



Sicha Summary

Chelek 16 | Teruma | Sichah 4

The Mishnah:

The final *Mishnah* of tractate *Chagigah* says:

“All the vessels that were in the Temple required immersion after the Festival [because the masses would touch them, imparting impurity], apart from the golden Altar and the bronze Altar, because they are considered like the ground [and therefore, like land itself, they were insusceptible to impurity]. This is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer. And the Rabbis say: It is because they are coated.”

The Talmud:

The Talmud cites scriptural support for Rabbi Eliezer’s position that the Altar is “considered like the ground.” The verse states, “An Altar of earth you shall make for Me.” (*Shemos* 20:21) The Talmud then explains the Rabbis response, “It is because they are coated,” in two ways.

- a) The Rabbis actually disagree with Rabbi Eliezer and maintain that the Altar does contract impurity. Since the altars were coated with gold and copper, they were considered to be “golden” and “copper” vessels which are susceptible to impurity.
- b) The Rabbis agree with Rabbi Eliezer that the Altar did not contract impurity, but they question the rationale he provided, namely, that Scripture considered the Altar to be “like the ground.” There is, the Rabbis argue, a more simple explanation. The Altars are “wooden vessels fixed in one place” and such vessels cannot contract impurity. “Perhaps,” the Rabbis proposed to Rabbi Eliezer, “you did not rely on this rationale because the Altars were coated with other material, and

are therefore not considered wooden vessels, but, rather, are defined by their golden or copper coating?” That would be mistaken, however, for the Torah calls the Altars “wooden” (*Yechezkel* 41:22) despite their surface coating, thus confirming that “their coating was nullified and considered subordinate to them.” The Altars, therefore, are indeed considered wooden vessels in a fixed place and therefore were not susceptible to impurity.

The above follows Rashi’s understanding of the *Talmud*. *Rambam*, however, explains the *Talmud*’s second take on the Rabbis’ position differently: The Rabbis provided their own rationale as to why the Altar does not contract impurity. If the usage of a given vessel did not involve contact with the vessel itself, but rather contact with a covering of some sort, such as in the case of a vessel with a coated surface, then that vessel cannot contract impurity. In this case, “because the Altars were” merely “coated” with gold and copper, the coatings are considered nullified and subordinate to the vessel. Therefore, they did not contract impurity.

In summation: According to Rashi’s understanding of the Rabbis’ position, the fact that the Altars were coated did not preclude them from contracting impurity, for they would be considered to be golden and copper vessels. It is only the Torah’s specific description of the Altar as “wooden” that precludes that conclusion. According to *Rambam*’s understanding of the Rabbis’ position, the Altar’s coating precluded them from contracting impurity, for the coating was nullified to the vessel and considered immaterial.

The Elaboration:

Rambam’s understanding of the disagreement between Rabbi Eliezer and the Rabbis can be understood as follows:

Rabbi Eliezer was an intellectual adherent of the House of Shammai, the unspecified majority holding Rabbis were aligned with the House of Hillel. Hillel and Shammai had fundamentally divergent perspectives on how to view and define *halachic* reality. This disagreement is expressed in dozens of their arguments throughout the *Talmud*, but the succinct encapsulation

is this: Shammai defines objects by their overall, general appearance; Hillel defines objects by their details.

In this scenario: Rabbi Eliezer, an adherent of Shammai, took the Altar at face value. The two Altars were called the “Golden Altar” and “Copper Altar,” and gold and copper vessels are susceptible to impurity, so the Altars should have been susceptible to impurity. It is only the Torah’s statement that they are considered “like the earth” that leads us to a different conclusion.

The Rabbis, students of Hillel, however, did not need to rely on a Scriptural decree to say the Altar didn’t contract impurity. They looked more closely at the Altar and distinguished between a mere covering and the item itself. The Altar was not a golden or copper vessel; those were only coatings that were nullified to the earth-based Altar. “It is because they are coated” that they didn’t contract impurity.

A Fitting Conclusion:

Following this discussion, the *Talmud* concludes with an *aggadic* teaching about *gehenom* — purgatory: “Reish Lakish said: The fire of *gehenom* has no power over the sinners of Israel. This can be derived by an a fortiori inference from the Golden Altar: If the Golden Altar, which had on it a coating that was no more than the thickness of a gold dinar, and which had incense burning on it for many years, and yet fire had no power over it, as the gold miraculously remained undamaged, all the more so should immunity from fire be granted to the sinners of Israel, who are filled with good deeds as a pomegranate is full of seeds.”

We can now appreciate how this teaching flows directly from the preceding discussion about the reason for the Altar being impervious to impurity.

The Rabbis’ position (according to Rambam) was that we do not define the Altar by its appearance as a metal vessel. Even though it is coated in gold or copper, we do not consider it to be a golden or copper vessel that was susceptible to impurity, because these coatings are immaterial; they were

nullified to the Altar itself which was made of matter insusceptible to impurity — earth.

This leads to the novel insight that the same is true of every Jew. Even if, on the surface, a Jew seems to be a “sinner,” this is merely a coating — something immaterial that obscures his true Divine essence. The inner core of a Jew is pure, like the Altar, and can never be subjected to the “fire of *gehenom*.”

The Lesson:

The law follows the view of the Academy of Hillel. Consequently, we must never define a Jew by his external appearance. We must seek to see the goodness within each Jew — the elements that G-d finds attractive and desirable. This focus on the positive will itself elicit these positive qualities, until we merit to consummate the marriage between G-d and the Jewish people, when we will see plainly how each Jew is precious and beautiful in G-d’s eyes.