

‘THE ALTAR of incense.’  
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PARASHAT KI TISA  
SHMUEL RABINOWITZ

## Turning a bad smell to a good aroma

At the beginning of this week’s Torah portion, *Ki Tisa*, we read a slew of directives given to Moses in preparation for building the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, that temporary temple that accompanied the Jewish nation until the Temple was established in its permanent place in Jerusalem.

One of the directives pertains to the making of the incense, a blend of herbs and balms placed on coals inside the Mishkan, which spread a pleasant smell:

“And the Lord said to Moses: “Take for yourself aromatics, [namely] balsam sap, onycha and galbanum, aromatics and pure frankincense; they shall be of equal weight. And you shall make it into incense... And you shall set some of it before the testimony in the Tent of Meeting... it shall be to you a holy of holies” (Exodus 30:34-36).

One of the ingredients in the incense was the galbanum. Surprisingly, the Talmud says that this ingredient actually had a bad smell! This peculiar detail is related to a fabled story which is no less surprising:

“Rav Hana bar Bizna says that Rabbi Shimon Hasida says: Any fast that does not include the participation

of some of the sinners of the Jewish people is not a fast, as the smell of galbanum is foul and yet the verse lists it with the ingredients of the incense” (Keritot 6).

That foul-smelling ingredient, when mixed with all the other ingredients of the incense, made its smell pleasant. The blending of its smell with other smells combined to form a pleasant aroma. Our Sages learned something from this about the complexity of human society and the manner in which society should be conducted.

Many of the negative acts done in our world stem from loneliness, from disconnection, from the emotional distancing between a person and his environment. There could be a trait that in a certain situation can bring about blessings for the world, but if a person is disconnected from society and acts alone, that same trait can become an obstacle and bring about negative behavior.

When man stands before God, it is an individual act, since each of us is a person unto himself. But there is also a shared aspect of a society composed of many different kinds of people, some good, some less. When they unite and stand together before God, they create a joint reality which does not exist when each of them

stands separately. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This is how the Rabbi Nissim of Gerona (14th century) explains this:

“The message to us in the galbanum – which was placed with the incense and it seemed like it would ruin it because of its bad smell, and with that the prophecy states that it is not complete without it – is that so it is when we are joined in our worship of God by the sinners and criminals, that our worship is not ruined, but by this it becomes even more complete” (*Derashot Haran*).

A healthy society is one that can also contain its less pleasant parts and repair them by properly integrating them. According to Rabbi Nissim, the entire society benefits from this.

The incense spreading a pleasant aroma in the Mishkan represents the entire Jewish nation, with all its varied layers and styles. Even the “sinners,” when they are involved and integrated into society, spread a pleasant aroma that honors God in the Mishkan. ■

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PARASHA & HERZL  
GOL KALEV

## The Golden Calf reappears

Theodor Herzl predicted that there would be those dancing around the Golden Calf once the Jewish state was established.

That dance, depicted in this week’s Torah portion, seems to shadow the Hebrews since the beginning and is intertwined with natural human confusion between immigration as an essence vs. it merely being a tool toward a greater mission.

In Lech Lecha, Abraham emigrated out of Ur of the Chaldees. God made clear right away that this exodus had an essence: “And I will make of thee a great nation.” God reiterated that the mandate was for Abraham’s seed to inherit the land. The migration out of Ur of the Chaldees was just a necessary tool for its fulfillment: “I am the Lord Who brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.”

Abraham seemed to have had his own Golden Calf moment. Unauthorized, Abraham seemingly assigned his God-given inheritance rights to his servant Damascus Eliezer: “And Abram said, ‘Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed, and lo, one born in my house is to be my heir.’”

Years of waiting for offspring led Abraham to conclude that God’s plan must have changed. He then unilaterally negated the mandate, based on rational reasoning, such as his wife’s old age, as opposed to faith.

While Abraham first understands his error – “And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness” – he then seems to lapse right back into doubt: “O Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” God reacts with what could be interpreted as a punishment or adjustment to the plan; informing Abraham that he is taking his seed into exile!

There was apparently a need for a redo – another exodus. Indeed, God notes that the fourth generation will come back from exile into the Promised Land “with great substance.” This materializes, but when Moses leads this fourth generation out of Egypt, that same confusion ensues.

God made it clear that this exodus, just like Abraham’s, has an essence: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God.” The mandate God gave Moses was for his people to accept God as their Lord. “And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them.”

Moses goes up to Mount Sinai to fulfill the mandate. But downstairs there are those who think the mandate was merely the Exodus from Egypt. They tell Aaron, “Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him.”

Forty days without Moses is a long time. The Hebrews reach a conclusion, which just like Abraham’s, is based on rationality and not faith. Unauthorized, they assign the God-given appointment of Moses to an object they created themselves: the Golden Calf.

God retaliates, as he did in response to Abraham’s actions. God first contemplates replacing the nation seeded by Abraham with a new one seeded by Moses. Once Moses pleads with God not to do so, a different adjustment is made: building the Tabernacle. Many biblical interpreters point to causality between the Golden Calf and the subsequent order to build the Tabernacle.



‘WHILE THE Golden Calf surprised Moses, Herzl was ready to confront it.’  
(Illustrative; Gary Stevens/Flickr)

‘Forty days  
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INDEED, FOR the next six months, the Hebrews believed in the Lord, and he seems to count it to them as righteousness. The people even over-donate to the building of the Tabernacle, which turned into the cornerstone of Judaism 1.0. For the next 1,400 years, Judaism was anchored around the worship in the Temple, until the Romans destroyed it and exiled the nation of Israel. When this European exile was about to come to an end, Theodor Herzl, who led the exodus, now had a valuable asset that Moses and Abraham did not: 2,000 years of nationwide learning of Abraham’s and Moses’s actions.

Herzl applied the lessons to the new exodus. Indeed, right at the onset, even before he made his plans public, he predicted, “We shall have to go through bitter struggles: with a regretful Pharaoh, with enemies, and especially with ourselves. The Golden Calf!”

Just as Herzl anticipated, the regretful Pharaohs appeared. The German Kaiser Wilhelm II at first assured Herzl that he would let the Hebrews go, but then his heart seemed to be hardened. Two decades later, the British received a mandate that included the building of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, but then reneged.

Yet, it was the other part – the bitter struggle with ourselves – that was the monumental hurdle to Zionism. A day after predicting the appearance of a Golden Calf, Herzl stunningly stated that he was ready for it. “I am prepared for anything: lamenting for the fleshpots of Egypt, the dance around the Golden Calf, also the ingratitude of those who are most indebted to us.”

While the Golden Calf surprised Moses, Herzl was ready to confront it. He did so by underscoring that the exodus from Europe was not the essence but just a tool. To explain this, Herzl offered a profound interpretation of the Torah, arguing that the Exodus from Egypt was neither about leaving Egypt, nor about arriving in Canaan. It was, as Herzl called it, “education

through migration.”

Herzl understood the Torah in ways others did not. In this and other aspects, Herzl remains one of the most misunderstood and understudied figures in Jewish history, as is his Zionism. Herzl predicted this part as well: “There are those people who do not understand us properly and think that the goal of our efforts is to come back to our land. Our ideal goes further than that. Our ideal is the great eternal truth.”

Indeed, some misunderstand Herzl’s Zionism so much that they argue that now that we are in Israel, we have entered a period of post-Zionism. This would be akin to labeling Abraham’s arrival in Canaan as post-monotheism and the Hebrew’s arrival in Canaan as post-Judaism.

On the contrary: Monotheism only began to develop upon Abraham’s arrival in Canaan, and Judaism only began to flourish upon the arrival in Canaan. Zionism, this “infinite ideal” as Herzl called it, is only in its infancy.

Using the analogy of stock market speculation, Herzl addressed those future skeptics: “Once we are over there, the dancers around the Golden Calf will be furious at my barring them from the Stock Exchange.” He argued that such stock market speculation “was all right in the time of our captivity. Now we have the duties of freedom. We must be a people of inventors, warriors, artists, scholars, honest merchants.”

Herzl’s Zionism was not about immigration but about a transformation: changing Jewish behavior and the Jewish mindset. Indeed, the emancipated nation of inventors is now increasingly celebrating its sacred duties of freedom. ■

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