

BS"D Soul Prayer, Class #17, March 3, 2020<sup>1</sup>

## Siddur Olat Rayah – Rabbi Kook on the Ketoret

*Ketoret* is considered the most powerful form of offering prescribed by the Torah. It contains the secret of overcoming death, and completely transforming all evil – in ourselves and in the world – into good. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov says: “The main refinement and elevation of the sparks of holiness from the *klipot* is effected by offering the eleven spices of the *ketoret*” (*Likutey Halakhot, Yoreh Deah, Cerim 3:16*) and “The main purpose of the *ketoret* is to elevate and reveal all that is holy and good but which is presently entrapped and occluded in the depths of the impure *klipot*” (*Likutey Halakhot, Rosh Chodesh 3:8*).

Rav Tzadok HaCohen: The Talmud declares that even the angel of death transmitted something to Moshe (*Shabbat 89a*). We learn from this that all the angels in heaven transmitted their particular secrets, meaning their secret powers, to Moshe. Among them was the angel of death. He revealed to Moshe that his power to kill derives from the *lashon hara* that we speak... (*Pri Tzadik, Volume 4, Parashat Korach, p. 144 (72b)*).

*Atah Hu Hashem Elokenu sh'hiktiru avotenu lefanekha et ketoret ha'samim bizman she'beit ha'mikdash hayah kayam kaasher tzivita otam al yedei Moshe nevi'ekha kakatuv beToratekha – You are He, Hashem our GD, before whom our ancestors burned the incense compound when the Temple stood, as You instructed them through Your prophet Moshe, as it is written in Your Torah.*

***Atah Hu Hashem Elokenu – You are He, Hashem our GD.*** The content of the *ketoret* is exalted and intensely spiritual, and therefore connected to the innermost essence of life itself. Like the vital life-force that moves from within outward, from the life of the soul to the life of the body, it spans all levels at once. At such a level of exalted inner content, there is no distinction between historical periods. The fact that the temple no longer stands physically, and that we no longer offer the incense in its sacred precincts, makes no difference with regard to the power of the *ketoret* to effect purification. The inner content is simply not subject to external influence. As much as the level of any generation might descend, its full potency never wanes. This explains why the *Siddur* does not state here the more common phrase, “*Elokenu v'Elokei avotenu* – our GD and the GD of our ancestors,” but rather, “*Atah Hu Hashem Elokenu sh'hiktiru avotenu* – You are He, Hashem our GD, before whom our ancestors offered.” The former implies a change of status in our relationship with Hashem vis à vis that of former generations. The latter phrase (that is used here) implies no such change in status. On the inner level of the *ketoret* there is simply no difference between then and now. You are He, one and the same, and our relationship to You has not changed.

***Kaasher tzivita otam al yedei Moshe nevi'ekha kakatuv beToratekha – as You instructed them through Your prophet Moshe, as it is written in Your Torah.*** The holiness of the eternal Torah is not subject to change. Its exalted level of prophecy was given to us through Moshe, the master of all prophets whose prophecy was directed to all generations equally. So too the inner quality of the *ketoret*. The great difference in the degree of revelation of godliness between the time of the Temple and our time has no effect on it. Certainly in the external world the difference is great. Nevertheless, because of the internal level [of *daat*] which the *ketoret* embodies, there is no difference. This is the inner meaning of the phrase, “Whoever has *daat*, it is as if the Temple was built in his day” (*Berakhot 33a*). It is for this reason that we conclude here, “*kakatuv beToratekha* – as it is written in Your Torah.” It tunes us to the fact that it is the power of Torah that makes the recital of the *pitum ha'ketoret* [which begins by quoting verses from the Torah specifically about the *ketoret*] equal in magnitude to the actual offering of the *ketoret* when the Temple stood.

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*Vayomer Hashem el Moshe: Kach lekha samim, nataf u'shechelet ve'chelbenah, samim, u'levonah zakah, baad be'baad yihiyeh* – Hashem said to Moshe: Take to yourself spices – balsam, onycha, galbanum, [as well as other specified] spices [with similar properties], and pure frankincense, equal amounts of each (Exodus 30:34).

**Vayomer Hashem – Hashem said.** In countless instances in the Torah, it is written “*Vaydaber Hashem el Moshe lemor* – Hashem spoke to Moshe saying.” Here, with respect to the exalted holiness of the *ketoret*, it is written simply “*Vayomer* – Hashem said.” In *lashon ha'kadosh*, *amirah* is more *penimi* (inner) and *mufshat* (abstract, subtle) than *dibur* (*Zohar Naso, Idra Rabbah* 3:132b). This is consistent with the Talmud’s depiction of the *ketoret* as *davar shebe’chashai* (a secret thing) (*Arakhin* 16a, *Zevachim* 88b). Indeed the true inner power of this *amirah* was never revealed; its secret remained with Moshe. [Again this is implied in phrase “*Vayomer Hashem el Moshe* – Hashem said to Moshe,” which indicates a personal communication as opposed to “*Vaydaber Hashem el Moshe lemor* – Hashem spoke to Moshe saying,” where the extra *lemor*-saying invariably means “say to others” (see Ramban on Exodus 6:10).]

This is exactly the *ketoret*’s specialness. Because it remains a secret, it embodies the exalted level of the *encompassing* Divine holiness of the soul that precedes differentiation into specifics. This is why Hashem continues and says, “*kach lekha samim* – take for yourself spices,” without specifying which spices to take. And even when the particular spices are immediately mentioned, they themselves stand above the level of mere specifics precisely because of their complete connection to undifferentiated oneness.

***Nataf u'shechelet ve'chelbenah* – balsam, onycha, galbanum.** Here is revealed the holy secret of the *ketoret*. It informs us that no evil or no ugliness exists from the point of view of the *klal*, the all-encompassing, undifferentiated light of GD’s oneness. All that appears coarse and evil will ultimately be transformed into pure goodness and exalted holiness. For this we need **two spices** which – as hinted in their names – will have the power to nullify the existence of evil. This tunes us to the fact that, precisely when we see something whose external appearance indicates wickedness and coarseness, we also know that holiness has **two special properties** [to rectify this]. One of these is its **ability to remove the evil** [i.e., separate it off from the inner essence from which it sucks its life-force]. The second is the **ability to elevate the very evil itself and transform it into complete goodness**. It is for this reason that *nataf* and *shechelet* were placed side by side with [the evil smelling] *chelbenah*. The *chelbenah* is included in the spice compound in order to teach us that there is no absolute evil in existence. *Nataf*’s task is to remove the evil aspect of the *chelbenah* by counteracting its evil smell. This, however, is not enough. It now becomes the task of the *shechelet* to literally transform *chelbenah*’s evil smell into a pleasant fragrance.

***Samim, nataf u'shechelet ve'chelbenah, samim.*** *Nataf, shechelet, and chelbenah* are rooted in the all-encompassing goodness of the soul (the first *samim*). This endows them with the ability to return again and bind together in unity (the second *samim*), even after being enumerated separately and revealing their specific powers. It is as if they were never differentiated into specifics. This is the meaning of the repetition of the word *samim*. [*Samim...samim*: the repetition of *samim* indicates that each of the substances mentioned is now raised to the level of a *klal* (*Keritot* 6b).]

***U'levonah zakah* – and pure frankincense.** In the dimension of subtle essence that remains forever in total unadulterated oneness there is no need to mention the necessity of keeping things pure. Now, however, as we prepare to bring all this into a world of physical activity, the Torah specifies that we must not include anything impure in the *ketoret*. This is alluded to in the *levonah zakah*... Again, *chelbenah* is the aspect of the soul in which evil has appeared. *Nataf* and *shechelet* are the powers of the soul that remove evil, and transform and elevate it to pure goodness. *Levonah* is the revelation of these powers in a life dedicated to complete goodness.

*Ve'asita otah ketoret rokach maaseh rokei'ach memulach tahor kadosh*— [grind each spice separately and then] blend [them together as] a *ketoret* compound, the work of a master perfumer, well-blended, free of all impurity, and holy.

***Ve'asita otah ketoret rokach—blend [them together as] an incense mixture.*** The exalted intention of the *ketoret* is that the supernal light of pure spirituality manifest in the world, in man, in the nation, in humanity, in life, in the totality of the cosmos. In kabbalah, the dimension of pure light that lies at the core of all existence is called *Atzilut* (Emanation). Concerning this dimension it is written, “Evil cannot abide in Your presence” (Psalm 5:5). From this we learn that all that appears evil and coarse in life and in the world of action is but an external garment that shrouds a pure and good essence. For it is impossible that any essential existence [created by GD] be anything but pure, holy, and the most absolutely shining good. All existence came forth and continually comes forth from one supernal Source, the source of goodness and benevolence, blessed be He. This holy service [the *ketoret*], filled with Divine wisdom and holy craftsmanship, is thus only in order to purify and clean away those evil coverings that shroud the good.

***Maaseh rokei'ach—the work of a master perfumer.*** One does not approach lightly the exalted, awesome, holy service of returning all that is evil to complete and total good. Not with human intelligence alone can it be done, but with the great faith and holy craftsmanship of Hashem’s chosen ones, the master sages of all generations. Men who can stand in the palace of the King, who know the depth of this heavenly work, to transform bitter to sweet, and darkness to light.

***Memulach tahor kadosh—well-blended, free of all impurity, and holy.*** Three preparations are needed for this supreme work of returning all that is presently lost and displaced to its true Owner; returning all that is coarse to the height of heavenly beauty; returning all that is evil to complete supernal good.

**First** is the deep blending. When *inclinations* descend, they bifurcate in accord with the quality of *gevurah* that divides and separates [like fire]. The aspects of evil in the inclinations, although very exalted and holy in their root, nevertheless become exposed to contamination in their descent. They are then incapable on their own of rising up to their pure source. They can only rise up when they are completely and deeply re-blended and re-merged—to the point of total and absolute re-inclusion in and within the deepest good—by and through the powers that remove the contamination at its root, and transform it to its supernal exalted beauty. **Second** is purity. The inclination (proclivity, preference) to perform this holy service must be absolutely pure [i.e., untainted by any desire for personal gain]. It must be free of even the slightest tendency to [justify, rationalize, or defend] that which is intrinsically evil and coarse. **Third** is sanctity. Out of respect to the GD’s exalted holiness, the goal of this service must be [the return of all that is presently estranged from GD to] the highest degree of holiness. For GD’s own holiness will shine and become even more perfect with the complete and exalted return of all [the sparks of holiness that are presently exiled and] dispersed to the ends of the earth; [the return of] all that is presently estranged from His exalted holiness. This must be done with the knowledge that the deeper something is presently sunken in the depths of evil, the greater its original exaltedness in its supernal root. There is therefore an enflamed excitement in this holy service to return everything to its proper place in holiness.

When all these conditions are fulfilled together, the inner content of this holy, exalted, and luminous service is filled with the light of the soul. This [profound connection between the *ketoret* and the soul] is alluded to in the following teaching of the sages: “Rav Zutra bar Tuvia said in the name of Rav: From where do we know that we are required to say a blessing over a pleasant fragrance? It is written, ‘*Kol ha'neshamah tehallel Yah*—let every soul praise GD’ (Psalm 150:6) [that is, the soul must praise GD even for things from which only it derives benefit, not the body]. What pleasure is so subtle and elusive

that only the soul benefits from it, while the body does not? We must conclude that it is a pleasant fragrance” (*Berakhot* 43b).

*Ve’shachakta mimena hadek, ve’natatah mimena lifnei ha’edut, be’ohel moed, asher iva’ed lekha shamah, kodesh kadashim tihiyeh lakhem*—Grind a small portion of it [daily] and place it [on the golden Altar] before the [Ark of] Testimony in the Communion Tent where I commune with you. It shall have the highest degree of holiness for you.

***Ve’shachakta mimena hadek*—finely grind a small portion of it [daily].** [We have seen that, at its highest and most encompassing level, the *ketoret* alludes to] the elevation and complete re-merging of all tendencies into their source, by means of which everything returns to its root in supernal holiness, and all bitterness is sweetened. The principle applies with even greater force and exactitude on a daily basis. Each day requires its own specific elevation. This is the meaning of “*ve’shachakta*” [finely grind a small portion of the *ketoret* daily], that is, grind it ever finer.

***Ve’natatah mimena lifnei ha’edut, be’ohel moed asher iva’ed lekha shamah*—and place it [on the golden Altar] before the [Ark of] Testimony in the Communion Tent where I commune with you.** The purpose of this is to connect and elevate this re-merging and inclusion of all the inclinations up to the highest hidden level of holiness...the holy of holies of the Communion Tent. In this way the level of holiness attained to this point is elevated to the level of Holy of Holies.

*Vehikteer alav Aharon ketoret samim baboker baboker; beheitivo et ha’nerot yaktirena*—Aharon shall offer the *ketoret* mixture on it [the golden Altar] early each morning; when he cleans the [*Menorah*] lamps he shall offer it.

***Vehikteer alav Aharon ketoret samim baboker baboker*— Aharon shall also offer the *ketoret* mixture on it [the golden Altar] early each morning.** The *korban tamid* (perpetual elevation-offering of two sheep, one in the morning and one in the evening) comes to shine the light of perpetual holiness [into our lives]. Its function is to protect us from the constant [risk of] contamination that arises daily out of our preoccupation with the material aspects of life. In the same way the perpetual offering of the *ketoret*—renewed early each morning—shines the inner light of holy fragrance [into our souls]. This light is none other than the inner content of the life of the soul in its most exalted sense. It carries within itself the power to liberate from all subjugation to physicality. And this renewal is also fitting for the *Shachrit* offering of the *ketoret*, coming as it does each morning when man awakens from sleep completely renewed.

***Beheitivo et ha’nerot yaktirena*—when he cleans the [*Menorah*] lamps he shall offer it.** The sages’ statement, “One who wishes to attain wisdom should turn slightly toward the south,”<sup>2</sup> is based on the fact that the *Menorah*—which embodies wisdom—was situated close to the southern wall of the *Mikdash*. Cleaning the lamps of the *Menorah* thus represents the preparations we make to attain wisdom. Indeed, the preparation itself comes from a place that is higher than the wisdom that derives from it. This explains why it is intrinsically connected with the holiness of the *ketoret*. For the *ketoret* is offered precisely in order to reveal the inner light of the soul—that total manifestation of spirit that transcends all limitation. The *ketoret* is thus so much higher than wisdom that it is impossible for it to limit the power of its illumination except through the simple act of cleaning and preparing the *Menorah*’s lamps.

<sup>2</sup> “One who wishes to attain wisdom should turn slightly toward the south, while one who wishes to become wealthy should turn slightly to the north. The sign for this is that the *Shulchan Lechem HaPanim* (showbread table) was on the north, while the *Menorah* was on the south” (*Baba Batra* 25a).