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שמע בקולה

## Scents of Redemption

By Shira Billet

Ronda Angel Arking, Editor

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# Scents of Redemption

By Shira Billet<sup>1</sup>

As we approach the celebration of Passover, we are overwhelmed with scents and aromas: the burning hametz, the cleaning soaps, the roasting shankbone, the pungent wine mixed with chopped nuts and fruit. In Aristotle's treatise on the nature of living things, the human sense of smell is judged poorly: "[O]ur power of smell is less discriminating and in general inferior to that of many species of animals; humans have a poor sense of smell and our apprehension of its proper objects is inseparably bound up with and so confused by pleasure and pain, which shows that in us the organ is inaccurate" (*On the Soul* II.9).<sup>2</sup> Aristotle expresses a common assessment of the hierarchy of the senses — that the sense of smell is lower than the senses of sight and hearing. Modern neuroscience, however, demonstrates that our sense of smell, governed by the olfactory nerves, is deeply linked with long-term memory. We remember smells from the past far more powerfully and accurately than we recall past events. A scent that we haven't experienced since childhood can evoke powerful emotions and memories.

In biblical revelation, the senses of sight and hearing are often privileged. Throughout the Exodus narrative, the Israelites are reminded of the great miracles they have *seen* (e.g. "You yourselves *saw* that I spoke to you from the very heavens," Ex. 20:19).<sup>3</sup> And in Deuteronomy, although the *seeing* of God's revelation is downplayed, the *sounds* of God's saving presence are emphasized (e.g. "You *heard* the sound of words but perceived no shape — nothing but a voice," Deut. 4:12). Much like Aristotle, we often consider the sense of smell to be associated with pleasure and inaccuracy. Indeed, one of the first experiences of smell in the

Torah is a moment of deception. In order to more effectively deceive his blind father and to receive the blessing intended for his brother, Jacob wears Esau's clothing, saturated with the scent of the wilderness, prompting Isaac to say, "Ah, the smell (ריח) of my son is like the fragrance (רוח) of the fields that God has blessed" (Gen. 27: 27).

Yet, I want to resurrect an alternative understanding of smell in the Torah, where it is associated with redemption, salvation, and love. The most potent example of this occurs when God decides, after the end of the flood, never to destroy the world again. After Noah and his family exit from the ark, they build an altar and offer sacrifices to God from all of the pure animals and birds.

God smelled the pleasing aroma, and God said to God's heart, "Never again will I doom the earth because of humanity, since the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done." (Gen. 8: 21)

The scent of a pleasing aroma prompted an eternal commitment on God's part — a commitment to respect the frailty of human nature and to allow the world and human life and human history to continue on. Olfaction is elevated to become a vital sense for the redemptive relationship between God and humanity.

In the Genesis story, the sense of smell transforms God's relationship to humanity. The other side of this relationship, where olfaction assists *humans* in connecting to the divine, is emphasized in the Talmud's discussion of the blessing over pleasant scents:

Rav Zutra bar Toviyah said in the name of Rav: From where do we learn that we recite a blessing over fragrance? It is stated, "Let every soul praise God." What is something from which the soul derives pleasure but the body does not derive pleasure? You must say that this is the fragrant smell (*B. Berakhot* 43b).

The sense of smell is here elevated from the material to the spiritual; it is a sense of the soul, rather than the body. Far from causing deception, olfaction leads

<sup>1</sup> Shira Billet is a doctoral student in Religion at Princeton University, where she studies modern Jewish thought and intellectual history.

<sup>2</sup> This translation comes from J.A. Smith's translation of Aristotle's *De Anima*.

<sup>3</sup> All translations of biblical passages are either taken directly, or adapted somewhat, from the new JPS translation.

the soul to delight in and praise God.

Two fascinating—and strange—midrashim seem to draw upon the role of scent in the first redemption of the world, and emphasize a similar redemptive role in the exodus from Egypt, which we commemorate in our Passover celebration. On the fateful eve of the fourteenth of Nisan, that life-and-death night when a מַשְׁחִית (destroyer) prowled about Egypt killing all firstborns, the Israelites were commanded to offer the קָרְבַּן פֶּסַח (Passover offering) and to place some of its blood upon the doorposts of their homes, in order that God would protect their homes. Eating from the Passover offering was also a precondition for redemption.

According to the laws outlined in Exodus 12, the Passover offering could only be eaten by women, girls, and circumcised men and boys who were affiliated with the Israelite people. In Exodus, the Torah is silent on whether the Israelite males were themselves circumcised at this time. In the book of Joshua, however, after the crossing of the Jordan River, the new leader is commanded to “circumcise the children of Israel again, *a second time*” (Joshua 5:2), and the narrator explains that the men in the generation of the Exodus had been circumcised, whereas the generation born in the desert had not. Following this mass circumcision, the Israelites celebrated Passover with the Passover offering.

A midrash in Exodus Rabbah, recalling this narrative from Joshua, relates that the Israelites were all circumcised on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt. But, according to one version of the story, things were rather complicated:

Our rabbis said: The Israelites did not want to be circumcised in Egypt... And God wanted to redeem them, but they had no merit... God called Moses and said: Go circumcise them... but many of them would not agree to be circumcised. God said that they should make the Passover offering. Once Moses made the offering, God decreed that the four winds of the world which blow in Paradise should go and carry the aroma of that Passover sacrifice, as it is said, “Awake, O north Wind, and come O South Wind!” (Song of Songs 4:16). And its aroma spread... Then all Israel gathered in Moses’s

presence and said: “We beg you, let us eat of your Passover offering!” for they were faint from the aroma. And God said, If you are not circumcised you cannot eat... Immediately they presented themselves for circumcision... And God passed through them and took each one and kissed and blessed them.... (Exodus Rabbah 19:5)<sup>4</sup>

In this midrash, the sense of smell plays a vital role in convincing the otherwise reluctant Israelites to join the covenant and to begin the process of redemption. One reading of the midrash might say — perhaps with Aristotle — that the sense of smell led to an inaccurate assessment of the situation. The pleasure or disturbance of the smell, not genuine motivations, led the Israelites to follow God’s bidding. But if we recall the notion that smell is a sense of the soul that connects people with God (from *Bavli Berakhot*) we might read this midrash rather differently. The scents of the Passover offering and meal may have touched the souls of the Israelites and reminded them of their covenantal relationship with the divine. God has no hesitations about the role of smell in this story, and indeed responds with deep affection.

In a parallel midrash in Numbers Rabbah, a similar story of that fateful night in Egypt is told, this time from God’s perspective:

[After the circumcision]... the scent of the blood and the foreskin was pleasing before God like fragrant spices... And regarding this it says, “I shall go to Mount Myrrh” (Song of Songs 4:6) — this is the circumcision of Egypt, where [the scent] was pleasing before God like the scent of myrrh... (Numbers Rabbah 14:12)

The midrash goes on to say that the pleasing scent is memorialized in the קְטוֹרֶת (incense) used in Temple sacrifices, where myrrh was the primary ingredient. This midrash is quite strange in many ways, and yet it shows the other side of the midrashic redemption narrative we have been following. Not only did the sense of smell awaken the souls of the Israelites and play a vital role in

<sup>4</sup> I first saw this source in *Particulars of Rapture*, by Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, and I draw upon her translation for parts of the cited passage.

their participation in the redemption, but it also played an essential part in God's role as redeemer. Although we could equally read this midrash with an Aristotelian embarrassment of God's portrayal here, the midrash implies no such criticism. If we recall the way in which, after the flood, God's olfaction evoked mercy and love for human beings, we may see in this midrash another example. Olfaction is elevated to become *the essential sense* for the redemptive relationship between God and Israel, and between God and all of humanity.

Both of these midrashim cite verses from the Song of Songs, the love poem that we read on Shabbat Hol haMoed Pesah, traditionally understood as an allegory for the love between God and the People of Israel. The word ריח (scent) appears more frequently in Song of Songs than in any other biblical book, other than Leviticus and Numbers where the phrase "a pleasing scent for God" is repeatedly associated with sacrificial laws. In the latter two books, the notion of a scent is one sided — a scent for God; but in Song of Songs, the scent of each lover is pleasing to the other, and the scents of nature and of the changing seasons are pleasing to both of them. Mutual love grows and is expressed through an elevation of the sense of smell.

Recalling the power of the olfactory nerve to elicit strong and distant memories, let us consider the role that smells play in creating a continuity of traditions, and perpetuating relationships between God and humanity, and between individuals in community. Rather than diminishing olfaction to a sense governed by desire rather than reason, let us imagine God still recalling with joy scents from the days of the Exodus, and let us imagine ourselves inheriting scents smelled by our mothers and fathers of yore. In this season of gathering together with loved ones over delicious food and retellings of the past, let us take in the familiar scent of a loved one, of a well-worn house, and of a Passover kitchen and a seder table in which relationships are created and traditions are passed down every year.

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