

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Ki Tisa

Tel: 815-301-1928

Fax: 815-301-1928

Email: shabbatshalomfax@gmail.com

ShabbatShalom.org

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

ת"ס

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GOOD MORNING! Growing up in Miami in the 1970's, I had one friend who was very fond of marijuana. He would regularly come to school "baked" and tried to justify his obsession with it by saying that it was even used in ancient Israel and that it was, in fact, a part of the famed *ketores*. The *ketores* was a mixture of different spices that made up the special incense that was a key part of the daily worship in the Tabernacle and Holy Temple.

This oft-repeated canard is based on the remarkable linguistic cognate of the Hebrew words *k'neh bosem* (one of the spices mentioned in the Bible) and the word cannabis. The first and most obvious problem with this theory is that *k'neh bosem* wasn't one of the spices used in the special *ketores* mixture, rather it was used in the preparation of the anointing oil – *shemen hamishcha*. The *ketores* doesn't have any real connection to cannabis – though it would give a whole new meaning to the term "high priest."

However, this week's Torah portion discusses the *ketores* and lists the four spices that made up the bulk of the special mixture. As we shall soon see, the *ketores* is a VERY special part of the worship in the Holy Temple – it may even be arguably the most important part of the service. The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:7) describes the *ketores* as "the most endearing of all the services in the Holy Temple." Therefore, I am dedicating this column to exploring what this special incense service was all about.

We find in this week's Torah reading: "God said to Moses take the following spices; balsam onycha, galbanum, and pure frankincense of the same weight as well as other spices [...]" (Exodus 30:34).

According to tradition, the *ketores* was a combination of eleven spices mixed as an enormous annual batch weighing in at 368 *maneh* (a *maneh* in weight was 1,000 shekels, which is about 5 pounds; thus the total weight of each batch was about 1,840 pounds).

Every day one *maneh* of this mixture was used in the *ketores* service (half in the morning and half in the late afternoon). It was specifically prepared this way so that there would be one portion for every day of the solar calendar; thus 365 *maneh* were used throughout the year (considering that the Jewish calendar is a lunar one, this concept is unique in and of itself). The "extra" three *maneh* were used in the special *ketores* service of *Yom Kippur* – the one day a year that the *Cohen Gadol* – High Priest – was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies where the Ark stood.

The *ketores* had its own special altar within the Temple known as the "golden altar" because it was covered in pure gold (the main altar on which all the animal sacrifices were brought was covered in copper and located in the courtyard outside the Temple structure). The "golden altar" was different than all of the other vessels in the Temple and in fact is not included in the portion of the Torah that discusses the vessels, but rather is listed alone in the portion of the Torah that discusses the priestly vestments.

The *ketores* was also used to determine who had a legitimate claim to being the High Priest. When Moses' cousin Korach complained that Moses' brother Aaron was unfairly chosen for the position Moses devised the test of *ketores* to see who the Almighty would choose. Korach's offering was rejected and he and his 250 conspirators perished.

The following day the Israelites started an uproar and accused Moses and Aaron of "killing God's people" (*Numbers* 17:6). By this point, God had just about had it with the Jewish people – "Stand clear of them and I will destroy them this instant!"

Immediately, a plague descended and people started dying. Moses instructed Aaron to quickly grab the *ketores* and stand between the living and the dead and the plague would stop. The famous Biblical commentator Rashi (17:11) quotes the Talmud that states that when Moses ascended to Mount Sinai to retrieve the Torah he was informed that the *ketores* had the power to stop the angel of death. So Aaron stood between the living and the dead and created a barrier that the angel of death was not permitted to cross, thus ending the plague and saving the rest of the nation.

What attribute of the *ketores* service makes it so powerful? To begin, we must understand that even the animal sacrifices are repeatedly described in the Torah as having a pleasing smell to the Almighty. Whether it was an animal sacrifice or the incense service, clearly it all revolves around the sense of smell. But what is it about the sense of smell that is different from all the other senses?

Additionally, the Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*, which comes from the root word *karov* – to draw near. In Aramaic, the word *ketores* means "bound together" – also denoting a deep connection. Clearly, the purpose of Temple services is to bring us closer and bind us to the Almighty. How is this related to the sense of smell?

According to Jewish tradition, the life force within man came when the Almighty "blew into his nostrils the soul of life and man became a living being" (*Genesis* 2:7). It is for this reason that the word soul – *neshama* is rooted in the Hebrew word for breath – *nishum*. This is why the nose, used for breathing and smelling, is the organ through which

the soul enters and leaves. (This is seen on the day of the inauguration of the Tabernacle when two of Aaron's sons sinned and brought their own fire in the *ketores* service. As punishment, a heavenly fire descended and entered their bodies through their nostrils and killed them.)

Also according to Jewish tradition, the only one of the five sense that was left unspoiled by Adam and Eve's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge was the sense of smell. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve corrupted four out of their five senses. They **heard** the serpent's alluring words, they **saw** the fruit was "*a delight to the eyes,*" they **touch**ed it by taking from its fruit, and they **tasted** it. But the sense of "smell" remained untarnished.

Consequently, the nostrils represent the one sense that still allows us to connect directly to our souls. It is through this connection to our soul that we are able to be revived. We find a similar concept in the natural world – when a person loses consciousness and is administered smelling salts, which induces him to breathe and revives his physical body.

Since the sense of smell is the only sense untainted by Adam and Eve's sin, it is the only one still capable of connecting us to our holy soul and to the Almighty in the manner that He always intended. This is why, at the end of Shabbat, when we lose the connection to the extra soul we are granted on Shabbat (the *neshamah yeseira*) we perform the *havdala* service and are comforted by smelling fragrant spices.

We connect with the Almighty through the last remaining sense that is as God intended – smell. This is why on the holiest day of the year the High Priest is permitted to enter the Holy of Holies and place the fragrant *ketores* opposite the Ark of the Covenant. In fact, the Talmud says that the first part of the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies was his nose.

The Talmud also teaches us another important lesson from *ketores*. One of the main components of the spice mixture was the galbanum – *chelbona*. This spice was renowned for having a very pungent, some might even say putrid, smell to it. The commentaries explain this strange inclusion in to the incense mixture: "This comes to teach us that we should be vigilant in the law of including in our prayer gatherings those people that have committed severe transgressions" (see Rashi *Shemos* 30:34).

In other words, when the Jewish people gather as a congregation to pray, we **MUST** include even those with whom we would prefer not to associate. On the surface this seems rather illogical. If we are gathering to pray to God wouldn't we want to pray only with those who have pure hearts and good deeds? Wouldn't God be more inclined to answer our prayers if everyone in the congregation was righteous?

The answer, of course, is no. The whole strength of the Jewish people comes from the strength of our community. Just as the special formula for sweet smelling incense is invalid without the pungent galbanum, so too we must include everyone in our gatherings. It is only when we present ourselves to God as a unified community that He will truly respond to our prayers.

"QUOTE OF THE WEEK": In life, like incense, you have to be on fire to fulfill your purpose and positively affect others.

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Stanley H. Beck



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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