

Pekudey

Incense, Physical Deficiencies, and Spirituality

Today we read the *Torah* portion *Pekudey*. Today is also *Parshas Hachodesh*. This is the *Shabbos* before *Rosh Chodesh Nisan*. We take out two *Torahs* and we read how the first commandment given to the Jewish people was the making of a calendar. We learn in this *Torah* portion *Pekudey* how the Jewish people had completed everything as G-d had commanded them to do, and we also learn here how all the objects of the *Mishkan* and all its utensils and all the clothes of the priests were done as G-d had commanded Moshe to do them. But we have a problem. The problem is the incense. We all know that the *Halacha* is that the incense had to be prepared in the Tabernacle. It had to be prepared in a dedicated Tabernacle. In this case there was no dedicated Tabernacle, so how were they able to prepare the incense? This is a conundrum, because if they prepared the incense, they could not use it because it was not prepared in a dedicated Tabernacle, and a dedicated Tabernacle could not come into being unless they had the incense.

The *Ramban* says that this was a special situation because, since the Tabernacle had not been completed, special rules applied. We see that there were special rules in this situation because Moshe Rabbeinu officiated as the high priest for the seven days of the dedication of the Tabernacle. Only on the eighth day was Aaron officially inaugurated as high priest. We know that Moshe Rabbeinu was not a *Kohen*, a priest. He was from the Tribe of Levi, but only a *Kohen*, Aaron or his descendants, could officiate in the Temple so the *Ramban* says there were special rules before Aaron's inauguration. This applied to the incense, too. Normally, it could only be made in a dedicated Tabernacle but it was allowed in this particular instance to be made in a place which was not a dedicated Tabernacle.

The *Ramban* also asks a different question: why do we need these spices at all? The *Ramban* explains that the reason why we had incense in the Tabernacle was to mask the smell, the necessary unpleasantness of the Temple itself. After all, when animals are sacrificed, you will have the smell of putrid flesh. The Tabernacle was a human institution with all our human failings. The burning of the incense was to signify the fact that, even though we needed to go through the physical to achieve the spiritual,

we could transcend the many things in the physical world which may repulse us and cause us not to seek the spiritual. The *Ramban* says that the incense was so strong that it could be smelled all the way into Jericho. Jericho is not that very far from *Yerushalayim*. On a clear day you can see Jericho from *Yerushalayim*. What is the point then of the incense? The point of the incense was to allow us to renew ourselves spiritually, was to allow us to see beyond the physical deficiencies of the Tabernacle, itself, to its spiritual beauty. We all know that since we are human, we all have physical needs which have to be taken care of, and these physical needs many times get in the way of our seeing the spiritual. I remember one person came to me and said, "You know, Rabbi, why I am quitting your synagogue?" I said I did not know. He said, "The reason I am quitting your synagogue is because the tallises are dirty. You should see to it that the tallises are not dirty." I was a little taken aback by that, but I suppose that he considered it part of my job to make sure that the tallises are clean because, otherwise, it affected his spiritual growth. There was somebody else who said that they felt they had to quit our synagogue because the restrooms were not maintained properly.

We all know that we have physical needs, physical differences. We all know that as human beings we make mistakes. Sometimes we make mistakes by forgetting to acknowledge people. Sometimes we make mistakes by forgetting to give people *aliyahs*. Sometimes we make mistakes by forgetting *Yohzheits* and wedding anniversaries, etc., but we have to transcend these things. That is what the incense was meant to do. It was meant to have us realize that, because we are human, we must go through the physical with all its deficiencies in order to reach the spiritual. We are different from all other religions, because most religions say that you have to deny the physical in order to get to the spiritual, but we say the exact opposite. We say that you can only get to the spiritual by going through the physical. This is similar to music. What are the greatest violinists doing when they play a concerto by Mendelsohn or Tchaichovsky or Beethoven? They are taking a bunch of horse hair and gliding it over some catgut. When you think about it, it is almost disgusting. Catgut, itself, is a disgusting thing, and horse's hair, usually from the horse's tail, is used mainly to swat flies. But here these two physical elements, both of which can be

disgusting, are used to give us the sublime spiritual experiences of listening to great music. Judaism teaches us that in order to have a spiritual experience, we have to go through the physical.

There is another question, too, that we can ask about this *Torah* portion. Why when Betzalel builds the Tabernacle, does he not follow Moshe's instructions? Moshe was told by G-d to build the holy objects that were to be in the Tabernacle, the Ark, the table, the *menorah*, the altar, etc. first and then make the Tabernacle but Betzalel makes the Tabernacle first and then he makes the holy objects. He first makes the curtains, the walls, the boards, and everything else needed in order to make the structure before he made the furniture for the Tabernacle. When Moshe questions Betzalel about this, he refers Moshe to G-d, and G-d confirms that Betzalel is right. Moshe then makes a play on Betzalel's name. Moshe says that since the name Betzalel means in shadow of G-d, Betzalel was correct in the way he built the *Mishkan*. In order really to have spirituality, in order to have spiritual things we need to have an institution.

It is true that institutions can have faults but, unless we get together as a group, it is very hard to obtain spiritual experiences. In fact, that is what the incense is meant to teach us, also. It is meant to teach us that life overcomes death, that the sacred overcomes the profane, and that we can transmit the physical and make it spiritual. It is difficult, hard work but if we work together, we can do it. Every synagogue, in order to create spirituality for those who come, requires a lot of physical detail. Just maintaining the building, renewing city permits, sending out bulletins, notices, raising money requires a great deal of attention to physical detail, but we should not be blinded by the inevitable mistakes that will occur to the spiritual experience that we can all obtain in a synagogue. Just working together as a group is a spiritual experience. We need institutions to experience spirituality.

At the end of this portion the Jewish people are referred to as *Beis Yisroel*, the House of Israel. Only after they have built a sanctuary, the Tabernacle, were they assured that they could continue to have the spirituality they experienced at Sinai. In order to have spiritual experiences we have to gather together as groups. We have to build and maintain institutions which will help us to obtain spiritual experiences. Betzalel says first:

let's have the institution and then we can worry about arranging the objects within it which will lead to spirituality. That is also true for the other basic institution that we have in Judaism, the family. G-d commanded the Jewish people before they were to leave Egypt to gather together in families because that is the source of our spirituality. The source of our spirituality is the family. The family is a place where we know that we are accepted for ourselves, and it is a place where we belong. It is true that sometimes within families adjustments have to be made, but as long as we have a strong family structure, we can overcome all difficulties and problems. The incense helped us overcome all the unpleasantness that is inevitable when we deal with the physical things which are necessary in order for us to gain a spiritual experience. That's why the incense is referred to as something pleasing to man because it strengthens the institutions that we have and allows us to gain spiritual exposure. We must strengthen the family and the synagogue. Family is also what guarantees that we will live physical lives, a prerequisite for any spiritual experience. Someone once told me that the reason he likes Houston is he can have anonymity. He does not have to worry about what his family thinks and he can do all sorts of things he normally wouldn't do because he is just one of the crowd. We know that that is also one of the reasons for the increase of crime in our society. In a close knit family, people will not do certain things because it will shame their family. It will shame their parents. But if a person has no sense of family, no sense of community, then he will not worry whether it is going to shame his family or shame his people. He will lack the basic requirements for spirituality, a sense of morality and community. In order for us to have a spiritual experience, the incense must overcome the normal physical disgusting aspects of life. It must overcome the mistakes of life. In order for us to live elevated spiritual lives, we must also have institutions, especially the institutions of the family and synagogue. They elevate us so that we will truly be worthy of the spirituality. Let us all hope and pray that all our actions will reflect the incense of the Temple, that they will cause a sweet odor to ascent so G-d will certainly bless us because He will see that we are trying to achieve a better and a higher spiritual life in spite of our difficulties, in spite of our physical nature, and in spite of our shortcomings. Let us all hope and pray that we will continue to

try to achieve spirituality in spite of all difficulties because we have strengthened our families and come together in synagogues.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a fellow who came to work for a brokerage house. After about a year, he was taken in to the boss, and the boss said, "Goldstein, you have done wonders for our bottom line." Goldstein asked how he had done that. He said, "You have made us a non-profit organization." It is not up to all of us to make ourselves into non-profit organizations by looking for spiritual profits, not just material profits. Unfortunately, many people today are only interested in material profits. They are not interested in spiritual profits. The spiritual profits come when we try to maintain holiness by trying to, so to speak, elevate the level of our lives by trying always to use the physical to obtain the spiritual in spite of all difficulties. Let us all hope that by doing these things, the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.