

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Vayikra* – The Levona Spice

I was wondering about the לבנה//*levona* – frankincense, sprinkled on each of the daily *Mincha* grain offerings as it states,

ספר ויקרא פרק ב:א וַיִּפֹּשׂ פִּי תִקְרִיב קֶרְבַּן מִנְחָה לַיהוָה סֶלֶת יִהְיֶה קֶרְבָּנוֹ וַיִּצַק עָלֶיהָ שָׁמֶן וַיִּתֵּן עָלֶיהָ לְבָנָה:

“When you present grain as an offering to Hashem, the offering must consist of choice flour. You shall pour olive oil on it, sprinkle it with frankincense” (*Vayikra* 2:1).

What kind of incense is *Levona* and why is it used specifically with the meal offerings?

The meal offering, consisting of a kind of cake made with the finest flour, is different from the other sacrifices because it is the product of human labor. It is an offering of the humblest human effort, as it is made from unleavened bread, and offered with holy joy represented by the consecrating oil. The purifying frankincense signifies the devotion of those cleansed of self-interest. Alshich explains that the meal offering corresponds to the *nefesh* – the lowest part of the soul, the oil to the *ruach* – the emotional part of the soul, whereas the *levona* corresponds to the *neschama* and is the highest of the components of the *Mincha* sacrifice (Alshich on the book of *Shemot* 27:20-21, *Vayikra* 2:1-2). The frankincense would produce a strong-smelling cloud of smoke when the offering was set on fire, corresponding to the smell of the animal sacrifices, described as producing a pleasant fragrance to Hashem. Fragrance connect the physical and the spiritual realm. Thus, the sweet smelling frankincense would facilitate the elevation of the meal offering and transform its physical ingredients to the vapors of the spiritual realm. Although the secret of the sacrifices is beyond human understanding, I’d like to explore the purpose of adding frankincense to the grain offerings, as well as some of the spiritual and medicinal properties of frankincense.

#### Raising up our Prayer like the Smoke of Incense

The sacrifices that Israel offered in the Tabernacle and Temple brought us close to Hashem, as the Hebrew word for sacrifice, קרבן/*korban* stems from the Hebrew word קרוֹב/*karov*, which means ‘close.’ Today when we don’t have sacrifices, our prayer is considered our offering that brings us close to Hashem, as the prophet proclaims, “Instead of bulls we will pay the offerings of our lips” (*Hoshea* 14:3). Frankincense, moreover, represents purification and devoted prayer. The Jewish people in the desert is compared to a woman perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, “Who is this that comes up from the desert like columns of smoke, in clouds of myrrh and frankincense?” (*Shir Hashirim* 3:6). When our prayer rises up to Hashem it is not the words of our prayer, but rather our heartfelt intention that receives an everlasting elevation before Hashem. Our love and awe imbued in the words of our prayer becomes like two wings that carries our *tefila* to Hashem. Like the smoke that rises from the flames of fire, the smoke of

the *levona* symbolizes our pure thoughts and intentions of love and awe which form the *midot* (character traits) (*Ohr HaMeir*, on *Shir Hashirim*). Often myrrh and frankincense go hand in hand (*Shir Hashirim* 3:6, 4:6, 4:14). Perhaps, because they correspond to awe and love respectively. Myrrh with its purifying property may correspond to awe, whereas *Levona* with its connotation of pure white may correspond to love. Note that the word *Levona* includes all the letters that spell out the English word 'love,' as well as the Hebrew letters for hear לֵב//lev. Interesting the numerical value of לֵבְנָה//levona (87), equals that of אֲנִי הַשֵּׁם/Ani Hashem (61+26), which means, "I am Hashem." When these words are annexed at the end of a Torah verse they refer to Hashem's knowing the thoughts of our heart (See for example *Yirmeyahu* 17:10). So, if we want our prayer to go up before Hashem's throne of glory, we need to take a moment to purify the thoughts of our heart.

### The White Purifying Frankincense

The meaning of the Hebrew word לֵבְנָה//levona, from the word לָבָן//lavan – white, the color of purity, moreover, teaches us that frankincense symbolizes our pure intention. *Levona* got its name from the word 'white' as it comes from the milky white sap drawn from the *Boswellia* tree. When the tree bark is cut with a knife, a milky white sap flows from it. In addition, it occasionally produces small white flowers. In the process of sacrificing, the red flames of fire are transformed to the white ashes, the same way that the red stain of our sins are transformed to pure white forgiveness and atonement, like the crimson string on the Yom Kippur goat turning white at the end of the service. Whereas, the red color is the color of *gevurah*/might and power, white represents *chesed*/kindness (*Rav Tzvi Elimelech of Dubno, Agra d'Kala* 300/51). We need humility in order to think about others rather than ourselves. The simple color of white is, therefore, both the color of kindness and humility. On the holiest day of Yom Kippur, the Kohen *Gadol* (High Priest) would serve in white garments to signify his humility and self-effacement... (Maharal, *Chidushei Agadot*, 3:100, *Baba Batra*). "Humility is the most important quality in spiritual life. There is no quality that is more important because whatever qualities and powers you possess – if you do not have humility – they're all in vain... So if you seek eternity and light and luminosity, seek humility first" (Rama – Dr. Frederick Lenz). Since *Levona* is linked to humility we can understand why *Levona* is such an important purifying agent for the soul. "The soul comes out of *Gehenum* (hell) and is cleansed of its sins like an iron whitened in the fire. Angels ascend with it until it arrives at the Lower Garden of Eden, where it is cleansed in the water and perfumed with its spices, as written: 'Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense' (*Shir Hashirim* 3:6)," (*Zohar*, Part 3, P 53a). The medicinal properties of frankincense are synchronized with its spiritual purification properties. Frankincense oil is effective as an antiseptic, and even the fumes or smoke obtained from burning it have antiseptic and disinfectant qualities that eliminate the germs in the space where the smoke filters out. It can be applied on wounds without any known side effects to protect them from tetanus and becoming septic. It is equally good on internal wounds and protects them from developing infections.



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## Frankincense Corresponds to the Matriarchs

Whereas the red fire of the sacrifice represents the outgoing masculine, the white vapor of the frankincense represents the feminine yearning also referred to as the raising of the feminine waters (*Sefat Emet, Likutim, Parashat Tisa*). The female quality of לְבֹנָה/*Levona* is embodied by its connection with the feminine moon called לְבָנָה/*Levana* in Hebrew. There are three components of the *Mincha* offering, the fine flour, olive oil and *Levona*. Maharal explains that they correspond respectively to the body, mind and deeds. *Levona* corresponds to the deeds, which are pure and white (Maharal, *Drush for Shabbat Hagadol*). From all the grain offerings, the only one, which didn't have *Levona* added to it, is the offering of the *Sotah* (suspected adulteress). Rashi explains that this is because she turned aside from the ways of the Matriarchs who are called *Levona* (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 5:15). Maharal adds that the *Sotah* who followed her bodily desires does not merit to add to her offering neither the oil corresponding to a pure mind, nor the *Levona* representing purity of deeds. Masters of good deeds have a good name because their fragrance can be sensed at a great distance. The frankincense is very deep and teaches us about purifying the body, which is the secret of true spirituality (Maharal *Drush for Shabbat Hagadol*). It is interesting to note that frankincense has been used for thousands of years in ceremonial incense for meditation and prayer because of its power to slow down and intensify breathing. Avraham Sand writes that its aromatherapeutic properties are elevating, spiritual healing, for ritual and meditation. Applied directly to the temples and the third-eye area of the forehead, frankincense quiets the mind and promotes meditative stillness. Throughout history, frankincense has been used to treat emotional disorders such as nervousness and hysteria. It relaxes both the mind and the body. As an ingredient in home remedies, frankincense promotes relaxation and treats stress and insomnia ([http://www.ehow.com/about\\_5459497\\_health-benefits-frankincense.html](http://www.ehow.com/about_5459497_health-benefits-frankincense.html)).

I'm sorry to learn that frankincense is near-extinction, according to the [Journal of Applied Ecology](#). Perhaps, purifying our deeds with kindness and humility the way of our Matriarchs will help save the *Boswellia* tree so we can continue to burn frankincense in the Temple!