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Kol Rinah
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We read this week about the completion of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, which was an intensely physical place filled with things, all meant to help us make God's presence physically manifest in that particular time and place.

Each of the things in the Tabernacle—all the furnishings, the altar, the laver, Aaron and his sons—are all to be anointed with *shemen hamishcha*, שֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה—anointing oil, whose formula is given in Exodus 30, in Parashat Ki Tissa. It's made from myrrh, cinnamon, aromatic cane, cassia, and olive oil, blended in a particular, expert way. And no, we don't know what aromatic cane or cassia really are.

These products did not all grow near and in the land of Israel; some grew quite far away, and were hugely expensive. Things from far away, with no obvious connection to holiness, can be brought in and used in ways that create unexpected and important dimensions of holiness, suggests Rabbi Eli Munk in his commentary on the Torah, Kol Dodi. Munk was the leader of the Paris Jewish community before the 2nd World War. Further, perfume, which we usually think of as something people use to beautify themselves—can have a holy purpose as well. And Munk, in Paris, probably knew something about this!

How was this anointing oil used? Some say it was smeared on, implying messily, and in large quantities, but actually, it was just a drop here and a drop there—suggests Umberto Cassuto, Italian Israeli biblical exegete of the 1950s and 1960s. It was much more like perfume than lotion.

The goal, as I imagine it, was to create a unique, positive identifiable scent of the Mishkan, of those who officiate in it, and thus, of Israelite worship. You can read articles about creating customized hotel lobby scents, and scent marketing nowadays, and perhaps this was the same thing.

It needn't be overpowering; subtle is the way to go here—just a subtle fragrance of holiness. For many of us, there was a particular combination of scents and odors that we remember from our parents' or grandparents' homes, or from particular rooms in their homes. These scents are amazingly evocative and transporting. There are also scents that conjure less positive memories—many of us can still remember the smell of a school cafeteria, for instance.

Another interesting detail about the anointing oil is that the Torah also prohibits making anything like this anointing oil for any other purpose. And Jewish tradition suggests based on the fact that the anointing oil is supposed to be sacred to God *l'dorateichem*, לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם—for all your generations—that it was actually only ever made once, by Moses, and that it miraculously never ran out, even though it was used to anoint priests and kings for many, many generations to come.

At some point though, along with the Ark of the Covenant, the anointing oil was lost. Perhaps Indiana Jones found it and it's resting in a government warehouse.

To me, this about the power of something very strong smelling, very concentrated, to require only the most minute quantities to be used—enough so that it can last forever. And that that smell was so good and so strong that there was never need to make it again. A few

drops being used every few years could enable it to last, and our smell memory is good enough for that to be enough. The smell of holiness need not overpower—just a hint is enough!

The difference, however, between anointing oil and perfume, cologne, and other smells that we have today is that we understand that God created the *shemen ha-mishcha*, and presumably, everyone liked it. But we know that we have different reactions to different scents. Some of preference, some of allergy. So as a reminder, please leave perfume and cologne at home, and don't wear it to shul, unless you have some of the anointing oil from the mishkan. Although we're not allowed to wear that unless we're kings or priests!

One could construct an entire theology of smell, and I'm interested enough in the idea to imagine teaching a class someday on "smell in Judaism."

But for now, I want to offer just one theological, olfactory reflection. Smell is perhaps our least necessary sense for survival. Maybe it's tied with taste. But we know how bland food is when we can't smell. And smell often is one of the consistent yet small pleasures in life. Smell also helps us recognize which things that are disgusting, and creates the contrast between the good-smelling and putrid. God enjoys the *reiyach nichoach*, ריח ניחוח, the good smells of sacrifice, and of the *ketoret*, קטורת, the incense that was used. God can smell, and we, created in God's image, can smell too. Smell is in fact the one thing we can create for God that God apparently can enjoy; we can't cook for God; God doesn't need our clothing or jewelry or poetry. But God does love good smells. And so can we!