

EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"And you shall make an Altar, a place to burn incense; you shall make it from acacia wood."
[30:1]*

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, notes that the other articles in the Tabernacle were described in the previous parsha, Terumah, whereas the Incense Altar is only mentioned here. This is even more puzzling because still later, in Vayakhel and Pikudei (the final weekly readings of the Book of Exodus), the Torah tells us that Betzalel, the inspired craftsman, made this Altar, and then made the Altar for sacrifices - and similarly, G-d commanded Moshe to have the Incense Altar and Sacrificial Altar brought into the Tabernacle, in that order. If the Incense Altar was to be constructed first, why was the command given so much later?

Clearly, the Torah "waited" to mention this Altar for a reason. Rabbi Feinstein says that G-d was waiting until Aaron was designated the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, before mentioning the Altar. This, Rabbi Feinstein explains, is because of the lessons we can learn from the smell of the Incense - and how they relate to Jewish leadership.

The smell of the incense used in the Tabernacle and then the Temple was quite powerful, and one could detect the scent a long distance away. The Talmud in Tractate Tamid says that they could smell the incense from the Temple as far away as Yericho.

Secondly, odors - whether good or bad - come upon a person even against his will. One can look away from something, but it is hard to avoid a scent without moving away from it. The Talmud in Tractate Pesachim discusses the prohibition against deriving pleasure from idolatry, and the Sages argue whether a person violates this prohibition if the smell of incense (offered to idols) comes into the room, and s/he doesn't leave - even without any intention of going closer to the smell.

Finally, certain smells are like an early warning system - such as the smell of spoiled food, or, for that matter, the unique odor of melting silicon which is part and parcel of our electronic era. A perceptive person must be on the alert, ready to respond to the signals provided by these scents.

Rabbi Feinstein says that a Jewish leader must have three similar attributes. First of all, he must be able to influence his students even when they are far away. His reach should be so powerful that he

motivates them even against their will. And finally, he himself must be alert and perceptive, knowing which directions are appropriate and positive. To mix metaphors, the Talmud in Tractate Tamid says, "Who is wise? He who sees the likely outcome of events (literally: that which will be born)."

This explains why the Torah waited for the designation of Aaron as High Priest before mentioning this Altar. Furthermore, it explains why the actual construction and installation took precedence over the Sacrificial Altar - because the quality of a positive influence over others, encouraging them to move upward, is far more significant than merely performing obligatory sacrifices!

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken