



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > Eighth Day

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April 30, 2016

Pesach

Perfume and Passover



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Coco Chanel's name adorns the world's most famous fragrance, but a Jewish family which outsmarted the Nazis is the driving force – and scent – behind it.

Why speak about perfume on Passover? Because perfume can teach us about the Messiah. And it can teach us something about fusing matter and spirit, which is a prerequisite to the Final Redemption.

It all begins with the walls of Jericho falling down, which happened on *Acharon Shel Pesach*, the last day of Passover.

Here's a whiff of what glorious scents are in store:

- Jericho (*Yericho*) is rooted in the Hebrew word for scent, *re'ach*.
- The Messiah will judge the people with his sense of smell. So says the Talmud.
- *Yizkor* is about memory. Scents and smells, more than any other faculty, remind us of things connected to our loved ones – like grandmother's chicken soup or father's coat.
- Scents also remind us of who we are and why we are.

So, yes, feel free to stick your nose into our business. One could never be too nosy when trying to sniff out the soul.

PERFUME AND PASSOVER: STICK YOUR NOSE INTO OUR BUSINESS

1. Cheap Perfume (Joke)

After being away on a long business trip, Tim thought it would be nice to purchase his wife a little gift.

"I'm thinking about some perfume," he confided to a cosmetics clerk at Saks Fifth Avenue.

She smiled and showed him a beautiful bottle of Chanel No. 5 Eau De Parfum costing \$100. It smelled magical.

"That's a bit much," Tim said. So the clerk returned with a smaller bottle of Eau De Toilette for \$67. It had a delightful smell as well.

"That's still a lot of money for a tiny bit of smelly spray!" Tim complained.

Growing annoyed, the sales clerk brought out a \$15 bottle of low end perfume. It smelled like spring roses, albeit a bit wilted.

"No," Tim protested. "You're missing the point. I would like to see something really cheap!"

At that, the clerk handed him a mirror.

2. Chanel No. 5

Chanel No. 5 is, by most accounts, the world's most famous perfume. And Chanel No. 5 is not cheap.

Chanel No. 5 is named after Coco Chanel. But the business really belongs to a discreet family of French Jews, the Wertheimers, creators of the premier perfume of the 1920s called "Evening in Paris."

At about the same time that “Evening in Paris” became a best-seller, Coco Chanel was trying to develop a perfume line herself. For this, she turned to the *grande nez* (“great nose”) of Ernest Beaux, a perfume developer. He created for her a series of scents numbered from 1 to 5, and she chose No. 5. A few years later the Wertheimers bought her out, according to Wikipedia, which also tells us the following:

Chanel believed that the time was opportune to extend the sale of her fragrance, Chanel No. 5, to a wider customer base. Since its introduction it had been available only as an exclusive offering to an elite clientele in her boutique. Cognizant of the Wertheimers’ proven expertise in commerce, their familiarity with the American marketplace, and resources of capital, Chanel felt a business alliance with them would be fortuitous...

For a seventy percent share of the company, the Wertheimers agreed to provide full financing for production, marketing and distribution of Chanel No. 5 ... For ten percent of the stock, Chanel licensed her name to “Parfums Chanel” and removed herself from involvement in all business operations...

[But] World War II brought with it the Nazi seizure of all Jewish-owned property and business enterprises, providing Coco Chanel with the opportunity to take back Chanel No. 5. Since the Wertheimers were Jewish, Coco Chanel used her position as an “Aryan” to petition German officials to legalize her right to sole ownership. Chanel was unaware that the Wertheimers, anticipating the forthcoming Nazi mandates against Jews, had taken steps to protect their interests. Prior to fleeing France for New York in 1940, they had legally turned control of “Parfums Chanel” over to the Christian industrialist, Felix Amiot. At war’s end, Amiot returned “Parfums Chanel” back to the Wertheimers.¹

Today, the Chanel perfume line is a two billion dollar business, according to *Women’s Wear Daily*.²

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/24/magazine/the-power-behind-the-cologne.html?pagewanted=all>.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Wertheimer also see: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,858285,00.html>.

All interesting, you say, but why are we speaking about perfume on the last day of the Passover Festival? Is there an innate connection between perfumes (or scents) and Judaism?

Yes, there is. And it is no mere coincidence that the most famous perfume in the world is owned by Jews. Let us sniff out this mystery.

3. Achron Shel Pesach

Why would someone pay upwards of \$100 for a little bottle of perfume? What is perfume's power?

The answer can be found in *Achron Shel Pesach*, the last day of Passover (in the Diaspora, which is *Isru Chag*, the day after Passover in Israel).

Seder HaOlam (lit. "The Order of the World"),³ a classic 2nd-century CE chronology of the generations of the world, states that when the time came for the Jews to enter the Promised Land in the time of Joshua, they crossed over the River Jordan and celebrated Passover. Then, as soon as the holiday was over, they surrounded Jericho⁴ and seven days later, after encircling it seven times, the city's walls crumbled.⁵

What's the connection between *Achron Shel Pesach* and the fall of Jericho?

4. Sense of Smell

The name Jericho, *Yericho* in Hebrew, is actually hinted at in our Haftorah, which is a passage from the Book of Isaiah. The Haftorah describes how the Messiah will judge the Jewish people at the time of the Final Redemption:

³ Rava ch. 11, brought in Tosafot s.v. M'kan, Menachot 30a.

⁴ Joshua 6:3ff.

⁵ Ibid. 20.

*And the spirit (ruach) of the Lord shall rest upon him [the Messiah], a spirit (ruach) of wisdom and understanding, a spirit (ruach) of counsel and heroism, a spirit (ruach) of knowledge and fear of the Lord. And he shall be animated (va'haricho) by the fear of the Lord, and neither with the sight of his eyes shall he judge, nor with the hearing of his ears shall he chastise. And he shall judge the poor justly, and he shall chastise with equity the humble of the earth.*⁶

The words *ruach* (spirit) and *va'haricho* (animated) are etymologically connected to the word *Yericho* (Jericho). What is that connection? The Talmud says it is the word *re'ach* (smell).

The Talmud also adds the following:

Bar Kochba ruled for two and a half years, and then said to the Sages, "I am the Messiah." They answered, "Of Messiah it is written that he smells and judges: let us see whether he [Bar Kochba] can do so." When they saw that he was unable to judge by the scent, they slew him.⁷

This cryptic passage from the Talmud requires much explanation. But one thing it readily clarifies for us is the connection between *ruach*, *re'ach*, *va'haricho* and by extension *Yericho*, as well as the meaning of this verse in our Haftorah: *And he shall be animated by the fear of the Lord, and neither with the sight of his eyes shall he judge, nor with the hearing of his ears shall he chastise*. Instead, he will judge with the sense of smell!

But this brings to mind more questions:⁸

- Why would the Messiah judge with the sense of smell and not with any other faculty? How is it even possible to judge with the sense of smell? Scent and judgment are two completely opposite forces: scent is intangible and abstract; judgment is concrete and empirical; scent is fleeting and changing; judgment is final; scent is quite difficult to articulate; judgment must be articulated. How can someone judge this way?

⁶ Isaiah 11:2-4.

⁷ Sanhedrin 93b.

⁸ For the following see Achron Shel Pesach 5745 talk of Lubavitcher Rebbe.

- Why is *Yericho*, Jericho, named after *re'ach*, scent, a factor in this? What's the connection with the events that happened thousands of years ago on this day?
- And, most importantly, what lesson does this contain for our modern, everyday lives?

5. Messiah: Perfume + Fusion = Perfusion

Jericho is called the “lock to the Land of Israel.”⁹ If you open the lock you open the door; if you open Jericho you open all of Israel. Capturing Jericho, then, was a prerequisite to capturing all of the Holy Land. But why is the “lock” to all of Israel related to the sense of smell?¹⁰

Scent is abstract. Judgment is concrete. Precisely in this reality is found the answer to all our questions.¹¹

Everything in this physical world is empirical and tangible. Matter is measurable and definable. Spirit (*ruach*) is the opposite. Spirit is abstract, indefinable, ethereal, other-worldly. The Final Redemption is about fusing abstract spirit with concrete matter, soul and body. It is for this reason that the Messiah will judge with the sense of smell (*re'ach*).

The Torah's story of creation states that *God breathed into [Adam's] nostrils the living soul*,¹² and from this we see that the nose and olfactory senses symbolize the essence of a human being. The soul/spirit enlivens every facet of matter, including mankind. *Neshama* - the Hebrew word for soul in Hebrew - can also be read as *neshima*, breath.¹³

⁹ Leviticus Rabbah 15:15; Tanchuma, Behaalotcha 10; et al.

¹⁰ For more on the spiritual significance of scent, see Meaningful sermons Tetzaveh 2014 and Shavuot 1 2015.

¹⁴ See discourse Vehenif Yodo Al Hanar 5711.

¹² Genesis 2:7, and Bechai ad loc.

¹³ See Midrash Tehillim at the end.

Breath and soul are deeply associated.¹⁴

And this is why the Messiah employs scent as a means of judgment.¹⁵

Messianic reality is fusing spirit and matter – the utterly abstract with the utterly concrete.¹⁶ Revealing the soul within all existence. This is even hinted in the verses of our Haftorah itself, *And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and heroism, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. And he shall be animated by the fear of the Lord...* The essential scent (*re'ach*), the spirit of life (*ruach*) itself, doesn't supersede and overpower the more tangible faculties of *wisdom and understanding, counsel and heroism, knowledge and fear*. Rather the scent and spirit of the Messiah reveals the true nature of all the other more tangible faculties.

And this is Jericho (*Yericho*) – scent (*re'ach*) – the key to unlocking and entering the Promised Land. For the Holy Land is all about taking the most abstract and making it most concrete, fusing Torah ideals gifted to the Jewish people in the abstract wilderness of Sinai with the very concrete reality on the ground. The Land of Israel is where the 613 concrete mitzvot play themselves out in entirety, making tangible the abstract and ethereal spirit of God.

A fascinating difference between Jewish mysticism and other schools of mystical thought is that in Judaism one can reach greater heights through action than through meditation. We reach the greatest spiritual heights through the performance of physical mitzvot on Earth. Our heads are in the clouds but our feet are firmly planted on the ground.

This is what our Haftorah tells us. And this Messianic energy is felt on the final day of Passover.

¹⁴ This also explains the power of the Ketoret, the eleven types of incense in the Temple, as well as why we inhale spices as part of Havdalah service to ease our transition from Shabbos, a day of heightened spiritual sensitivity, back to an existence defined by the physical and the mundane. Smell benefits the soul and not the body (Berachos 43b).

¹⁵ See Hemshech Ayin Beis (5672) ch. 222.

¹⁶ See Hemshech Samach Vav (5666) p. 68ff.

6. Yizkor

In just a few moments, some of us will be reciting one of the most solemn of prayers, *Yizkor*, in the memory of our loved ones.

Scent is the single most powerful reminder.¹⁷ Science today tells us that the olfactory nerve cells are linked directly to the brain, more than any other of the senses. National Geographic once published an article titled *Want Memories? Follow Your Nose*.¹⁸ When you smell something from your past, be it your grandmother's chicken soup or your father's coat, you are immediately transported to that time and space.

Yizkor is the scent that reminds us of our loved ones. *Yizkor* is the scent that reminds us of ourselves, of our purpose here on earth, of why we live in the first place.

Yizkor is the scent that we inhale, transporting us, reminding us that we are here to fuse the most abstract, ethereal, otherworldly divine power of our souls – which has been breathed by God into our nostrils – into the tangible, concrete, material, earthly world in which we live.

We yearn for the physical presence and tangible material of our loved ones, and our hearts are torn open when they are no longer in front of us. At the same time, *Yizkor* reminds us that we have the spirit of our loved ones with us at all times. That can never go away. Through our memories and our commitment to give charity on their behalf we reconnect their souls with the material world.

We honor them and ourselves by doing our best to fuse all matter and spirit, so that very soon – immediately we pray! – this schism between the abstract and the tangible, between spirit and matter, will fade away as the prophecy of our Haftarah foresees.

We each must use the most abstract (scent) to inform the most concrete (judgment). This is how we crumble the walls surrounding Jericho, the “lock of Israel,” opening up the Promised Land for all eternity.

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olfactory_memory.

¹⁸ <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/traveler-magazine/real-travel/smells>.

7. The Scent of Moshiach (Story)

They tell the story of Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, the 18th Century Torah giant whose wife ran through the door one afternoon shouting, “Mendel, Mendel, there’s a man outside shouting that Moshiach has arrived!”

Immediately, Reb Menachem Mendel jumped up and ran to the window, took a long sniff of air, then shook his head and muttered, “Nonsense!” before returning to his studies. Like Yitzchok Avinu, the rebbe knew that a world with Moshiach smells different from a world without Moshiach, and that if he could not detect the fragrance of Gan Eden then certainly Moshiach had not yet arrived.

Two generations later, Reb Yisroel of Rizhin asked why the illustrious rebbe had to run to the window – why could he not simply sniff the air in his own home?

The Rizhiner answered his own question. So involved was the Rebbe with his own personal divine service, so intent was he upon hastening the arrival of Moshiach, so profoundly had he already connected with the spiritual source of the universe that his own house had already acquired the fragrance of Gan Eden. Consequently, he had to run to the window to discover what the rest of the world smelt like.

Through our work today in refining our lives we have the power to infuse our material activities with spiritual vitality and introduce the fragrance of Moshiach into the world. Every mitzvah we do, every time we say a kind word to someone, give some charity, take anything physical and use it to help another, we are releasing new scents and fragrances that beautify the environment.

8. Cheaper than Diamonds (Joke)

Shmuel walks into Bloomingdales, aims straight for the fragrance department, and says to the salesperson, “Today is my wife Esther’s birthday. I’d like to buy her a nice bottle of perfume, perhaps Chanel No. 5.”

“What a surprise that would be for your wife,” exclaims the clerk.

“It sure will,” replies Shmuel. “She’s expecting a diamond necklace!”

9. Conclusion

Diamond necklaces are nice, especially if you’re getting your wife a birthday present. But for redemptive purposes, perfume is nicer.

Alain Wertheimer, one of the current owners of Chanel No. 5, said of his products, “We don’t sell handbags or haute couture. We sell dreams.”

People buy Chanel No. 5, or any other perfume, not because they are buying a fragrance but because they are buying a dream.

We Jews are in the dream business – the dream of unlocking the heavenly scent of the Promised Land and fulfilling the purpose of existence itself which is fusing matter with spirit.

God willing, may all our dreams come to tangible fruition today, immediately, before the holiday of Passover concludes. May we be able to go out into the street and smell the scent of Moshiach in the air.

Amen.

Chag Sameach and a Happy Pesach!