

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

פרשת תצוה תשכ"ז ד"ה ועשית מזבח מקטר קטורת בלתי מוגה

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THE FIRE ON THE INNER ALTAR

IN THE INNER PART OF THE SANCTUARY THERE WAS A SMALL ALTAR, MADE OF WOOD OVERLAID WITH A THIN layer of gold, mainly used for incense². The Sages tell us that a Divine fire settled on this Altar so that the incense was consumed of itself, without additional fire being needed³. Because the fire was from Heaven, it did not burn the thin gold overlay, nor the wood beneath. Heavenly fire does no damage⁴.

The Rebbe asks: what is the significance of this Fire from Heaven on the Inner Altar? The two kinds of fire, from above and from below, represent the person's spiritual arousal from above – without their effort, as a 'gift'; from Heaven – or from below, which is a product of their own personal effort. Surely, comments the Rebbe, the emphasis in Chabad is on one's personal effort.

Indeed, the Rebbe continues, this is the theme of the Sanctuary. The verse tells us⁵: “make for Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell in them [within each of them]” – this means, the Jewish people should make the practical and spiritual effort which creates the Sanctuary, and then, as a Divine response, G-d's Presence will dwell within them.

¹ Maamar Veasita Mizbeach Miktar Ketoret 5727 (1967). It was printed in Dvar Malchut Tetzaveh 5774. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² See Tetzaveh, Exodus 30:1ff. As well as the incense offered twice daily, this Altar was used in the Yom Kippur service.

³ See Jerusalem Talmud Chagigah, 3:5 and Korban HaEdah commentary. (Nonetheless, burning coals would be brought from the large Outer Altar, as is mentioned later).

⁴ See Shemot Rabbah 2:5, and also end of Chigagah in Tosfot 'She-eyn' in name of Tanhuma.

⁵ Terumah 25:8. We would expect the verse to say 'I will dwell in it', but it says 'in them', which is explained as meaning 'within each individual'.

This is also the theme of the offerings which are brought to the [outer] Altar, which is the main function of the Sanctuary. The fact that they are brought in obedience to the Divine Will, through the effort of man in this world, evokes Divine ‘happiness’, termed ‘nachat ruach’⁶, as a response from Above.

All this emphasizes the idea that the Sanctuary/Temple is about the efforts of the Jewish people, to which G-d responds by making His Presence dwell among (or within) them in the Sanctuary. This means the fire is initially from below, the individual or the whole Jewish people making the effort.

This emphasizes the Rebbe’s question why the Inner Altar should be characterized by Divine fire from above rather than a fire which comes from human efforts below.

The answer is that the service of the Inner, Golden Altar, the incense, links with the service on the Outer Altar which is in the Courtyard of the Sanctuary, and on which the animal offerings were brought. These two kinds of service relate to the service of the heart: the inner aspect of the heart and the outer aspect.

The outer aspect of the heart is an external kind of enthusiasm. One is enthusiastic, with feelings of love of the Divine (or awe) as a result of one’s efforts in contemplation or other means, but this does not reach one’s very essence. Further, one’s enthusiasm may be fleeting.

By contrast, the service of the inner dimension of one’s heart is a true expression of one’s essence. The feelings one has in the inner dimension of the heart are real and permanent. But one cannot easily ‘reach’ the inwardness of one’s heart. [Chassidic teachings provide methods for trying to reach it – such as giving charity⁷ - but in general it is understood as a gift from above.]

We now come to the answer to the Rebbe’s question. The reason why the Inner Altar burns with a Divine fire from above is because it is the *second stage* of our attempt to relate to the Divine. The first stage is with our own efforts to arouse the external dimension of the heart.

This generally evokes a response from the Divine: an arousal from above triggered by our efforts from below. The discourse cites a passage from the Zohar⁸ depicting the Golden Menorah, which is also in the Sanctuary, as expressing this. The central stem of the Menorah expresses the efforts of the

⁶ See Rashi on Vayikra 1:9, Pinchas 28:8, explaining the words ‘re’ach nichoach’ – ‘a pleasing savour’. G-d says “it gives Me nachat ru’ach, ‘happiness’, that My Will is obeyed”.

⁷ See Tanya Part 4, sec. 4

⁸ Zohar III, 254b ff.

individual (or the nation). The seven lights of the Menorah are the Divine response, but the Golden Altar for incense is a further dimension.

This is because the Golden Altar manifests something on a completely different level. It expresses a further stage in our relationship with the Divine. The Divine fire on the Golden Altar is a Divine gift, from a level which cannot be directly reached by our service from below.

This is the Divine arousal of the inner heart. We can make ourselves ‘fit’ to receive this illumination. But we cannot (easily) kindle this flame with our own power. It is from beyond, fire from Heaven.

The goal is to join these two aspects of our heart in our service of the Divine, as we ask G-d in our prayer before the Shema ‘and unify our heart’, *veyachad levavenu*. The word ‘heart’ has two letters Beit, expressing two aspects of the heart, outer and inner.

We ourselves make the effort as regards the outer level of the heart, but we ask G-d to respond and arouse the inner level. Since this is the completion of the arousal of the Outer Altar, the Talmud also instructs us to bring coals from the Outer Altar to the Inner Altar⁹.

The Rebbe continues that this heavenly arousal of the inner heart achieves the unification of the Holy One and His Shechinah, which is the true goal of our service. The dislocation of the two aspects of the Divine expresses the state of Exile, but reaching the illumination of the inner heart draws them together in Redemption.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care

⁹ See Tamid 33a, Rambam Temidim uMusafim 3:7.