fulfillment in the intercessory work of Yeshua as our Great High Priest. For it is by His constant intercession that we have ready access (through Him) to the Father. HaShem’s favor toward us is the proof that Messiah’s work is powerful, for it satisfies the infinite holiness of the Father. In His gracious acts toward us who are sinners, His justice never is diminished, for the work of Yeshua in His intercession is powerful to save.

The *haftarah* also emphasizes this aspect of the incense, for it is in the burning of the incense (along with the other sacrifices) that HaShem’s Name is seen to be great. Surely

the greatness of our God is manifest in the world around us, for He is the Maker of the heavens and the earth. This is a regular point made in the Psalms (Psa. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 135:6; 136:5; 146:6). But His greatness is seen in even more significant ways when one recognizes the power of His grace in making atonement for sinners. For though the creation required His speech, and the Torah required the writing with His finger, redemption was accomplished “with an outstretched arm” (Ex 6:6; Deut 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8; 1Kings 8:42; 2Kings 17:36; 2Chr 6:32; Ps 136:12; Jer 27:5; 32:17,21; Ezek 20:33-34), symbolic of a great exercise of power and energy.

Our Apostolic section makes an interesting application of the Altar of Incense. Here, in Revelation 8:1-5, the incense put upon the golden altar is specifically said to be the prayer of the pious ones: “Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel’s hand.”

Here we see that the intercessory work of the high priest, symbolized in the Altar of Incense, is combined with the prayers of the pious ones as they petition HaShem. This is a very important insight: our prayers reach the Almighty because they are “intermingled” with the prayers of our *cohen hagadol*, Yeshua. Paul hints at this when he writes in Romans 8:26ff, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” Through the Ruach HaKodesh, our petitions and heart-needs are brought into the very presence of the Almighty by the intercessory work of our High Priest.

Here, then, is a beautiful picture of the intersection of our need for diligence in prayer and the faithfulness of our Savior in His intercession for us. It is not an “either-or” but a “both-and.” We are not blessed only because Yeshua works on our behalf, nor are our blessings solely dependent upon our faithfulness. It is in the intersection of our obedience and His faithfulness that blessing comes to us. And since He is faithful to intercede for us, we will persevere and we will grow in our obedience to Him. The one guarantees the other. “For He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it (i.e., bring it to completion) with a view to the very day of Messiah Yeshua’s appearance” (Philippians 1:6).

Note the strict prohibition against burning “strange incense” upon the Altar of Incense or offering any kind of sacrifice on it (v.9), “You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar, or burnt offering or meal offering; and you shall not pour out a drink offering on it.”

What exactly is “strange incense?” We know that the sons of Aaron were struck dead by the Almighty because they offered “strange fire” to the Lord (Lev. 10). The Hebrew is קִטְרֵת זָרָה, *k’toret zarah*. The Sages understand this to mean incense provided by an individual and not made specifically for the purpose (Rashi) or incense made with unauthorized ingredients (Ibn Ezra; Ramban). But *zarah* is the common word for “stranger (usually of idolators),” and thus “strange incense” most likely means “incense used for pagan worship.” This might fit the description of “strange fire” offered by Nadav and Avihu, in that it appears they were mixing pagan worship into the service of the Tabernacle.

But notice also that the offering of any sacrifice upon the Altar of Incense is prohibited. What should we understand by this? Simply that the Altar of Incense was to foreshadow the intercession of Yeshua *after* His sacrifice, not an on-going sacrifice. That is to say, Yeshua died once for all time, never to die again. The Roman Catholic teaching that the Messiah

is constantly dying is not only unbiblical, it totally misses the point of His death in the first place. Yeshua died once for all time and in that death obtained eternal redemption for all of His people. Note Heb 9:12 – “and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” If there were sacrifices offered on the Altar of Incense, this would ruin the picture and the foreshadowing of Yeshua’s death for us as acted out in the once-a-year Yom Kippur sacrifice.

Furthermore, the prohibition of “strange incense” teaches that the intercession symbolized by the incense is of a unique quality and cannot be duplicated or copied. All other forms, regardless of how “beautiful” they may be, are not accepted. This speaks to the uniqueness of Yeshua’s person and work. There is one way and only one way to find full acceptance before HaShem, and this is only through His Son, our Messiah Yeshua. Throughout the symbolic teaching of the Tabernacle, this fact is emphasized over and over again. God desires to dwell among His people, but He can do so only as His people can approach Him in holiness. Represented by the *cohen hagadol*, the people of Israel come into the presence of God through the sacrificial cleansing and atonement. But all of the regulations and prescriptions teach us that there is only one way for this to happen, and it is God’s way. All other attempts or designs will be rejected. Yeshua said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

Consider, then, the mystery of this picture: Yeshua, the eternal Messiah, acts as our *cohen hagadol*, takes our prayers and our concerns before the Almighty in the majesty of His person, on the merits of His own sacrifice, and with full confidence that His every request will be granted. It is in this that we have bold confidence to approach the “throne of grace” (Heb 4:16), for we know that we have received grace “in the beloved one” (Eph 1:6).

In John’s Gospel, he gives us an inspired preview of our Master’s heavenly intercession for us. It is as though we are allowed to peek through a crack in the opened door of heaven, and witness the activity of our High Priest in His intercessory prayer on our behalf. In John 17, we hear the words of Yeshua just hours before He would be tried, condemned by man, and crucified. Yet in v. 11, Yeshua states: “I am no longer in the world,” while in v. 13 He says, “these things I speak in the world.” Apparently Yeshua had, in His prayer, transported Himself beyond the cross, beyond the tomb, beyond His ascension, to His abode with the Father in glory. He begins His prayer (v. 1) by saying, “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do” (v. 4). As such, His prayer in this text stands as a model of His intercession, and affords us the opportunity to understand what it is that He requests of the Father on our behalf.

We may note a number of preliminary aspects of His prayer. First, He says that He is not praying for the world, but for those given to Him (v. 9): “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours.” Like the *cohen gadol* in Ancient Israel, who carried the names of the tribes upon His chest and shoulders as he burnt the daily incense, so our High Priest prays for those who are His—His chosen ones.

Secondly, we see that Yeshua’s intercession is based upon His having accomplished the work of redemption for which He was sent (v. 4). That His requests will be granted is based upon the fact that His sacrifice was accepted by God. In His intercession, He applies the merits of His sacrifice to those for whom He died.

We may summarize the requests of His prayer as follows:

1. Glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You (v. 1).

The glory of the Father is the ultimate goal and result of Yeshua's prayer. It is when the Son is glorified in accomplishing the work of redemption for His people, that the Father will be glorified. One cannot honor the Father, if one does not honor the Son. "He who hates Me hates My Father also" (John 15:23, cp. 5:23).

2. Keep them in Your name, which You have given Me, that they may be one, even as We are (v. 11).

Yeshua's prayer secures that all who were given to Yeshua will be kept or guarded so as not to be lost or taken from Him. Our redemptive relationship with God is the work of God. We are not kept by our own power or even by our own faithfulness. It is God's omnipotence that maintains our relationship with Him. Our salvation is as secure as is the relationship of the Son to the Father. "... He who began a good work in you will perfect it with a view to the day of Messiah Yeshua (Phil 1:6).

3. Keep them from the evil one (v. 15)

Our warfare is not against flesh and blood, but against wicked spirits and demonic forces (Eph 6:12). Apart from Yeshua's intercession on our behalf, we would be powerless to fight and win in the battle against the enemy of our souls. But because Yeshua always lives to make intercession for us, we may be confident that we will win this battle. We need never fear that somehow we will be defeated by our enemy. The victory is ours because Yeshua is praying for us. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail..." (Luke 22:31-32).

4. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth (v. 17)

Yeshua prays that we will be set apart by knowing and applying the eternal truth of God's word. In other words, He is praying that we will understand and apply the Scriptures to our lives. Our hunger for the word of God, and for knowing what it means and how it applies, is the direct result of Yeshua's intercession on our behalf. We hold in our hands the eternal words of the Almighty—the Creator of this universe, and our own King! And we may have every confidence that as we study and search the Scriptures, they will be unfolded to us by the Spirit as He implements the requests of our High Priest. We may therefore come to the Scriptures with the full anticipation that in them, we will find the answers to the deepest questions of life, and discover in them the shalom that God intends us to enjoy. "...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32).

5. I ask...that they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You...that the world may believe (vv. 20-21).

Being "one" means striving for unity. Unity is not "sameness," as though we all have to be clones of a single mold. Unity means the ability to remain one by affirming the essential truths, while allowing differences in the non-essentials. It does not mean that we find a oneness in reductionism, but that we all strive together to know the truth, and to live it out. Realizing that we are all seekers of truth, not manufacturers of it, enables us to strive together for the single goal of becoming like Yeshua. It is this ability to remain together in the midst of our differences, that forms a strong witness to the world. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

6. Father, I desire that they also whom You have given Me be with Me where I am (v. 24).

In ancient times, a ship that was making its way to the harbor during a storm, may have been unable to navigate the narrow opening of the harbor in the tempest. For that reason, they would send a smaller boat, with the anchor, into the harbor, to keep the ship from being blown back out to sea. Yeshua has taken the anchor of our souls with Him as He ascended to the Father, and thus our safe haven in the harbor of the world-to-come is secure. “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil...” (Heb. 6:19). The fact that there is a “man in heaven” today (cf. 1Tim 2:5) means that, as the first-fruits from the grave, He is the guarantee that a great harvest will follow. Nothing could ever overthrow this request of our High Priest: we will one day come into the presence of His glory, to abide forever in the world-to-come, because He is praying that this will be a reality. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39).

7. ...that the love wherewith You did love Me may be in them and I in them (v. 26).

While we remain in this life, we are assured of God’s love, not in some theoretical or philosophical sense, but in a deep reality that cannot be fully explained in words. Our corporate worship of song and prayer is one way of expressing the reality of this love. In the “ups and downs” of life, we nonetheless experience the abiding presence of God’s love for us, because Yeshua continues to intercede on our behalf, that this might be so. “...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Messiah which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17–19).