

**Parshat Vayikra**  
**A Scent of the Divine**  
**Rabbanit Yael Keller - Class of 2022**

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I love good smells. Smells can be so evocative. When I walk outside in springtime and smell the earthiness of mud and fresh grass, it smells like baseball. Inhaling, I feel like I'm back in high school warming up to play a softball game. Or smelling pine needles or chicken soup, sometimes my brain connects them and I feel transported to my *sukkah*, decorating it while the soup is cooking in the kitchen, or maybe preparing to celebrate at the first meal in the *sukkah* that year. Smells are personal. While I love the smell of springtime and baseball, others might like the smoky smell of a fire burning in the fireplace during the cold winter months instead. Sometimes the memory that becomes associated with the smell helps us relish the scent. Through personal association, we might enjoy the smell of mothballs because we remember playing dress-up in our grandparents' home, even if we might not have otherwise appreciated that smell. I wonder if our sense of smell is not just personal and evocative, but divinely inspired.

In this week's *parasha*, *Vayikra*, the Torah lists various animals and grains that can be sacrificed to God as an *olah*, a burnt offering. Following the directions for how to offer each animal/grain is the phrase "it is a pleasant scent to the Lord רִיחַ-נִיחֻחַ לַיהוָה." As the smoke rises up, the Torah is telling us that God smells the offering and finds it pleasant. This phrase is repeated 17 times throughout Sefer Vayikra<sup>1</sup>. It seems important that our sacrifices smell good to God. Surely God can see the animals— perfect, without blemish—being offered; God can understand the *kavanah* with which it is brought; God can hear the ritual and incantations around the offering; And, if God wished, God could taste the offering. Why is smell mentioned and emphasized in such a way? What is so important about God getting pleasure from the scent of the burnt sacrifice?

Moses Mendelsohn, a German Jewish scholar and theologian explains that "The sense of smell, in the Holy [Hebrew] Language, corresponds to the power of memory in the soul, for the idea of memory is the remaining impression in the soul, after the tangible experience has passed. That is the unique property of scent... and for this reason it says, "A pleasant scent" -- that is, one which will provoke the desired memory before God<sup>2</sup>."

Scent helps us remember. Just as it transports me from my front yard to a baseball diamond, or from a walk in the woods into my *sukkah*, we imagine that a pleasantly smelling sacrifice will be received more favorably by God in some way because it will make God remember. What do we wish God to remember and associate with the scent we send heavenwards? If we look at the first time a רִיחַ-נִיחֻחַ, pleasant smell, is described, we go all the way back to the beginning of *Breishit*. After the flood waters receded, Noach offered a sacrifice to God and we are told that God found the smell to be pleasant in *Breishit* 8:21

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 1:9, 1:13, 1:17, 2:2, 2:9, 2:12, 3:5, 3:16, 4:31, 6:8, 6:14, 8:21, 8:28, 17:6, 23:13, 23:18, 26:31

<sup>2</sup> Cited in [REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST - Parshat Vayikra](#)

“וַיִּרַח יְהוָה אֶת־רִיחַ הַבְּיֹחֹתִי” - And God smelled the pleasing odor.” Perhaps in response to this pleasant smell, God promised to never destroy the earth again. When God accepted Noah’s sacrifice, perhaps God felt gratification that God’s creations have been renewed. The acceptance and appreciation for the sacrifice prompted a divine love for humankind, which reassures us.

Perhaps, whenever sacrifices are offered, we are attempting to remind God of this investment in the world, this promise to not destroy its inhabitants again, despite our human failings. It is almost as though we are attempting to pull at God’s heartstrings. Remember that time, God? Please remember your promise, alongside the pleasant smell we are offering you.

Or, perhaps we are going back to another formative moment in our Jewish history, that of *Matan Torah*. In Tractate Shabbat 88b, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains that as God spoke each one of the Ten Commandments, the whole world was filled with pleasant smelling spices.

<p>R. Joshua b. Levi also said: What is meant by (Song of Songs 5:13) ‘His cheeks are as a bed of spices?’ With every single word [<i>dibbur</i>] that went forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, the whole world was filled with spices [fragrance]</p>	<p>וא"ר יהושע בן לוי מאי דכתיב (שיר השירים ה, יג) לְחֵיוֹ כְּעָרוֹגֵת הַבְּשָׂם? כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקב"ה נתמלא כל העולם כולו בשמים</p>
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God’s gift to us – Torah – was sweet smelling to our noses. After each of the *dibrot*, God would send a wind to clear the smell to make room for the sweet smell of the next commandment. I wonder what happened after the tenth commandment? There was no need to clear the air for a future commandment. Perhaps the smell was left to linger in our noses and our minds. Or maybe, God cleared the air and it was, and is, up to us to fill the air with new pleasant smelling scents, ones that mirror God’s gift to us. We offer up our gifts to God – our sacrifices, our prayers and good deeds, all our attempts to be closer to God – with a sweet smell. As if to say, remember your gift to us God and how sweet it smelled? Here is a sweet smelling gift in return.

Our sense of a smell is a powerful one and we awaken it at the end of each *shabbat*. In our current reality, without a Temple and sacrifices, we use *havdalah* at the end of *shabbat* to offer up a sweet smell to awaken ourselves to God’s presence. The good scent of *besamim* may evoke both the pleasantness of *shabbat*, and the gratifications of the prior week, that we hope will carry into the next week. The scent evokes our closeness to God on *shabbat* and awakens us to the possibilities of the week to come.

To smell the *besamim* and evoke memory is to follow in God’s footsteps. To find the scent pleasing is to imitate God, as God smells the pleasant smell of our offerings. With each sweet inhale, we express our *tzelem elokim* and breathe in a little godliness as well.



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