

Judaism is a tantalizing and challenging religious system! Judaism clearly relies on our five senses, in no particular order, sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing.

Historically, we can identify a tendency to focus or prioritize only on the aspects of Judaism that relate to our mind and our intellectual capacities, with the hope that this will help us develop a robust spiritual system. In this effort to concentrate on the intellectual aspects of Judaism we have neglected other aspects which also would help us develop a true sense of self and a true sense of community, both in connection with each other and with God.

For example, as much as we don't usually think this way, smell and taste are an intrinsic part of our Jewish experience as well.

Aren't you familiar with the story about a Roman Emperor who was wondering around town on a Friday late afternoon, very close to the start of Shabbat?

The emperor was in the Jewish area, and started to smell the Friday night food. Challah, Chicken Soup, roast meat. The smell overwhelmed him so much, he decided he had to try some of this Jewish food.

He summoned the Rabbi in town to his palace, and ordered him to arrange for all the same food but, this time, to be cooked in his palace. The Rabbi, of course, went to his wife who came to the palace and started cooking. Once ready, the emperor sat down to his meal.

First, he was brought the Challah. He looked at it and smelled it. Tore off a small piece and tried it. And turned his nose up and pushed it away. Then he was brought the Chicken Soup. Before he even tasted it, the smell put him off so much, he pushed the bowl over.

This went on with the whole meal. Nothing had the same aroma as what he had come across on that Friday night.

He summoned the Rabbi again and berated him and his wife for not making him the same food that they made for themselves. The Rabbi's wife, terrified, pleaded that she had used exactly the same recipe and ingredients that she used to make her own food, and couldn't understand why the emperor didn't like it.

Then the Rabbi asked if he could speak. He said "Sir, please forgive me, but I think I know the reason. There is a certain spice that was in our food, that couldn't be included." The emperor was even more furious. "How dare you! Rome is the center of the world, we have every known spice from all over the world in our kitchens, if there was another ingredient, if you told us, it could have been included."

The Rabbi said "Sir, I'm very sorry. This spice is something that can't just be added from a pot. It is the spice of Shabbat, a special flavor that comes along with food specifically prepared to celebrate Shabbat."

Beautiful, poignant description of how smell and taste enhance our Shabbat and holidays experience!

Sadly enough, for someone who has never experienced the Spice of Shabbat, this is something that cannot be intellectually conveyed. Either it is part of your experience or it is not. It cannot be explained.

The beauty of this spice is that you must create it yourself. You cannot buy it in the store, but you can create it yourself. Warning! It cannot be developed in only one Shabbat. You will need an ongoing practice to develop the real taste of this very special spice.

When we look into our Torah portion this week, *Ekev*, Moshe appeals to a very different aspect of our connection to Judaism. Moshe appeals to our ability to hear. Using the Hebrew root '*ShMoA*,' the same root that we have in the verse that contains the *Shema Yisrael*, our Torah portion this week opens with the line:

“And if you do obey (hear/listen to) these rules...” (Deuteronomy 7:12)

This translation already reveals the challenge which this Hebrew term presents. What is the meaning of the verb “*lishmoa*”? To ‘hear,’ to ‘obey,’ to ‘understand’?

Growing up in Argentina, my parents did not belong to an organized Synagogue. They started a *Havurah*, which met on Friday nights (religiously); we also met for Passover Sedarim and for High Holiday services. High Holiday services were always hosted by the same family. At some point, I must have been 13 or 14 at the time, the host came up with the idea of preparing a few signs to decorate the rooms that we used for prayer, in a way that was appropriate to conduct services. One of those signs was one that contained the Shema. To my and many others’ surprise, for the purpose of that sign, he did translate ‘Shema’ as ‘understand’ instead of ‘listen.’ Therefore, the translation read ‘Understand, O Israel, Adonai our God, Adonai is ONE.’ This came with a whole innovative explanation about how the Shema is not only about hearing or listening, but mainly about understanding and internalizing the contents of the teaching.

Our Torah portion this week, and the book of *Devarim* in general, have this verb '*lishmoa*,' repeated so many times! Even if we translate this verb as ‘obey,’ we must be mindful of the fact that in the obedience of the commandments that is expected from us, we must inform that obedience with ‘understanding.’

Following the commandments, the *mitzvot*, cannot be a matter of blind obedience. It must come with the intellectual and emotional understanding of what the purpose of these commandments is.

Following the story of the Roman Emperor, we shouldn’t follow *mitzvot* which are deprived of the spices that go with them.

Shabbat Shalom!

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