

# The Structure of the Holy Temple



# Introduction

When examining the structure of the Holy Temple and its utensils via the pictures in this chapter, we should note an important principle: the uniformity of the Temples. That is, all four of the sacred structures – the Tabernacle, the First Temple, the Second Temple, and the future Third Temple – have a similar structure and form.

Just as every commandment in the Torah has been kept throughout the generations in its original form, so has the Holy Temple. Maimonides ruled in his *Sefer HaMitzvot* (Third Root): “Every mitzvah in the Torah has been permanently set for all time, with all its details.” The same is true regarding the Holy Temple and the service therein; these matters are set for all generations, and are not to be changed. Thus, the structure of the Temple is uniform, and pertains to every Temple that will ever be built in the future.

Superficially, one might notice some differences between the various Temples. In truth, however, the principles of the Temple structure are the same throughout; only the outer “shell” is different – with minor changes in non-critical details.

Maimonides wrote briefly and concisely in the introduction to his Commentary on the Mishna that the Beit HaMikdash may be proportionately enlarged, but its essential shape must be retained – “for the proportions are from God, as it is written: ‘All this is written by the hand of God Who has instructed me’” (Chronicles I 28:19).

Specifically, in the case of the First Temple built by King Solomon, the *Midrash Shmuel* (15:3) teaches that its structure was determined in the *Megillat Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple Scroll Divinely given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Midrash states:

“The Holy Temple Scroll was given by God to Moses, as it is written, ‘Now you stand here with Me.’ Moses stood and passed it on to Joshua. . . . Joshua stood and gave it to the Elders. . . . to the Prophets. . . . to David. . . . who stood and passed it on to his son Solomon.”

This scroll and the plan it details contain the principles for the Temples that would be built throughout the generations. The Second Temple built by the returnees from Babylon was

constructed according to the exact specifications found in Solomon’s Temple. Except for small external details the Temple remains essentially as it was.

Regarding the utensils. We will describe an example of one that underwent a change. The *kiyor* (basin).

During the period of the Tabernacle in the desert, there were only four priests: Aharon, his sons Elazar and Ithamar, and Elazar’s son Pinehas. The basin therefore had only to hold enough water for four priests. As Maimonides writes (*Biat HaMikdash* 5:13): “How much water had to be in the basin? Not less than the amount needed to sanctify four priests, as is written: ‘Aharon and his sons’ – Elazar and Ithamar, and Pinehas with them, for a total of four.”

On the other hand, in the First Temple, King Solomon prepared no fewer than ten copper basins. And in the Second Temple, they prepared one copper basin with 12 faucets, so that the entire staff of priests preparing the daily *Tamid* offering could wash at once.

It is self-evident that the one copper basin fashioned by Moses for four priests could not suffice for the Temple period, when thousands of priests, divided into 24 bi-weekly shifts, were engaged in preparing the sacrifices.

Thus, we see that any basin that retains the original principles governing it – namely, that it and its base are made from copper, and that it holds enough water for four priests – is a perfectly acceptable basin for use in the Holy Temple.

Furthermore: King Solomon further improved the basins, building small wagons with wheels on which to move them easily from place to place, thus enabling water to be transported easily and quickly throughout the *Azara*.

The obvious conclusion is that when the Third Temple is built, it will be constructed according to the format of the previous two – and the utensils, as well, will be as they were in the past.

Thus explains Maimonides, in his introduction to the Mishna, why tractate *Middot* – “which is just a narrative of the measurements

and shape of the Temple” – was included in a work that is basically one of Jewish Law. The reason is, he writes, “that when the Temple is rebuilt, [we will know] to retain the same shape and proportions.”

Similarly, Maimonides includes the *Beit HaBechira* – a description of the Holy Temple as it appears in the Talmud – in his own code of Jewish Law, the Mishneh Torah. These are his words:

“The Temple built by Solomon – is explained in detail in the Book of Kings. And the future Holy Temple, too, [will be built the same way]” (1:4).

This is why the illustrations in this work all depict the Temple as it is described in Tractate *Middot*, and the holy utensils are shown as they looked in the past. In accordance with the Rambam the Third Temple should be built quickly following the plans of the Second Temple.

What about improvements that can be introduced based on the achievements of modern science and technology, such as electricity and computerization? Quite clearly, these will be incorporated into the Holy Temple systems, just as improvements were introduced in both the First and Second Temples. This fascinating topic deserves an essay of its own, in a separate framework.





## « The Sanctuary, the Courts, and the Chambers (view from the east)

Seen here is a marble-and-gold model of the Sanctuary, with the courts around it, as it is displayed in the Temple Institute.

**The Heikhal (Sanctuary):** Standing imposingly in the center of the *Azara*, the Sanctuary is plated with marble and gold. Its front entrance hall is called the *Ulam*, and its height is 100 cubits tall. It is also 100 cubits wide and long (*Middot* 4:6).

The front of the *Ulam* is adorned by a tall entranceway, the largest entrance in the Temple. It is 40 cubits high and 20 cubits wide (3:7). The Mishna describes five beams of precious oak wood placed in parallel above the entrance, like a type of awning.

Atop the roof of the *Heikhal* is a network of sharp golden spikes, known as the *kaleh orev*. Its function was to prevent ravens and other birds from landing and perching there, thus ensuring that they would not drop impure meat in the area and defile the offerings.

**The Sacred Court:** A vestibule on pillars encompassing the entire *Heikhal*. It measures 187 by 135 cubits. Jewish Law states that one who enters the Court while in a state of impurity — having come in contact with a human corpse or a dead creeping animal — is liable for the grave punishment of *karet* (excision).

**The Chambers in the Azara:** In the north can be seen three chambers, to the right of the *Heikhal*. The easternmost (colored pink is the *Lishkat HaGazit*, where the Sanhedrin convenes. To the left of it is the *Lishkat HaGolah*, which serves as one of the water reservoirs for the Temple. Furthest to the west, the structure with a dome on top is the *Beit HaMoked*, where the priests convene to prepare for the daily service.

On the other side of the *Heikhal* are three other chambers. The easternmost is *Beit Avtinas*, designated for the priests in charge of preparing the incense ingredients.

**Ezrat Nashim (the Women's Court):** This is the enclosed area adjacent to the *Azara* on the east (in the foreground). It measured 135 cubits square.

**The Chambers:** One chamber in each corner of the Women's Court: The Chamber of the Nazirites, the Chamber of the Wood, the Chamber of the Lepers, and the Chamber of Beit Shamanya (for storage of the oils and wine).

**The Gates:** The Mishna (*Middot* 2:6) notes 13 gates in the Temple: "Thirteen prostrations [were made in the Temple] opposite the 13 gates. . . . The southern gates adjoining the west: The Upper Gate, the Gate of Kindling, the Gate of the Firstborn, and the Gate of Water. Why was it called the Gate of Water? Because a pitcher of water was brought through it for libation on *Sukkot*. . . . And opposite them on the north, adjoining the west: Jeconiah Gate, the Gate of the Offering, the Gate of Women, the Gate of Song. . . . On the east: the Gate of Nicanor, with two wickets, one on its right and one on its left; and two in the west, without names."

On the other hand, another Mishna in the same tractate (*Middot* 1:4) provides another list of gates: "There were seven gates in the *Azara*: Three in the north, three in the south, and one in the east." Some explain the discrepancy between the *mishnayot* in that they are referring to different periods of time: At the beginning of the Second Temple, there were in fact seven gates, but when Herod later expanded the Temple, there were 13. Maimonides (*Beit HaBechira* 5:6) determines that there were seven gates in the Temple, based on the Talmud in tractate *Yoma* 54a and tractate *Ketubot* 106a.

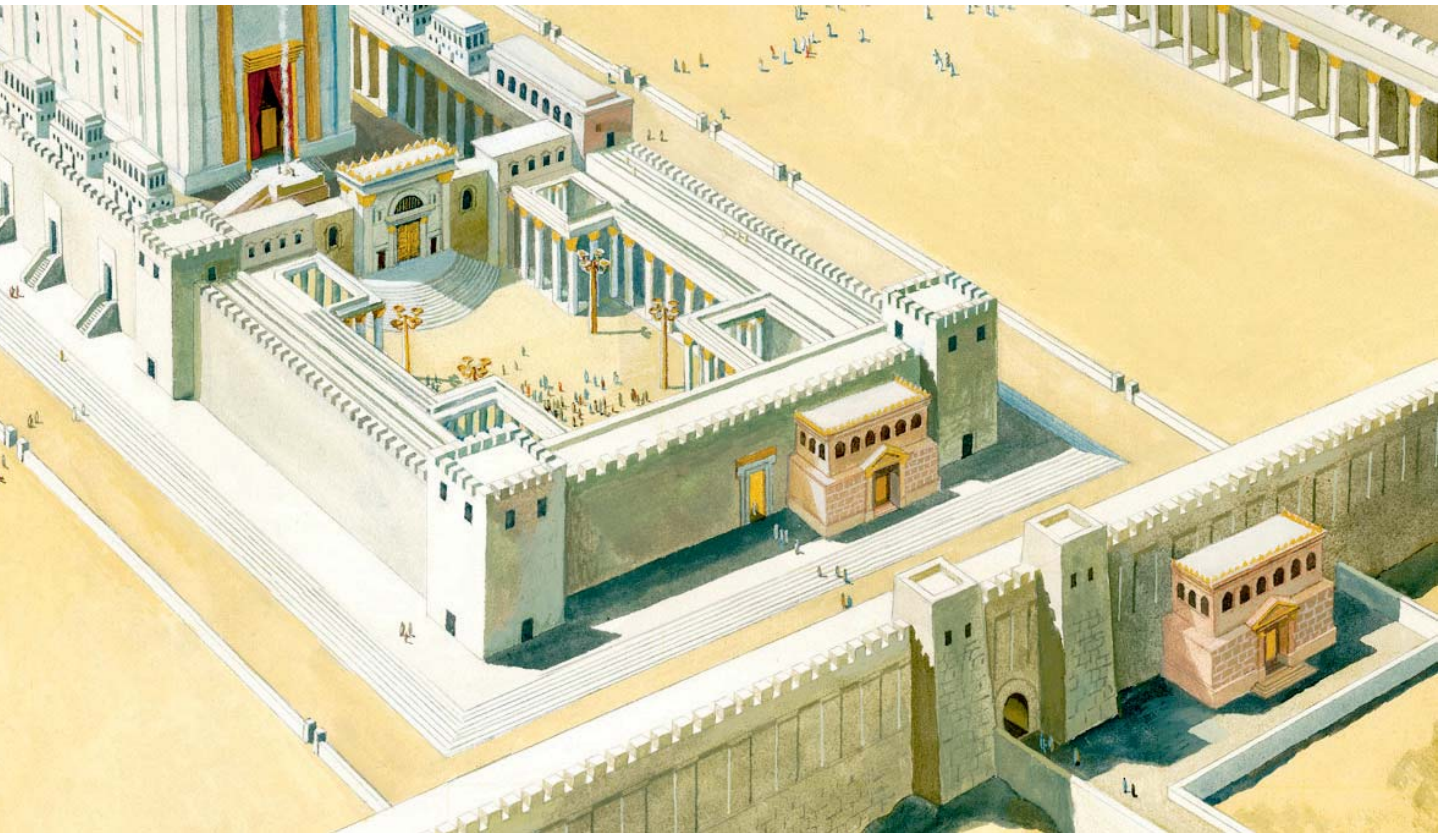


## ≡ The Temple Court System and Sanhedrin

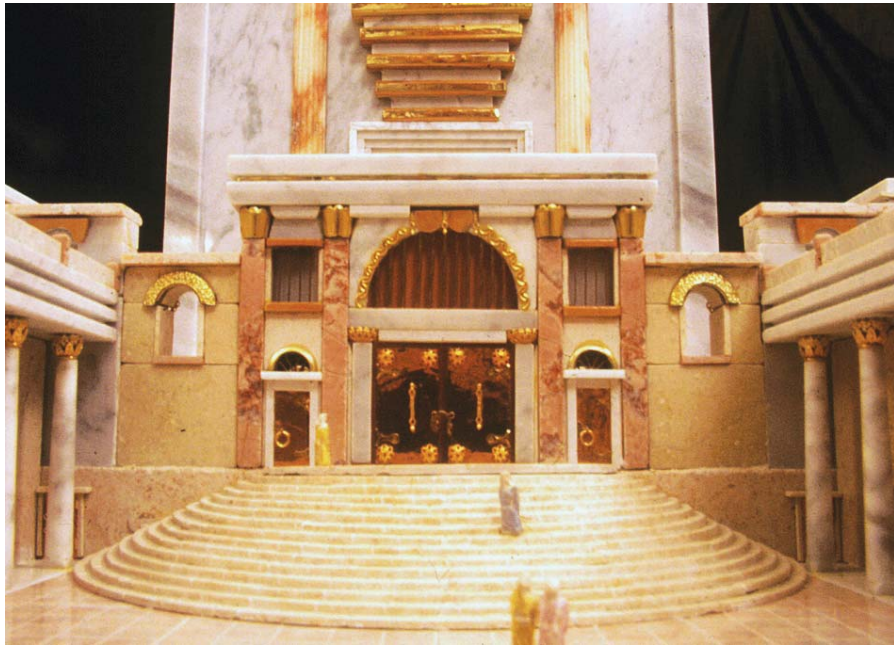
The Temple was the site of both the judicial system in Israel and the headquarters for teaching Torah to the nation, as is written: "For from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem." The judicial system included the three Sanhedrin courts: 1) The Great Sanhedrin, located in the *Lishkat HaGazit*, atop the wall opposite the altar, to the right (north) of the *Heikhal*; 2) The Small Sanhedrin, at the entrance to the *Azara* (in the center of the painting, colored pink); 3) The Third Sanhedrin, at the entrance to the Temple Mount, colored pink in the bottom-right corner of the painting.

Maimonides (*Sanhedrin* 1:3) writes as follows: "How many permanent courts should there be in Israel and how many

judges should there be in each court? First, a supreme court is established in the Temple, called the Great Sanhedrin, with 71 judges. . . The judge who is of greatest knowledge is named the head; he acts as the Rosh Yeshiva and is known as the *Nasi* by the Sages. . . The members of the Sanhedrin sit in a semi-circle so that the *Nasi* and his deputy, the *Av Beit Din*, can see all of them. Two courts of 23 judges each are also appointed, one of which convenes at the entrance to the Temple courtyard, and the other at the Temple Mount entrance."







## The Gate of Nicanor

This is the main entrance to the Holy Temple, from the eastern side of the courtyard. The Corinthian bronze gate was named after the man who donated it, as explained in the Mishna (*Yoma* 3:8): “Nicanor experienced miracles with his gates and he was praised.”

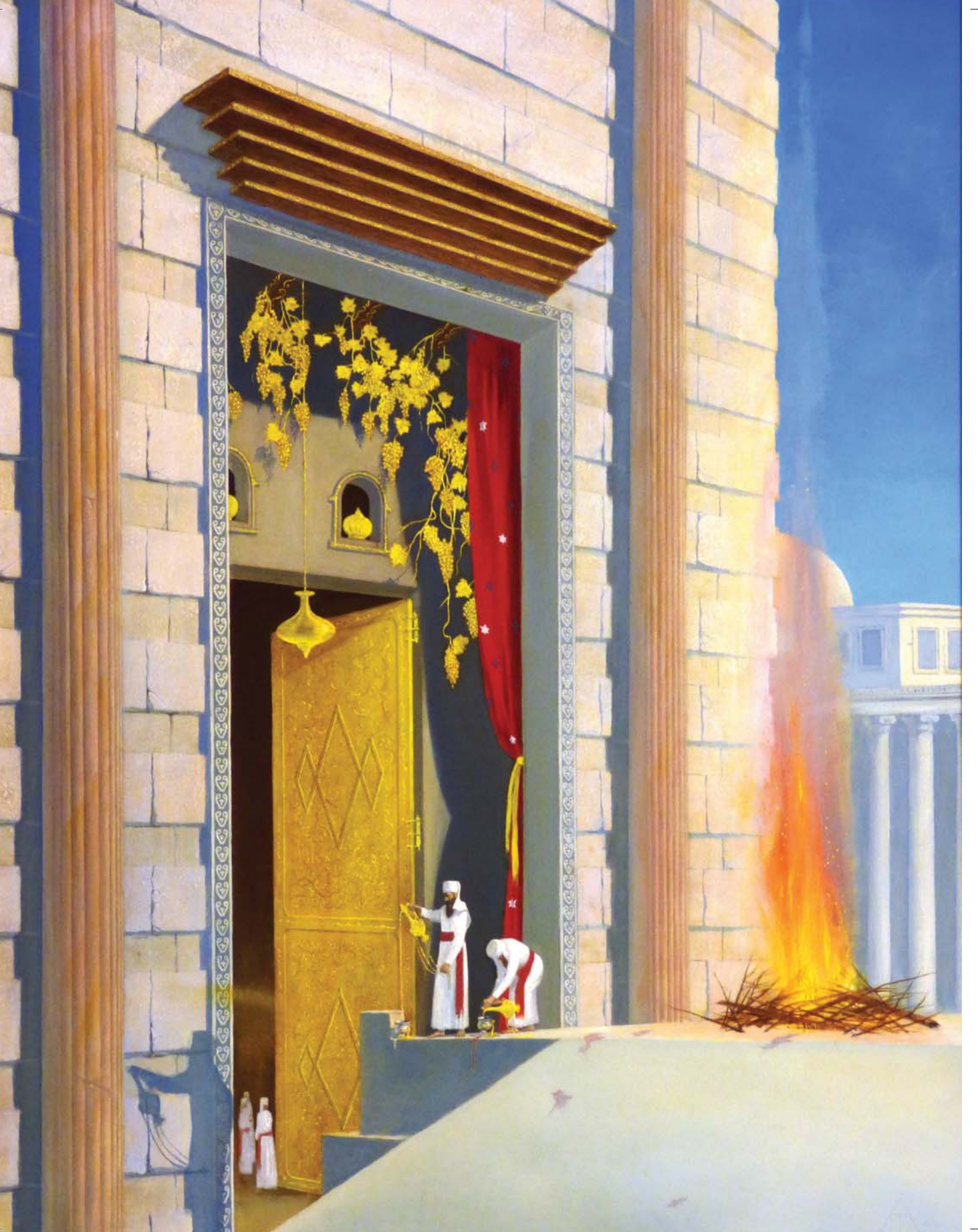
**The Doors:** The Jerusalem Talmud (*Yoma* 3:8) states: “All the gates there were changed over to gold, except for the Gate of Nicanor, because a miracle occurred to it; some say it was because its bronze yellows and [becomes] even more beautiful than gold.”

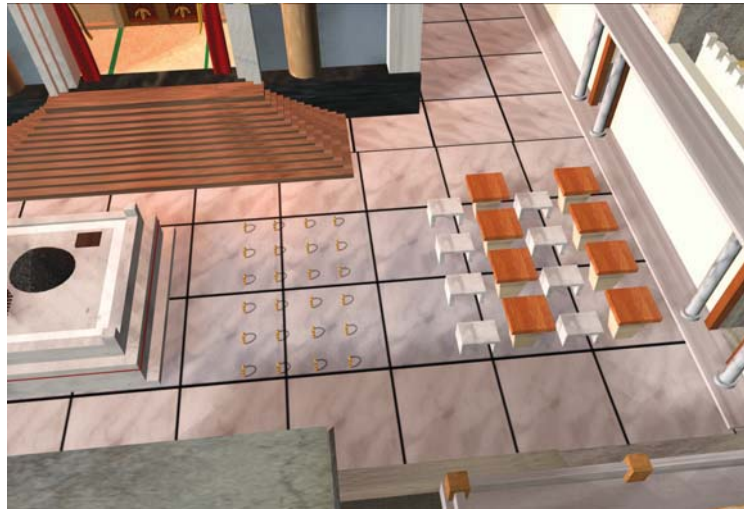
**The Chambers:** The Mishna (*Middot* 1:4) states: “It had two chambers or offices, one on its right and one on its left. One was that of Pinehas the Valet, who was responsible for preparing the priestly garments for the various priestly shifts, and the other was the Chamber of the Griddle-Cake Makers (for the High Priest’s daily *Mincha* offering); it was divided in half – one part offered together with the daily *Tamid* sacrifice in the morning, and the other with the evening *Tamid* sacrifice.”

**The Wickets:** The Gate of Nicanor was flanked by two smaller gates, as the Mishna tells us (*Middot* 2:6), one on the right and one on the left.

**The Chamber of the Musical Instruments:** From the Mishna we learn that this chamber was at the foot of the Gate of Nicanor: “There were chambers underneath the *Azara* that opened into the Women’s Court, where the Levites used to keep lyres, lutes, cymbals and all kinds of musical instruments.”

**The Steps:** Leading up to the Gate of Nicanor were 15 steps ascending from the Women’s Court to the holy *Azara*. When all of Israel visited the Temple on festivals, such as during the *Simchat Beit HaShoeva* (Joy of the Water Libation) ceremonies, the Levites stood upon these steps as they sang and played their musical instruments. The Mishna states (*Sukkah* 5:4): “Levites with harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets and countless other musical instruments were there upon the 15 steps leading down from the *Azara* to the Court of the Women, corresponding to the 15 “Songs of ascent” (Psalms 121–135); they stood upon these steps with their instruments of music and sang their songs.”





## The Slaughtering Area

The slaughtering area, where the sacrifices were prepared, was situated north of the altar. This is because most of the offerings, especially those of higher levels of sanctity, must be slaughtered in the north. Here the offerings were slaughtered, skinned and prepared to be brought upon the altar. The rings, tables and small pillars facilitated this. The animal's neck (or legs, according to Maimonides) was placed in the ring, and on the small pillars – known as *nanasim* – were hung the animals so that they could be skinned. The marble tables were used for washing the meat before it was placed in the fire on the altar.

In the words of the Mishna (*Middot* 3:5): “There were rings north of the altar – six rows of four rings each . . . Upon them the sacrifices were slaughtered. The slaughtering area was north of the altar, with eight small pillars there, on which were square blocks of cedar-wood. In these were fixed hooks of iron . . . on which they hung the carcasses, and skinned them over tables of marble between the pillars.”

## « A Golden Grapevine above the Eastern Gate

Atop the entrance to the *Heikhal* a “golden grapevine” was hung, for the purpose of raising donations for the Temple. As the Mishna (*Middot* 3:8) teaches, the golden grapevine was hung atop the *Heikhal* entrance on wooden planks, and when an individual would donate gold for use in the Mikdash, his donation would be fashioned into the shape of a leaf or cluster and these were hung on the vine. The Mishna quotes Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Tzadok as recounting an incident in which 300 priests were once commissioned to clear it – after

which the gold would be sold and the funds used for the Temple's needs. The Gemara teaches (*Chullin* 90b) that the number 300 is an exaggeration, coming simply to emphasize the tremendous amount of gold that had been gathered.

The Jerusalem Talmud (*Yoma* 4:4) tells us that when King Solomon built the Temple, he drew all types of tree forms into it, and that when the real trees in the fields would bring forth fruits, the same would occur with the ‘trees’ in the Temple.



## The Beit Avtinas Office

The painting depicts the preparation of the *ketoret* (incense) for the *Yom Kippur* service. The High Priest is seen practicing for the complex procedure (*Yoma* 47b). In the background on both sides are seen members of the Avtinas family grinding the *ketoret*, for which they were responsible (*Shekalim* 5:1), both on *Yom Kippur* and for the daily incense service.

It was also here in the *Beit Avtinas* office that the Sanhedrin elders had the High Priest swear that he would perform the *Yom Kippur* service, including the offering of the incense in the Holy of Holies, precisely as he was taught (*Yoma* 1:5). This office, designated

specially for the making of the incense, was located above the Water Gate in the southern part of the Temple, and was one of the three Temple offices guarded by priests (*Middot* 1:1).

Preparing the incense earned the Avtinas family both an honorable mention and a shameful one in the Talmud. They were mentioned in shame for not teaching others how to prepare the incense. On the other hand, “never did a bride of their family walk outside with perfume, lest people assume that the perfume came from the incense – and for this, they were mentioned with honor” (*Yoma* 38a).

## ≡ The Chamber of the Seals

It is located in the northeastern corner of the Fire Room, known as the *Beit HaMoked* (*Tamid* 3:3). The Mishna also teaches (*Shekalim* 5:4) that when a person wished to bring a sacrifice, he would go to this office to pay for the required additions of wine, flour, and oil, and would receive a receipt – a *chotam*, seal – in the form of a pottery piece marked appropriately. With this seal he would turn to the man responsible for sacrificial offerings, and would take possession of the animal. Rashi explains (*Yoma* 15b): “In the northwest corner of the *Beit HaMoked*, which was a large hall, large fires would be lit by which the priests would warm themselves; they walked barefoot on the [cold] marble floor of the *Azara* . . . There was the Chamber of the Seals, where would be kept the receipts of those who bought from the Temple treasury. And the Mishna (*Shekalim* 5:3–4) teaches: ‘There were four types

of seals in the Temple, written on them respectively: Calf, Kid-goat, Male, Sinner’ – each one referring to a different quantity of flour/oil/wine, depending on the sacrifice being offered. The person would pay, and receive a seal, and then go to the man responsible for the *nesakhim* (libations), and would receive the *nesakhim* in exchange for his seal.”

The illustration shows two people who wish to bring sacrifices. One goes to the treasurer (on the left), pays, and receives a seal; the other on the right has already paid, gives in a seal, and receives the *nesakhim* for the offering.

The illustration also shows the large rocks of the altar destroyed by the Syrian Greeks and placed there for safekeeping by the Hasmoneans (*Middot* 1:6; see the commentaries there).





## The Chamber of the Lepers and the Ritual Bath

In the north-west corner of the Women's Court was a special room in which lepers would immerse (*Middot* 2:5). When a leper would arrive at the Temple on the eighth and last day of his purification process, he would immerse in the mikveh (ritual bath) for his purification. From there, he would proceed to the nearby Gate of Nicanor, where he would stand and extend his thumbs into the Court as his special offerings were being sacrificed, so that the priest could place upon them some of the blood and oil from his offerings, and thus complete the purification.

Maimonides writes as follows (*Mechusrei Kappara* 4:2): "Afterwards the priest who receives the blood in his hand comes to the remaining leper, standing inside while the leper stands outside [the Gate of Nicanor]. The leper puts his head inside the *Azara* and the priest places from the blood in his hand on the leper's right earlobe. The leper would then extend his right hand into the *Azara*, and the priest would place [the blood] on his thumb, and the leper would then similarly extend his right foot and the priest would do the same on the big toe. . . ." [A similar process was carried out with the oil.]



## Chambers for the Preparation of Sacrifices

The picture shows a model of the Temple, focusing on the southeastern corner of the *Azara*; the Gate of Nicanor (left) leads outward to the 15 Steps. A two-story structure can be seen to the south of the Gate of Nicanor (top of the picture), with three chambers on the ground floor for the preparation of the sacrifices. As we read in the Mishna (*Middot* 5:3): “The Chamber of the Salt, where the sacrifice was salted. The Chamber

of the Fur, where the skins would be salted. The Chamber of the Washers, where the innards would be rinsed. . . . From there led a *mesibah* (a winding staircase) up to the roof of the Chamber of the Fur.”

On the second floor, above the Chamber of the Fur, was a special room in which the High Priest immersed his hands and his feet on the Day of Atonement.

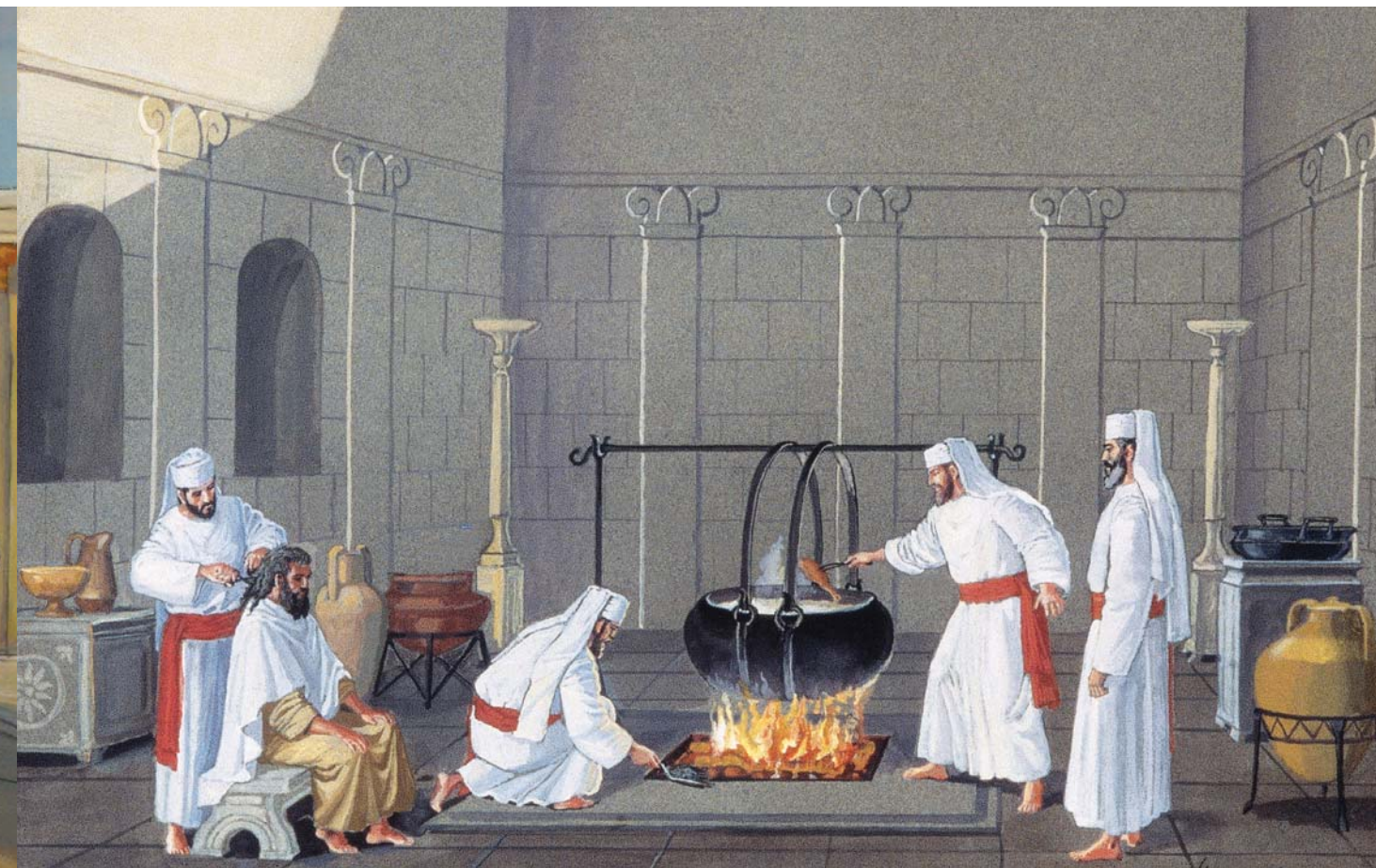


## Purification of the Leper at the Gate of Nicanor

In this illustration we see a man who has come to the Temple to be purified from his leprosy and to bring his purification offerings. He has already shaved off his hair, as required. He now stands in the east of the courtyard at the Gate of Nicanor, where he recites the confession and is about to lean his hands on the head of the animal he has brought for a sacrifice. The Gate of Nicanor is of a lesser sanctity than that of the courtyard to which it leads, and he may therefore perform the “leaning” there, even before he

has been purified. The purification process demands that blood of the sacrifice be placed on the thumbs of his hands and feet, and for this purpose he may insert those limbs inside the gate. He is also permitted to place his head inside the Gate, so that blood and oil may be daubed on his earlobes. The reason for this is because of the halakhic rule, “partial entry is not considered entry” (*Zevachim* 33b).





## The Chamber of the Nazirites

This chamber, one of the four located in the Women's Court, was where a nazirite would come to complete his period of nezirut. Located in the southeast corner of the Women's Court, it is described as follows in the Mishna (*Middot* 2:5): "The nazirites would cook their *shelamim* (peace-offerings) there, shave their heads, and burn their hair in the fire under the vat." For at the conclusion of his nezirut period, the nazirite would bring three offerings: An *olah* (burnt-offering), a *chatat* (sin-offering), and a *shelamim*. The nazirite would give the priest the shankbone of the *shelamim*, which he would have to first cook – and he did so in the Chamber of the Nazirites (so explains the Meiri).

Maimonides writes (*Nezirut* 8:3): "Where would he shave his hair? In the Women's Court's south-eastern room, the Chamber

of the Nazirites. There they would cook their *shelamim* and throw their hair into the fire." This, in fulfillment of the Torah command (Numbers 6:1): "And he shall take the hair that grew on his head during his *nezirut* vows, and place it in the fire that is under the *shelamim* sacrifice. . . He would not shave his head unless the entrance to the *Azara* was open, as is written: ' . . . at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.' This does not mean he must shave opposite the opening, for that would be a desecration of the holiness of the Temple [but rather that the entrance must be open]."

For this reason, a special office was placed close to the *Azara* entrance for the nazirites to shave their heads and cook the meat of their offerings."