Acherei Mot: Raising up the Physical

By Baruch Herschkopff

One of the most refined and holy of all the offerings brought in Jewish worship during the time of the Temple, and the time of the Tent of Meeting before it, was that of the ketoret, the special blend of incense. The burning of the incense comes to its utmost expression in this weekly Torah portion of Acherei Mot, where it becomes the offering of the High Priest on Yom Kippur as he enters into the Holy of Holies. This portion can illuminate for us the Torah’s insistence that we raise up the beauty of the physical world into spiritual service. Moreover, the incense offering of the High Priest is contrasted with the failed offering of Aaron’s sons Nadav and Avihu, which resulted in their death. From this contrast, we can also begin to understand the Torah’s perspective on proper and improper use of the environment. Furthermore, the Haftorah associated with this portion offers us strong indication of how we might apply this Torah perspective in our contemporary situation.

The Torah indicates through the service of the Temple, that humans have the ability to refine and lift up the physical world for spiritual service, rather than focusing on the physical environment as on object of commodity and selfish pleasure-taking. The ketoret in particular is a global blend of spices from the far reaches of the globe, which are ground and burnt together for the unique quality of their combination. G-d describes the special components of the ketoret to Moshe (Moses) soon after the exodus from Egypt:

“And the Lord said to Moses: Take for yourself aromatics, [namely] balsam sap, onycha and galbanum, aromatics and pure frankincense; they shall be of equal weight.”

The Talmud explains that according to tradition there are 11 spices in the ketoret. Some are native to the Middle East: Balsam, also known colloquially as the balm of Gilead, was produced in Israel, most famously in Ein Gedi. The aromatic gum resin of Galbanum is procured from plants native to Persia, or modern-day Iran. The various resins of Frankincense are all native to the lands of Arabia. Myrrh, also an aromatic resin ingredient of the ketoret, is native to Yemen, Somalia and the eastern parts of Ethiopia.

However, several of the spices must have originated in the farthest attainable locations. Cloves are native to Indonesia. Cassia, similar to cinnamon, is an evergreen tree native to southern China and Vietnam. Spikenard could be a member of the Valerian family that grows in the Himalayas of China, or it could be lavender, which is also native to Israel. Saffron, from the stamens of the saffron crocus, is native to southwest Asia, but has been cultivated for over 3,000 years. Also native to Europe, and much of Asia, especially the Himalayas, is Costus. Lastly, cinnamon is native to south India and Sri Lanka. The ingathering of all these components into one blended spice offering on the holiest day of the year carries an obvious message. While the High Priest, dressed all in white, is performing a sacred service of atonement, he brings with him the essence of plants grown in the dirt of many different places on earth. This is to say that he does not “leave the world behind” as he enters the Holy of Holies; rather he is taking with him the most elevated and refined representation of the entire world.

This entire portion of the service of Yom Kippur and the incense is introduced with a reference back to Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, the High Priest. The service is described as being taught to Moshe “following the death of Aharon’s son’s…who died.” Nadav and Avihu brought an incense offering at the
inauguration of the holy sanctuary. However, their offering was “foreign” and they died in a supernatural event. The Torah’s use of this introduction seems to contrast the description of the service of the High Priest. Indeed, the Torah makes note that the service of the High Priest is designed specifically, “…that he should not die,” in contrast to the way of Aaron’s sons.

What exactly is the difference between these two offerings, that one would be considered appropriate and the other not? From a cursory reading of the text, they seem so similar. Many classic Torah commentaries offer explanations. However, in our societal context, there is an extra lesson we can glean. From the understanding we have gained of how the ketoret represents resources from all over the world, we can allegorically infer a teaching about proper and improper use of the beauty and bounty of the earth’s produce.

The service of the High Priest is in response to a Divine command and represents a use of the physical world that is sustainable, extending beyond selfish desire. In comparison, the offering of Aaron’s sons seems selfishly motivated, personally oriented, and not in response to the Ultimate Will. Their untimely death in the Torah can be understood as a homiletical warning of the inevitable result of the lifestyle based on individually-motivated, selfish desire. How can we measure whether our use of the environment is selfishly motivated or is a lifting up of the physical world as part of a greater plan and intention?

This exact theme is accentuated in the Haftorah for Acherei Mot, a selection from the prophet Amos. The prophecy recorded suggests a misalignment with proper use of the world in several ways. Firstly, there is a description of excess personal consumption. The prophet speaks to, “those who lie on couches of ivory and stretch out on their beds, and eat lambs of the flock and calves out of the stall…” He warns them, “The L-rd G-d of Hosts says: I abhor the pride of Jacob, and I hate his palaces, and I will deliver the city and the fullness thereof”. Simply being over-invested in and distracted by material reality takes us out of the selfless and Divinely-oriented consciousness upon which proper use of the environment is predicated.

A second theme of the Haftorah is use of the physical world where people hoard resources for themselves. Amos speaks to, “…those who rejoice over a thing of naught, who say, ‘with our strength we have taken horns for ourselves.’” He criticizes the use of personal power to accumulate a private gain, for “ourselves,” but not for others, calling us to recognize, instead, the shared need and the common good.

Yet a third theme is the explicit harm which comes to other people when consumption of the physical world is oriented around personal gratification. The prophet warns that destruction will come, “for they are selling a righteous man for money, and a poor man for a pair of shoes.” When personal accumulation of physical property and the resources of the physical world are held as the highest priority, then even the most basic social justice is threatened.

While these external indicators are in themselves things to be avoided, they all stem from a common root of misunderstanding the role of the physical environment in the life of human beings. As long as we see the physical world as merely a means to satisfy our own desires, the pitfalls of unsustainable living will continue to threaten us. Our drive to hoard and consume, along with our fears of never having enough, will constantly strain our relationship with the environment. The more we are able to shift ourselves into a place of service to G-d, even in our consumption and use of the physical world, the more we will be able to attain a more selfless perspective, attune to the higher will of the world, and thereby be joyfully sustained.
and supported in our way of living. As the scripture states, our use of the physical should be sustainable “so that we should not die” both physically and spiritually.

**Suggested Action Items:**

1) Be mindful in your shopping. Try buying only what you need that can serve a greater purpose, rather than simply impulsively buying according to your desire. You could start with just one shopping trip, or one buying decision per trip, and see how it goes.

2) Investigate two or three products that you buy regularly. How are they made? What kinds of resources are used? Are they used in a sustainable way? Are the raw materials obtained in a process of fair trade? Are the people who produce the products treated in a humane way? Are there different product choices you could make to help limit your environmental impact? Ask your friends to do the same with a few other products and compare notes.

3) Appreciate the beauty of what comes forth from the natural world. Try not to throw out items which could be repaired or used in a different way. Are there more ways this item, and the physicality with which it’s made, can be raised up in service of the Ultimate Will? When it is finally time to throw something away, consider consciously acknowledging the service it has provided up until now. And dispose of it properly.

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1. Leviticus 16:12-13
2. A term which describes the selection from Prophets traditionally read on Shabbat morning following the Torah portion. These selections were instituted by Ezra during the time of the second temple, and correspond, sometimes cryptically, to the themes of the weekly portion or the time of the year.
3. In fact, the Sfat Emet, a 19th cent. Polish Hassidic commentator, explained that the Hebrew word for sacrifice is ‘korban’ which comes from the root ‘lekarev’ or to bring close. In his explanation of the Temple service in the Portion of Vayikra he points out that all sacrifices are meant to bring the physical world closer to G-d.
5. Babylonian Talmud (200 C.E.-~500 C.E.) tractate Kritot 6b
7. Encyclopaedia Britannica Eleventh Edition
9. Ibid.
14. From Wikipedia.org

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16 See Leviticus 10:1-2: “And Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before the Lord foreign fire, which He had not commanded them. And fire went forth from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.”

17 Leviticus 16:2

18 For instance, Rashi learns from various Midrashic and Talmudic sources that they were intoxicated with alcohol when they offered the incense. Others suggest that their mistake was offering the incense without prior instruction (See Nachmonides).

19 Amos 6:4

20 Amos 6:8

21 Amos 6:13

22 Amos 2:6