TETSAVE: The Scent of Jerusalem

The Tora mentions the preparation of the *qetoret* (□□□□□ □□□□□), translated in English as "incense," in our Parasha Tetsave (Shemot/Exodus 30:34). Incense is a fragrant smoke produced by burning specific spices and resins. The Tora itself lists only four of the eleven ingredients used in preparing the qetoret. The other seven are recorded in the Talmud, in the tractate *Keritut*, which we recite daily in our *tefillah* (twice in Shacharit and once in Mincha).

But why does the Tora require such an extensive explanation for something that appears as simple as incense? The most complex issue is identifying the eleven ingredients that composed the qetoret. After the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash, identifying these spices became the subject of many debates, theories, and speculations. This difficulty is not unique to the qetoret plants; the same challenge exists with other plants, precious stones, or animals mentioned in the Tora. In his book *Shilte Gibborim*, for example, Rabbi Portaleone devotes eleven chapters—thirteen pages—to identifying the first ingredient of the qetoret: the *tsori*.

Before entering those details, however, let us describe the mitsva of qetoret itself.

368 PORTIONS

The eleven ingredients, each in its precise measure, were blended into a special preparation once a year, at the beginning of the month of Nisan. The cohanim ground this mixture by hand and divided it into 368 portions (*manim*), each weighing approximately half a kilogram. During the 365 days of the solar year, they burned half a portion of qetoret every morning and every afternoon, following the daily sacrifice.

On Yom Kippur, at the holiest moment of the year, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies (*Qodesh haQodashim*), where no one else entered during the rest of the year, and performed the mitsva of qetoret there. Unlike the rest of the year, on Yom Kippur he used three full portions rather than a half-portion. He held these portions in his hands and ground them far more finely than the daily preparation (*daka min ha-daka*).

Each day, the cohanim burned the qetoret on a small altar designated exclusively for this service: the *Mizbeach haZahab*. This golden altar stood in the *Hejal*, the inner chamber of the Temple.

THE SECRET OF THE QETORET

As the qetoret burned, its smoke filled the Bet haMiqdash with a sweet, incomparable fragrance. Remarkably, the aroma was sensed not only within the Temple but throughout Yerushalayim. How was this possible?

First, the fragrance itself was extremely powerful. Most of the ingredients of the qetoret were rare plants and resins of extraordinary value. But there was also a closely guarded tradition: a priestly family in Yerushalayim, the Abtinas, was entrusted with preparing the qetoret. They preserved its "secret formula," which included the precise traditional methods of grinding and blending the spices. They also knew how to identify a mysterious plant called *ma'aleh 'ashan* ("smoke-raiser"). A few leaves of this plant caused the smoke of the qetoret to rise straight upward, as required by ritual law. The column of smoke then spread its fragrance across Yerushalayim—today's Old City—so that the scent of qetoret became the natural perfume of the city, part of what made our capital so beautiful and unique.

Travelers approaching Yerushalayim from the south, from Yericho (Jericho), could sense that they were nearing the Holy City when they began to perceive the distinctive aroma of the

qetoret.

The Midrash adds that in Yerushalayim, brides did not need to wear perfume even on their wedding day, because the exquisite fragrance of the qetoret surpassed any scent a person could apply.