



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Tetzaveh

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Tetzaveh

**Are You Incensed? The
Ketoret in the Modern World**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What does a soul smell like? What does a soul taste like? Are the tastes and smells of the soul perceived in your life?

And that brings us to another set of questions: Is life meant only to feed and sustain you or is life also meant to be aromatic, delicious and flavorful? Is Judaism and your relationship with God meant only to feed and sustain you, or is it also meant to be aromatic, delicious and flavorful?

Scientific studies have shown that smell and taste are part of the same whole, and that as much as 90% of perceived *taste* is actually the sense of *smell* at work. This is why when you have a cold, you barely taste the food that you eat.

Understanding the difference between the Temple’s two altars – one offering edibles and one offering scents – is understanding the difference between body and soul: the former “eats,” the latter “tastes.” (And by “tastes” we mean smells.)

Our sense of smell is our ability to infuse everything in life with zing and zest, aroma and perfume. And, as we will see in this sermon, it is through four characteristics – 1) holiness 2) purity 3) empathy, and 4) hope – that the *ketoret*, the soulful incense, is scented and enjoyed.

This is the ultimate nose job. And it is nothing to sniff at.

ARE YOU INCENSED?

THE *KETORET* IN THE MODERN WORLD

1. Google Nose (Humor)

“Smelling is believing.” Or so runs the headline on the homepage for a recently released Google product called Google Nose^{BETA}.

This is how Google describes¹ it:

Google Nose^{BETA} leverages new and existing technologies to offer the sharpest olfactory experience available:

- Street Sense vehicles have inhaled and indexed millions of atmospheric miles.
- Android Ambient Odor Detection collects smells via the world’s most sensible mobile operating system.
- SMELLCD™ 1.8+ high-resolution compatible for precise and controlled odors.
- The new *scentsation* in search.
- Coming to your senses: go beyond type, talk, and touch for a new notation of sensation.
- Your internet sommelier: expertly curated Knowledge Graphs pair images, descriptions, and aromas.
- Take a whiff: the Google Aromabase – 15Million+ scentibytes.
- Don’t ask, don’t smell: For when you’re wary of your query – SafeSearch included.

Google Nose^{BETA} was released this past April 1. The reason very few of us in this room – maybe none of us – have ever heard of this product is because, unlike Google Glass, Google Nose^{BETA} is completely fictitious and was an April Fools joke that Google played on the world.

¹<https://www.google.com/intl/en/landing/nose/>

2. The Complex Sense of Scent

The nose and its abilities are scintillatingly complex. While the senses of sight and sound and touch are rather straightforward, the sense of scent is not so simple.

Especially when it comes to the breakthroughs of technology. Sight, sound, taste, and touch are all very much affected by technology, and at times enhanced. But smell, as Google's April Fools joke demonstrates, still hasn't exactly made it into reality.

Science fiction has been talking for years about smell-a-vision, a device that would allow one to not only hear and watch a movie but actually smell the scents that the scene plays out.

The operative word, though, is science *fiction* – this is one area which is still in the realm of the imagination.

3. In Abstract Scents

Perhaps the reason smell is so difficult to capture – just look how much effort and expertise goes into creating a perfume – is because it is so ethereal, abstract and spiritual. When you *see* something you can paint it ... when you *hear* something you can record and replay it ... when you *touch* something you can feel its texture ... and when you *taste* something you can ask for the recipe and make it again at home. But when you *smell* something, how can you capture and replicate it? How to explain something that is so intangible?

Additionally, smells are everywhere. People wear perfume, hang car fresheners, spray Fabreeze, and don deodorant. And smells, unlike tangible objects, can fuse and intermingle into one amalgamation of many scents. This obviously helps confuse things even more.

You walk into a bakery, or a coffee shop in the AM, and go: *ahhhh!*

Conversely, you drive over a skunk or walk by a garbage dump in the summer, and you go: *ewwww!*

Smell is as ubiquitous as it is diverse. A smell can make your mouth

water or your eyes tear. A smell can inspire you or turn you off. A smell, then, is a very powerful, yet intangible, sense.

Similar to the soul, isn't it? You cannot see, taste, touch, or hear a soul, but *perhaps* you can smell this most intangible soul?

4. The Guardian Of Scents

Not too long ago, the British newspaper, *The Guardian* posted a blog, whose headline read:

TASTE WITHOUT SMELL

What does the lack of a sense of smell do to flavor perception?

The article discussed a medical condition called "anosmia," or lack of the sense of smell, explaining how anosmia affects taste. I quote:

So what is going on when you taste something? A mouth has a million taste receptor cells, which generate and mediate messages to the brain. Each receptor's taste hair responds best to one of the basic tastes – sour, sweet, bitter, salty and umami (salts of certain acids). This is what science calls taste (although there is debate over whether there are five or seven basic tastes). What we would more commonly refer to as taste is really flavor perception – the summation of taste, aroma, texture and visual presentation.

[But] according to Dr Alan Hirsch of the Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, 90% of what is perceived as taste is actually smell.²

Let me repeat that. According to this doctor, **90%** of what is perceived as taste is actually smell. That is incredible!

This, tangentially, explains the age-old frustration you feel when you have a cold and food tastes very much like cardboard. If 90% of your taste is actually smell, no wonder you can't taste anything when you have a cold – your nasal passageways and olfactory channels are stuffed and compromised.

²Word of Mouth blog, July of 2008. See also this study Taste and Smell.

5. Dish of Life

That said, I want to ask this question:

Can life as we know it be experienced as a taste or a smell?

Imagine life as a flavorless dish, whose nutrients sustain you and don't allow you to die even though the dish is akin to cardboard (similar to eating with a cold or anosmia). And then imagine a dish of life that can be enjoyed as a spicy, flavorful, punchy, aromatic and fragrant entrée that leaves you smiling and anticipating a sweet desert course.

Which one of these dishes would you want to experience?

This question can also be asked in the context of Judaism and God: Is your interaction with religion and the Creator one that is nutritious and sustaining but absolutely flavorless? Or is your relationship with Judaism and God nutritious *and* spicy, zesty, zingy, and delicious?

The answer – or at least 90% of it – lies in the smell.

6. Aromatic Service

As with all things in the universe, smell is discussed at great length in our source of wisdom, the Torah. In this week's reading, after diagramming the Temple and all its vestibules, the Torah talks of a gold altar, with a very specific and aromatic service:

*You shall make an altar for bringing up incense smoke... And you shall place it in front of the dividing curtain, which is upon the Ark of Testimony, in front of the ark cover, which is upon the testimony, where I will arrange to meet with you... Aaron shall make incense of spices rise in smoke upon it... continual incense before the Lord for your generations.*³

At first glance, most of the Holy Temple's services seem rather strange to today's modern individual – the offerings, robes, animals, blood – and the incense service is no different. For a skeptic (and every Jew is certainly a skeptic who takes nothing for granted), the incense service brings to mind images of an archaic ceremony ... of smoke rising from

³Exodus 30:1, 6-8.

burning spices as loin-clothed primitives dance around chanting nonsense. Is this, Heaven Forefend, what was going on? Of course not!

The priestly process of the incense offering was of the most *profound* of all the Temple's services. Indeed, this service was the culmination and bottom line of all the services.⁴

Additionally, the incense offering, which was brought by the High Priest upon the inner gold altar, was a service that had to be performed in complete solitude, between God and the High Priest alone and no one else.

This indicates intimacy and spiritual humility. The incense service was not a public show; it was a private audience.⁵

What exactly was this private audience? How were the aromas of the gold altar a spiritual exercise? And what can we learn from this in our present-day lives?

7. Two Altars

The Holy Temple was home to two different altars⁶ – the inner gold altar upon which the incense was offered (as mentioned above), and the outer copper altar upon which edible offerings were brought, such as oil, flour, birds and animals.

The Midrash⁷ describes these two altars in anthropomorphic terms:

- The outer altar (which was revealed to the outside world) represents the body, while the inner altar (concealed within) represents the soul.
- Because the soul is more precious than the body, the inner altar

⁴ This is the reason the segment about the incense altar is related last at the conclusion of the Torah portion, and not earlier in the portion (or even in the previous portion) when the other services are mentioned. See Likkutei Sichot I, p. 172.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This Altar had three names: 1) the incense altar; 2) the gold altar; 3) the inner altar. See Breita d'Maleches Hamishkan 11.

⁷ Midrash Tedasha 11.

was fashioned out of gold, and because the body is less precious than the soul, the outer altar was made of copper.⁸

- Just as the body eats by consuming food, the copper altar's offerings were food for consumption, and just as the soul only finds pleasure in fragrant aroma,⁹ so were the offerings upon the gold altar only of the fragrant aromatic variety.

Consumption, teaches the Midrash, is thus associated with the body, and aroma with the soul.¹⁰

8. Food vs. Fragrance

The difference between a body and a soul is the difference between consuming and tasting, between eating and scenting, between food and fragrance.

Your eyes see the outer altar, just as your eyes see the body, just as your eyes see the food that you put in your mouth. This is what bodies do.

But the inner altar, like all things inner, is never seen but its aroma carries far and wide. You don't taste incense in the classical scientific sense, but scent supplies 90% of your taste!

When you eat something, it enters your mouth, travels down your food pipe, and into your body, becoming your flesh and blood. When you smell something, it goes directly up your nostrils and into your brain.

Food has a very specific function, one that allows you to only eat a specific amount at a specific time. Scent can consume you entirely, wafting around you, enveloping you in a cocoon.

This is why, when someone is faint, you don't give them food through their mouths, but first revive them with smelling salts through their nostrils. Only then can you give them a drink of water or any food. Mouth

⁸Some say King Solomon built the outer altar out of earth. See commentaries Midrash ibid.

⁹See Berachot 43b: "What thing does the soul enjoy but not the body? Fragrance."

¹⁰See Hemshech Ayin Beis ch. 212-213. See also Likkutei Sichot V, pp. 401-402 and sources.

is an indirect and bodily process; nose is a direct path to the life source.¹¹

As the Talmud says: “Everyone agrees that the primary element of life is in the nose, i.e. the breath.”¹²

Indeed, when God Himself blew breath – the spark of the soul – into man, it was done through the nostrils.¹³ For it is the nose – our ability to experience the fragrance of life – which supplies 90% of life’s taste.

The body consumes – be it food, energy, technology, whatever – and the soul’s job is to infuse that consumption with scent, flavor, taste, aroma and perfume, making it delicious.

A bodily experience without the soul’s complement is like eating a dish while you have a cold – perhaps it’ll keep you alive, but it’ll taste like cardboard.

9. The Challenge

And this is the challenge and opportunity each of us faces every moment of our lives – to figure out how we can infuse the things in life with taste, scent, perfume, flavor.

Do we only want to just eat and consume Shabbat or do we want Shabbat to be flavorful and wow? When we do mitzvah, do we want the experience to be like taking medicine (necessary but horrid), or do we want it to be like going out to eat at a four-star restaurant (pleasurable and delightful)?

They say that “money cannot buy taste.” Because the difference between (only) having money and (also) having taste is the difference between eating and smelling. The former consumes; the latter enjoys. The former eats; the latter tastes.

When the body provides the mechanics of consumption, and the soul provides the spirit of taste, then you have got both money and taste, both texture and aromatics – and this is an entrée that begs for seconds.

¹¹ See Hemshech Ayin Beis ch. 210-222 at length.

¹² Yuma 85a. Sotah 45b. Cited in Hemshech Ayin Beis ch. 222.

¹³ Genesis 2:7

10. The Nose of the Messiah

There is a prophetic statement in the Talmud that, without knowing everything we have here discussed, would seem rather bizarre.

States the Talmud¹⁴ that when the ultimate Redemption comes – may it be before this sermon concludes, and it's a short sermon – the Messiah will evaluate the people by *scent*. And the Talmud brings proof from a verse in Isaiah.¹⁵ Strange, no? Why would the Messiah judge humanity by the sense of smell?

But with everything that we have come to understand, we know that evaluating the world through scent (as opposed to sound or sight) is processing the world through your soul as opposed to your body. And the Messiah will process the world and all of its inhabitants through soulful means and not bodily means.¹⁶

We Jews await the Messiah, but we do not wait for him the way a person waits for a bus. We wait for the Messiah by imagining what a messianic world will look like, to at least try to acclimate ourselves to some of these Torah ideals.

In an exclusively material world of exile, we judge ourselves and others via bodily (i.e. material) terms – by appearance, level of consumption, reputation. But in a purely soulful terms, we will only care what we and others smell of. Is there an *aroma* present? What is this *fragrance*? But the only way to do this is by tapping the soul level of existence.

11. Four Ingredients Of Fine Perfume

Infusing everything in life with the scent of soul is a monumental task, and the Torah offers practical exercises to help us experience the world in this fragrant way.

When infusing your life with a heavenly scent and a divine aroma, four ingredients intermingle to create this exquisite incense. And these four

¹⁴ Sanhedrin 93b.

¹⁵ Isaiah 11:2.

¹⁶ See Hemshech Ayin Beis ch. 222.

are hinted in the four letters of the word *ketoret*, Hebrew for incense – *kuf*, *tet*, *reish*, and *tof*. Each one of these four letters represents one characteristic of the aroma of life:

Kuf represents *kedusha*, or “holiness”

Tet stand for *taharah*, or “purity”

Reish represents *rachmanot*, or “empathy”, and

Tof stand for *tikvah*, or “hope”¹⁷

You want to experience the intense flavor and fragrant layers of life? Then infuse it with these four ingredients – holiness, purity, empathy, and hope.

This is 90% of the taste of the dish called life.

12. In Conclusion: Practical Examples

Benjamin Franklin once said: “Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days.” I’m sure good ole Ben meant to say that when something hangs around for too long it begins to smell – and not the soulful kind of smell we have been talking about either. What practical suggestions can we offer to insure that things do not sit around and get stale, beginning to rot and stink? How can we instead infuse them with the finest aromatics and highest-grade perfumes?

Life is not only about sustaining and eating and consuming. That is how someone doesn’t *die*. We want to know – practically – how someone *lives*.

This is where taste, aroma, fragrance, perfume, scent, spice and flavor enter the equation. These are the things that make living enjoyable. By these does a person live.

And such spice can be infused into any aspect of our lives. I would like to conclude with these few practical examples:

¹⁷Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 14.

In your spiritual life: One Friday night a month, change it up, add some spice to your life, and host a Shabbat dinner. You already host Shabbat dinners? Invite someone new and different to the table. You already do that too? Say something powerful and inspirational at the dinner. You do that too? Encourage one of your guests to host Shabbat dinner next week. You have already done that? Do it again. In a new way. This is how you add perfume and flavor to life.

In your professional life: On Monday, instead of going through the grind like a two-legged robot, ask everyone in your workplace to put a penny in a charity box. You already do that? Ask them to take a charity box home with them and put it in their kitchens. All your co-workers already have charity boxes in their kitchens? Tell your co-workers to give those charity boxes, when brimming at capacity, to this synagogue :). This is how you make life tasty and fragrant.

In your personal life: When you come home, surprise your spouse by saying: “Honey, the babysitter is coming in 30 minutes, and we are going on a date!” Over the weekend, shock your kids by taking them out for ice cream for no other reason than the fact that you love them. You already take them out for ice cream? Then just give them a kiss. This is how you spice up life and make it blossom scents of spirit and hints of the Divine.

And this is done through the *ketoret* – (an acronym for *kedusha*, *tahara*, *rachmanut*, and *tikvah*) – an acronym for holiness, purity, empathy, and hope.

This is how we all build altars of spice right now, right here, right away.

Don't turn up your nose. This is nothing to sniff at. Let us wake up and smell...

...The Scent of Soul!

Shabbat Shalom!