

**Parshat Toldot  
Scents of Connection**

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Scents can be personal and affecting, like the comforting aroma of a grandmother’s kitchen or a newborn baby’s head. A statement in the Talmud even declares them spiritually uplifting:

What benefits the soul and not the body? I would say, fragrance. (B. Ber. 43b)      איזהו דבר שהנשמה נהנית ממנו ואין הגוף נהנה ממנו - הוי אומר זה הריח (ברכות לג:)

Reactions to scent can feel instinctive and visceral. Why does this statement characterize scent as spiritual?

In this week’s parsha, when Isaac is old and visually impaired, his son Jacob approaches him with his arms sheathed in wool, trying to “fleece” his father and secure the firstborn blessing. Confused by the disconnect between what he hears (Jacob’s voice) and feels (Esav’s hands), Isaac trusts his sense of smell. While he agrees to bless the son before him after feeling him (verse 23), he still questions whether it is actually Esav (verse 24), until he catches his scent:

And he approached and kissed him and smelled the scent of his clothes and blessed him. And he said, “See, the scent of my son is like the scent of a field which God has blessed.” (Genesis 27:27)      וַיִּגַּשׁ וַיִּשָׁק לוֹ וַיִּרַח אֶת רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר רִיחַ בְּנֵי כְרִיחַ שְׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכּוּ יְקֹוֹק: (בראשית כז:כז)

The fragrance evokes positive associations: It is not just “earthy” or “field-like” but “the scent of a field which God has blessed.” According to the verse, Isaac smells the scent of the clothes Jacob is wearing, clothes which belong to Esav (as per verse 15). Esav’s scent (on the clothes) is familiar and comforting and Isaac associates it with inevitable blessing.

A midrash in Bereshit Rabbah (later quoted by Rashi) interprets the fragrance differently:

Rabbi Yohanan says: There is no harsher stench than washed goat skins. But it says, “And he smelled the scent of his clothes and blessed him”?! Rather, at the moment that Jacob our father approached his father, the Garden of Eden entered with him. That’s what it means when it says, “See, the scent of my son is like the scent of a field.” And in the moment that Esav approached his father, hell entered with him, as it says, “When arrogance comes, disgrace comes.” (Proverbs 11:2) (Bereshit Rabbah, Toldot 65)      א"ר יוחנן אין לך דבר שריחו קשה מן השטף הזה של עזים ואת אמרת וירח את ריח בגדיו ויברכהו, אלא בשעה שנכנס אבינו יעקב אצל אביו נכנסה עמו גן עדן, הדא הוא דא"ל ראה ריח בני כריח שדה, ובשעה שנכנס עשו אצל אביו נכנסה עמו גיהנם המד"א (משלי יא) בא זדון ויבא קלון (בראשית רבה סה)

According to Rabbi Yohanan, the scent of goat skins is particularly repulsive and so Isaac, who is moved to blessing, must be smelling something else. Instead of Esav’s odor or the odor of goat skins, Rabbi Yohanan thinks Isaac perceives the scent of the Garden of Eden, generated by Jacob’s righteousness. Even within this interpretation, we should still think that

Isaac believes this scent arrives with Esav, not Jacob, since he is stunned when Esav actually arrives soon after. Yet the midrash suggests that - though he doesn't know it consciously - Isaac smells the true essence of the person before him.

These two interpretations of the fragrance - as Esav's body odor or Jacob's paradiscal aroma - reflect different aspects of the sense of smell: It can be associated with particularly intimate or emotional knowledge, as it is in the first interpretation. It is also sometimes used to denote intuitive understanding of essence, through instinctive attraction and repulsion to good and evil, as in the second interpretation (see also the Bavli's interpretation of Isaiah 11:3, in which the messiah is said to be able to determine whether people are good or evil by smelling them, B. San 93b).

These different interpretations affect how we might read other elements of the story. If Isaac truly smells the fragrance of Eden, then he is right to trust his nose: It enables him to perceive truths about his children that he is otherwise blind to, providing evidence that ultimately the right child has been blessed. In contrast, if we think Isaac smells the mundane scent of Esav's clothing, the one sense he instinctively trusts proves misleading. According to the former interpretation, his initial trust of scent indicates the appropriateness of the blessing. In the latter, it's a sign of the comfort of his relationship. In these different interpretations the heartbreak Isaac feels at the revelation of betrayal might also differ: In the former interpretation, in which Isaac smells the scent of paradise, he discovers that he has previously misjudged his children. In the latter, he is shaken by the unreliability of his senses, the deceit of one child, and the possibility that he has blessed the wrong one.

The Talmudic statement above (B. Ber 43b) characterizes scent as spiritual but not physical sustenance. This could be because scent is impossible to see or touch and is associated with essence. However, I'd like to suggest that scent can also be seen as holy because it evokes feelings of relationship. When Isaac smells the everyday scent of Esav's clothing, he experiences holiness in the familiar scent of his son, which arouses love and inspires blessing.



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