

Upon it shall Aharon bring the spice incense up in smoke. (30:7)

The Mizbayach HaZahav, Golden Altar, also known as *Mizbayach HaPenimi*, Inner Altar, and *Mizbayach HaKetores*, Incense Altar, was not used for the offering of animal sacrifices, but for burning *ketores*, incense. Nonetheless, it was called a *mizbayach*, derived from the root word, *zevach*, sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice is the reducing of something to nothingness. The burning of incense has such beneficial impact that it can defeat plagues, calamities, even death. The mysterious power of the incense burning explains the privileged place **within** the *Mishkan* reserved for the Golden *Mizbayach* upon which the *ketores* was burnt. Hence, its name – *Mizbayach HaPenimi*, Inner Altar.

Reiach Nichochi, “My satisfying aroma” (*Bamidbar* 28:2), is the term used by the Torah to describe Hashem’s “appreciation” of the *Ketores*, incense. Thus, it was burned on the Inner Altar, while the animal sacrifices were burnt on the *Mizbayach HaChitzon*, Outer Altar. *Horav Elie Munk, zl*, cites *Midrash Tadshei* (Ch. 11) that views the relationship between the Inner Altar vis-à-vis the Outer Altar to be very much like the *neshamah*, soul, is to the *guf*, body. The soul becomes elevated to the higher spheres, while the body is purified and sanctified for serving the Almighty.

This idea has its parallel in the existence of two Altars, each consecrated to a specific service. The animal flesh is burnt on one altar, while the incense ascends Heavenward from the second altar. It is only when the Inner Altar transforms the flesh offering into a pure, ethereal flame of incense that Hashem perceives the *reiach nichoach*, the satisfying aroma, *Rav Munk* explains this as a two-part process. “The sacrificial service expresses man’s will to tame animal life by spilling its blood in honor of Hashem and having its flesh ascend in a sacred flame. The act of burning incense represents the disembodiment of the outer covering of flesh. What has up until now been physical is presently transformed when it comes in contact with the Altar erected before G-d. It is transformed into a fragrant flame which burns in tribute to Hashem, a flame like the spirit freed from earthly contingencies, drawn by an invisible force upward towards the celestial heights.” The hot coals which were used for burning the incense came from the residue of the sacrifice taken from the Outer Altar.

The sense of smell, explains *Rav Munk*, is the purest of all five senses, since it was the only one not affected in the first sin. It is the least material sensation. Fragrance, thus, becomes synonymous with purity and spiritual delight. Hashem feels satisfaction from man’s behavior, due to the *reiach nichoach*, satisfying aroma, which he sends up to Him. *Rav Munk* observes that the terms *reiach*, smell, and *ruach*, spirit, are related, as are *neshimah*, breath, and *neshamah*, soul.

The incense on the Altar represents the triumph of spirit over matter, for the flesh corresponding with man’s base nature succumbed, but the breath of life rose from its ashes as an ethereal flame which continues to give of its fragrance. Through these properties the incense has the power to

triumph over destruction and ruin. It restrained harmful forces and was powerful enough to stop even the hand of death.