

Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins
Parashat Ki Tisa

Even A Stinker Can Be Holy!

In this most fascinating of Torah portions, I want to draw our attention to a rather obscure spice. *Parashat Ki Tisa* is best known for its telling of the infamous act of apostasy, the building of the golden calf. It is also the portion that contains the extraordinarily significant theological epiphany of Moses who pleads to see God. I've spoken and taught on both themes several times in my 30 plus years leading and teaching congregations. But this year, I'd like to focus on something quite different. True, I am well aware that it is a bit unusual. Indeed, the topic is a real stinker. Nevertheless, consider the following.

³⁴ Adonai said to Moses: Take the herbs stacte, onycha, and galbanum -- these herbs together with pure frankincense; let there be an equal part of each. ³⁵ Make them into incense, a compound expertly blended, refined, pure, sacred. ³⁶ Beat some of it into powder, and put some before the Pact in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you.

לד וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה קַח־לְךָ סַמִּים נְטֹף וְשֵׁחֶלֶת וְחֶלְבֵנָה סַמִּים
וְלִבְנָה זָכָה בַד בְּבַד יִהְיֶה: לֵה וְעָשִׂיתָ אֹתָהּ קְטֹרֶת רִקַח מְעֻשָׂה רוֹקַח
מִמָּלַח טָהוֹר קֹדֶשׁ: לוֹ וְשִׁחֲקֵתָ מִמֶּנָּה הֲדִק וְנִתְתָּה מִמֶּנָּה לְפָנֵי הָעֵדֻת
בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר אוֹעֵד לְךָ שָׁמָּה קֹדֶשׁ קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיֶה לָכֶם: לז וְהִקְטַרְתָּ
אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה בְּמִתְכַנְתָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיֶה לְךָ לַיִּי:
Exodus 30:34-36

The three spices that make up the incense for the Tabernacle, and later the Temple's, ritual contain a rather interesting ingredient. *Chelbenah* (חֶלְבֵנָה) is understood to be galbanum, a gum resin. By all accounts it gives off a rather unpleasant odor when it is burned.

Since the purpose of the incense is to increase the spiritual experience, it's natural to ask why our ancestors would have introduced a foul smelling ingredient!

In what way did galbanum enhance the incense? The late-great Biblical scholar Nachum Sarna proposes that galbanum was used by our ancestors to enhance the sweeter ingredients. Similarly, relatively malodorous additives are used in modern perfumes to increase and prolong the effect of the more desired smell. Our ancestors

were struck by the fact that even products that, by themselves, may be rejected as undesirable still have qualities that elevate everything around them.

The Talmud offers an interesting analogy:

*As to '**galbanum**', its mention is necessary for its own sake, for its odor is unpleasant. . . Said Rabbi Hana bar Bizna in the name of Rabbi Hisda the pious: **A fast in which none of the sinners of Israel participate is no fast; for behold the odor of galbanum is unpleasant and yet it was included among the spices for the incense.** Abaye says: 'We learn this from the text: "And God has founded His vault upon the earth."*

The last quote is from the Prophet Amos 9:6, in which the word used for "vault" derives from the root אגד of אגדתו 'his vault,' which means to bind together. Just as all the earth was created by God, it goes without saying that every person and creature is of God. **All** are of God's holiness and all have the capacity to enhance the sacredness of others. All - - including the stinkers like galbanum!

For us, the application of this teaching is both obvious and applicable to countless situations. Parts of God's magnificent creation that people are too quick to reject and shun as repugnant may, in fact, have a precious role that elevates our senses and increases holiness. We are thereby cautioned not to be so quick to judge, hold our noses and condemn. Rather, let us search for deeper meanings and purpose for every creature and experience. We are bound together in this experience of life. And while we strive to be sweet as roses, it's nice to know that even the stinkers can be holy!

Shabbat Shalom!

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