

Fire emerged from Hashem and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who had offered incense... The fire pans of those who sinned against theirs souls - make them into beaten plates, a cover for the Altar. (16:35, 17:3)

As part of Korach's rebellion, the two hundred and fifty men who were part of Korach's group were to offer incense in fire pans. They received their due punishment in that they were being consumed by a fire from Hashem. Their fire pans, instead of being discarded, were melted and shaped into a covering for the *Mizbayach*. Until now the Altar had been a hollow frame which was filled with dirt every time *Klal Yisrael* camped. Now, the outside surface was to be covered with a thin mass plating composed of the sinner's fire pans. This is enigmatic! Is it right to take fire pans that were originally used for sin and transform them into a substance for a *mitzvah*? Moreover, obviously up until this point in time it was fine to offer incense upon a *mizbayach* filled with dirt. Why should the *Mizbayach* now require brass plating?

The *Shem Mishmuel* explains the profound nature of the actual test of offering incense in brass fire pans, as well as the reason it was later melted down to be used as a covering for the Altar. We find that gold was the designated metal to be used for offering incense. The *Mizbayach* upon which the incense was offered was made of gold. On *Yom Kippur*, when the *Kohen Gadol* entered the *Kodesh Hakedoshim*, Holy of Holies, he came bearing a pan of gold. The glowing coals, which were used to burn the daily incense, were brought to the *Mizbayach* in a gold pan.

Three metals were used in the construction of the *Mishkan*: gold, symbolizing fear; silver, denoting love; and brass, which alludes to strength of character. In a number of places in *Tanach*, we find the connection between strength and power as symbolized by brass. In this case, brass is used to signify the ability to remain firm and resolute in the face of challenge, strong and unyielding in one's conviction, and fidelity to Hashem. This strength can manifest itself in a positive manner, as well as in a negative sense. One individual may be stubborn and resolute, while another may be brazen and insolent. This characteristic may very well be the most powerful of all traits, because of its ability to swing from one extreme end of the pendulum to the other.

The *Midrash* tells us that gold represents Avraham, silver represents Yitzchak and brass represents Yaakov. Each of our *Avos*, Patriarchs, possessed unique qualities and virtues to which the various metals allude. For our purposes, we will focus on brass. This metal symbolizes a character trait - which, when thoughtfully utilized - is most credible, manifesting itself as determination in confrontation with challenge and adversity. If this metal is left uncontrolled it becomes inflexible, obdurate and brazen. Yaakov *Avinu* was the essence of truth. He symbolized the positive aspect of brass, maintaining his conviction in the face of Eisav and Lavan's challenge. He was not afraid that Eisav would inflict bodily damage on him, nor did he fear Lavan's challenge to his spiritual status. He remained resolute and strong as brass. Korach, his grandson, inherited

this trait. Regrettably, he utilized its negative aspect. He demanded *kavod*, honor. He sought a position in *Klal Yisrael's* hierarchy. He was determined to get more for himself; nothing was going to stand in his way. Indeed, Korach epitomized the "brazenness" of brass. Hence, it was necessary to determine which way Korach's followers were leaning. Were they brazen or were they resolute?

To pretend that there was no realm of good in Korach's rebellion would be wrong. Korach, regrettably, took the "brass" aspects of resoluteness and conviction, and manipulated them into brazenness and arrogance. The ability to stand up for one's principles was distorted by self-seeking hautiness. Korach's followers were excessive in their resolution; they were "carried away" with conviction. They began to believe in themselves, transforming their ideals into full-fledged rebellion.

Thus, we may justify using the brass fire pans as a surface for the *Mizbayach*. The pans symbolize the basic good intentions of Korach's followers. After the men died, the fire that was upon the pans was "lifted up" and thrown away. The fire symbolized the excess - the frenzy of arrogance that so often is the result of misplaced good intentions. This left the empty fire pans, representing the good aspect of their character. In Jewish theology, *mitzvos* and sins do not cancel out one another. One is compensated for each *mitzvah* and sin. Hence, while the men were punished for their arrogance, they still deserved a reward for their original good intentions. The good element, the original brass, was, therefore, used as a covering for the *Mizbayach*.

Originally, offerings were brought directly upon the earth of the *Mizbayach*. Earth is synonymous with Avraham *Avinu*, whose humility was paradigmatic of "dust and ashes." He symbolized remorse and contrition, the broken spirit and crushed heart one needs, the ingredients necessary for an effective *korban*. While this emotion prevailed in early times, the people later experienced a resurgence of the strength of character as exemplified by Yaakov *Avinu*. This personality change in people made it appropriate for *korbanos* to be offered on brass, which symbolized this strength of character. After Korach's rebellion, the brass fire pans were used as an everlasting memorial to a character trait that is inherently good.