

# *Even Sinners Are Protected*

PARSHA INSIGHTS - PIKUDAI (5757)

## WHAT DOES OIL HAVE TO DO WITH THE GOLDEN ALTER?

INTRODUCTION: Today's *parsha* [Torah portion] once again mentions the numerous components of the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle]. In *Perek Lamid Tes, Pasuk Lamid Gimmel* [chapter 39, verse 33], we are told that after all the parts were finished being built, the *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] brought them to Moshe. *Rashi* explains that the Jews were unable to erect the *Mishkan* as a whole, and since Moshe did not personally perform any specific action in its construction up to now, Hashem left him the task of actually setting it up. Ultimately, it miraculously rose by itself, although it appeared that Moshe was erecting it.

Let us focus our attention on one sacred object in the *Mishkan* - the golden incense altar, which was used inside the *Kodesh*— a holy chamber in the *Ohel Moed* [Tent of Meeting]. When mentioning that the *Bnai Yisroel* brought this particular item to Moshe, the list goes as follows (*Perek Lamid Tes, Pasuk Lamid Ches* [chapter 39, verse 38]): "...and the golden altar, and the anointing oil, and the fragrant incense..." The Lutzker Rav, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, *Zatzal* [may he be remembered for a blessing], wonders about something. If the purpose of this *mizbaiach* [altar] was to burn incense, why does the Torah always list the anointing oil BETWEEN the golden altar and the incense? The altar and the incense should be listed one right after the other, since they are used together! What does the anointing oil have to do with the golden incense altar?

To begin to comprehend this, we need to see the *Gemara* in *Chagiga, 27A*. The *Gemara* states: "Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish said, 'The sinners of Yisroel - the fire of *Gehinnom* does not rule over them. This is learned from a *kal vachomer* ["all the more so"] from the golden altar. The golden altar only has on it the thickness of a *dinar* of gold (a *dinar* is a coin - *Rashi* explains that this is a very thin layer of gold, over acacia wood), and for the many years that the *Mishkan* was in use, the fire burning on it did not affect it. How much more so the fire of *Gehinnom* will not affect even the sinners of Yisroel, since even THEY are filled with *mitzvos* [good deeds] like a pomegranate (is filled with seeds)!"

The *Maharsha*, based on *Tosfos*, concludes that the *Gemara* is explained as follows. The layer of gold over the acacia wood on the altar was no thicker than a golden coin, a *dinar*. Even so, the wood underneath was miraculously not burnt, because this very thin layer of gold protected it. Similarly, even the sinners of the Jewish people are filled with *mitzvos*, as the *pasuk* in *Shir Hashirim Perek Dalid, Pasuk Gimmel* [Song of Songs, chapter 4, verse 3] compares them to pomegranates. These *mitzvos* are like gold, as stated in *Tehillim Perek Yud Tes, Pasuk Yud Alef* [Psalms, chapter 19, verse 11]. Consequently, they shield even the sinner from the fire of *Gehinnom*.

Now that we have learned this *Gemara*, says Rav Sorotzkin, we can address our original question. We must particularly notice the statement of the *Gemara* that the layer of gold over the wood of the altar was extremely thin. Why is the anointing oil always mentioned BETWEEN the golden altar and the incense, which was burned on it each day? The answer is simple. The Torah is hereby giving us the solution to the mystery of how the thin layer of gold was able to protect the wood underneath. It was precisely because the altar had been sanctified - anointed with - the anointing oil, as the Torah states in an earlier section, that it was miraculously protected from the fire burning upon it. To make this clear, the Torah places the anointing oil before the incense. In other words, the anointing oil did have A LOT to do with this altar.

Although there is a discussion in the commentators on the above *Gemara* regarding which sinners (or "empty ones" - see *Rashi* in *Shir Hashirim*) the *Gemara* is referring to, a lesson can definitely be learned from these words of *Chazal* [our Sages]. We are a nation precious to Hashem, and all Jews have potential for holiness and piety.

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