

INORGANIC DIVINE CHEMISTRY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Do not plant an Asherah – any tree – near Hashem's altar.

Meshech Chochmah: *Korbanos* occupy an outsize position in the Torah. They are easily misunderstood. Despite numerous references to offerings as G-d's "bread for His fire," we categorically reject any suggestion that *korbanos* give Hashem anything. How could they? A perfect G-d cannot be made more perfect. We cannot "feed" or "sustain" Him, because there is nothing He lacks. "If you were righteous, what have you given Him?"^[2] He cannot be improved, expanded, enhanced.

There is unanimity about this. *Korbanos* work upon us, not upon Him. They are designed to work wondrously upon the soul of the one who brings them to the *beis hamikdash*, adding *deveikus* and spiritual advancement to the him as he contemplates that what is happening to the animal he brings ought to be happening to him! The approach of the Zohar and the kabbalists adds an entirely different dimension to the function of *korbanos*: uniting the various spiritual worlds, directing all of them to an intended goal.

None of this, of course, has any relevance to Hashem, who cannot be changed or improved. The Torah's Man-centered treatment of *korbanos* contrasts entirely with the ancient pagans. They recognized separate, distinct forces, whose worship increased their power. In gratitude for their enhancement, these forces, they thought, would heap blessing and success upon the worshipper.

This understanding lies behind Ben-Azai's observation:^[3] "Come and see! In the Torah section of *korbanos*, the Divine names *Elokim* and *Kel* are not used – only the name Hashem. This denies the heretics an opportunity to validate their claims." The name *Elokim* refers to the combination of all upper forces; *Kel* speaks of the strength and power of a G-dly activity. If either of these names were used in conjunction with *korbanos*, it would create the impression that G-d was somehow strengthened or enhanced through the offering. Instead, the Torah uses the name Hashem exclusively. This name drills down on His special Existence, which is what allows the existence of all other things and phenomena. Such a G-d is above all need and all receipt. This drives home the lesson that no *korban* can do anything for G-d, i.e. it His existence is the cause of everything including the *korban*, then nothing about that *korban* is going to improve His lot.

Plants and animals are organic. They can change, grow, flourish. Earth, on the other hand, is unchanging. It knows nothing about development. The Torah therefore insists on the latter in

building an altar, instructing us to build it out of stones rather than wood. The altar, symbolic of Hashem accepting our offerings, remains as unchanging as stone. It is unlike wood, which when still connected to the ground can be nurtured and encouraged to expand and change. The construction of the *mizbeach* embodies this all-important idea that we don't present Hashem with anything He needs when we offer a *korban*. In the *Asherah* we find the very opposite. Chazal^[4] teach that its very name bespeaks the support and assistance^[5] that the object of veneration receives from those who serve it.

The altar is not the only fixture of Jewish life that must eschew receiving. Justice can never be served unless judges remain entirely neutral. They, too, must distance themselves from any gain related to the cases they try. They should run, not walk, from anything that enhances their position, be it tangible goods, favors, or prestige. They need to keep in mind that justice evades mortal human beings. "Justice belongs to G-d"^[6] – and to Him alone. When we try our hand at it, we do so as His human surrogates, feebly trying to do the best we can.

"Any judge who judges a true judgment according to its truth becomes a partner with Hashem in Creation."^[7] We could explain that "according to its truth" means the same thing. G-d had no ulterior motive in creating the world. He receives nothing from it. When a judge exercises his authority in the same way, pursuing justice for its own sake without the admixture of any gain whatsoever, he becomes a partner with Hashem. He acts with the same purity of intent as G-d did when he brought the world into existence.

There is more. The judge and the altar are also partners. They share a common function: bringing the hearts of His people close to the Heavenly Father. The judge does this by relieving the strife between people that interferes with His relationship with His nation. *Korbanos* undo the damage that the sinner has done through his transgression, and reverse the distance it has created between Man and G-d. This is what Chazal had in mind when they taught^[8] that the Torah section on civil law is juxtaposed to one about the altar in order to teach that the Sanhedrin should convene near the *mizbeach*. They belong together. Between the two of them, the nation rids itself of its blemishes, and is restored to its closeness with HKBH.

We can close the circle. "Whoever appoints an improper judge" – i.e. one who derives some gain from his office – "is as if he planted an *Asherah* near the altar." The altar is a potent symbol of a perfect G-d not receiving from human beings. When judges – acting as they do in His stead – corrupt their office with personal gain, they substitute the needy, receiving *Asherah* for the stones of the altar.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Devarim 16:21.
2. Iyov 35:7.

3. Menachos 110A .
4. Toras Kohanim 11 .
5. Related, according to the Chofetz Chaim, to *ashru chamutz* of Yeshaya 1:17 .
6. Devarim 1:17 .
7. Shabbos 10A .
8. Mechlita, Yisro, end .