



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Tetsaveh
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Smell the Flowers

Torah Reading: Exodus 27:20 – 30:10

Haftarah Reading: Ezekiel 43:10 - 27

Companies invest millions of dollars to create the best-smelling scents, coming up with as many different scents as one can imagine – flowers, fruits, plants, trees.

This week's Torah portion, Tetsaveh, intimates that those modern companies were not the real innovators of perfume. Rather, it seems, even God has a preferred scent: *"On it (the altar) Aaron shall burn aromatic incense: he shall burn it every morning when tends the light. And, Aaron shall burn it at night when he lights the lamps – a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout the ages."* (Exodus 30:7-8)

With this statement, a blend of secret substances that exhale perfume during combustion, the *k'toret*, an incense offering whose very smoke produces the smell that is considered the desired scent, became an important act of sacred worship. Moreover, while in context of these two verses, this was done at the request of the High Priest only, the Talmud tells us that all priests in the Temple completed the daily incense offering ritual.

A bit later in the chapter and with help from the Talmud, we come to learn that the formula for the incense includes: sweet herbs and spices (some of whose names would be completely unrecognizable) with pure frankincense; each pounded separately; and blended together as incense seasoned with salt to make it pure and holy.

I do not recall ever smelling incense burning in synagogue. In fact, as a child, while such practice seemed more common in other religion's houses of worship, it was alien to Jewish religious experience. Yet, the Torah describes the burning of aromatic spices as important and normative daily - morning and evening -activities within the Temple ritual. In addition, in his commentary, Rashi tells us that the incense is more beloved than any of the sacrifices (and more dangerous). So important was the sacrifice that altering it in any way would result in estrangement. In fact, it was this type of departure from sacrificial norms that apparently caused the death of Aaron's own sons, Nadav and Avihu (see Leviticus 10 and thus, I assume, Rashi's understanding of the danger).

What is it about this strange mixture of smells that makes it so incredible that God finds it to be the most desired offering of all?

Perhaps it was a way of cleaning the air, warding off the stench of bad odor from animal sacrifice. On the other hand, as Maimonides explains, such a smell would negate the intention of the heart needed for serving God in the moment of sacrifice that this incense offering became a necessary step to purify the air to avoid distractions.

While the altar of sacrifice no longer stands, we know well the importance of our senses in providing focus and meaning. Touch, sight, hearing, taste and smell - our senses work together to help us understand the world and react to changes in the environment. Moreover, each of our senses is connected to and heightens the experience of the others. When our sight is limited, sound pierces more deeply and touch becomes our vehicle to experience that which is in front of us.

Likewise, true prayer (which was instituted to replace Temple sacrifice after the destruction of the Temple) invites a whole body, total sensory encounter, to experience a moment of transcendence, an experience of insight, meaning and connection. For this reason, we read in the book of Psalms "*May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*" (Psalm 141:2)

That is a scent that is priceless and worth smelling today and every day!

Shabbat shalom!

Rabbi Cheryl Peretz, is the Associate Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, where she also received her ordination. She also holds her MBA in Marketing Management from Baruch College, and helps bring those skills and expertise into the operational practices of rabbis and congregations throughout North America.



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