

ASHES - SEPARATION AND REMOVAL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

When approaching the sections of the Torah which deal with the karbanos - the sacrificial offerings brought both in the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle, and later in the Beis HaMikdash, the Holy Temple in Yerushalayim - we should keep in mind that karbanos are not merely ancient rites of past generations. Although for numerous reasons it is impossible for us to offer karbanos presently, a great deal of insight can still be gleaned by examining the various offerings and procedures described in the Torah, and attempting to apply them to our own avodah (service of Hashem). As tzaddikim were wont to say (see, for instance, P'nei Menachem, Vayikra p. 8): Do not think that when the Torah speaks of the "Ohel Moed" it is referring only to the Tent of Meeting in the Tabernacle; every Jew has to build an Ohel Moed in his own heart...

Parshas Tzav begins with the mitzvah of Terumas ha-Deshen, the separation of the ash from the Altar fire. The first Temple service of each day was the removal of a small portion of the previous day's ashes from the Altar. The Kohen takes a shovelful of the innermost ashes of the Altar, and places them on the floor of the Courtyard, on the east side of the ramp that leads to the top of the Altar. This in no way served to cleanse the Altar of its ashes (which was a separate service, as we shall soon see), as only one shovelful of the ashes were removed. Rather, from the wording and description of the Torah, it seems that this separation was a sort of offering, similar to the kemitzah (threefingersful) of flour removed from the meal offering and burned on the Altar. What is so special, one may ask, about the previous day's ashes, that they warrant this special honour?

Rabbi Shamshon Rafael Hirsch zt"l writes that the Torah is teaching us, by way of example, that yesterday's avodah does not lose its relevance with the rising of the morning sun. In our generation more than ever, we are witness to a mindset that cries out: Get rid of the old to make way for the new! Today's knowledge, data and information far outdoes that of yesterday or last year. Our "wisdom," it seems, advances at such a rapid pace, that what may have seemed important and meaningful last month or even last week, is today shunned as a thing of the past. It is not difficult to understand why, living in such a society, today's youth are all too ready to shun the advice and guidance of their parents and elders, and forge for themselves a new and enlightened path.

We, bnei Torah, are of a different mind. Today's service must begin with the knowledge and appreciation that it is merely building upon yesterday's. We perform a separation offering using yesterday's ashes, symbolizing a national declaration that yesterday's avodah remains holy to us, even as we set out to accept the challenges and opportunities of the new day. Although today we

begin anew, we do so only with an intimate connection to our past; to our mesorah, the chain of our tradition given over from generation to generation.

Afterwards, the Torah describes the service of Ho-tzapas ha-Deshen, the removal of the Altar ashes. Rashi explains that this service, unlike the previous, was not done daily, but rather involved the cleaning of the Altar's ashes whenever they accumulated to the extent that they needed to be removed. Rambam (Temidin u'Mussafin 2:12-14) however, disagrees, and maintains that the ash-removal service was also performed daily. It involved the Kohen changing his clothing, and scooping all of the excess ashes into large vessels, in which they were transported outside of the encampment.

In the footsteps of the Rambam, Rabbi Hirsch explains that after connecting ourselves with the continuum of our heritage through the separation-offering, it was then necessary to cleanse the Altar of yesterday's ashes. Symbolically, we must realize that we should not rely today on that which we accomplished yesterday. Each day carries its own message, its own obligations, and its own potential. We begin each day, as it were, with a "new slate." We can not allow ourselves to get bogged down with our past failures, nor can we afford to "take the day off" based on yesterday's accomplishments. After connecting with the past, we must enter the new day with fresh insight and vigour - with the excitement and enthusiasm of one performing a new task.

As we begin each day, and we mount the "altar" of our personal Ohel Moed, we do so with great anticipation. Today is a new day; it carries so much opportunity - the possibilities are endless! At the same time, however, we must always remember to take a moment to peer down at yesterday's ashes, resting right next to the ramp we have just climbed.

Text Copyright © 2000 [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **Project Genesis, Inc.**
