



What Do I Need to Know About Aromatics and the Temple Incense?

Why Do We Recite Blessings on Pleasant Scents?

As part of my weekly Herbal Workshop, we smell herbs and learn about the various blessings to be recited over aromatic plants. I'm surprised that the four different blessings for diverse pleasant-scented items are so unfamiliar to most of my students, even to those who grew up in Torah-observant homes. This may be another symptom of our long-winded exile, in which we have become so alienated from nature. As part of my personal mission, I enjoy teaching these important halachot, that help reconnect us to nature, and bring about redemption – when once again our souls will be uplifted by the sweet scent of the Temple Incense. As is known, the sense of smell is the most spiritual of senses, since it was the only sense not employed and contaminated by eating from the Tree. How do we know that we must recite a bracha (blessing) on a fragrance? Because it states, "Let the entire neshama praise Hashem" (*Tehillim* 150:6). What exists in the world that the soul enjoys, but not the body? Only fragrance (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 43b). This teaches us that we must praise Hashem even for the enjoyment of the soul. What is the enjoyment exclusively for the neshama? This is the sense of smell (*Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim* 216). The reason the neshama gets enjoyment from fragrance in this world is that it is the food of the neshama in the Garden of Eden. The enjoyment of the neshama is greater than the enjoyment of the body, for the enjoyment of the body is temporary but the enjoyment of the soul is perpetual. Therefore, we don't recite an after-bracha for fragrance. We also don't bless *shecheyanu* (blessing recited before enjoying a new fruit in its season) on aromatics, since the soul is eternal. Therefore, a new herb of the season is not considered new, as scent is imprinted eternally in the soul (Ben Ish Chai, *Hilachot Shana Rishona, Parashat VaEtchanan*). There is furthermore a connection between scent and spirit through the Hebrew word, רֵיחַ/*rey'ach* – 'smell' which is cognate with the word רוּחַ/*ruach* – 'spirit.'

Blessings on Various Pleasant-Smelling Plants and Perfumes

Most people are aware of the general blessing for various scents, *...boreh minei b'samim* – 'Creator of different types of aromatics,' which we recite at the Havdalah ceremony. During this ritual, we partake of a pleasant-smelling spice in order to strengthen the neshama, that just experienced leaving the blessed realm of Shabbat, to face the routine of the week. Since Havdalah is recited universally by Jews, who may not be so well versed in plant botany, the Ashkenazi halacha requires reciting the general blessing on fragrance for Havdalah, rather than the particular blessing for the specific aromatic. This ensures that no one inadvertently recites the wrong blessing.

The four specific blessings for pleasant scents are:

1. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵצֵי בְשָׁמִים / *Baruch Ata Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam boreh atzei besamim* – 'Blessed are You Hashem... Creator of fragrant trees.'
2. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֲשָׂבֵי בְשָׁמִים / *... boreh isvei besamim* '...Creator of fragrant herbs.'
3. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַנוֹתֵן רֵיחַ טוֹב בְּפִרְוֹת / *...hanoten reyach tov baperot* '... Who gives a good fragrance to fruit.'
4. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיְּנֵי בְשָׁמִים / *boreh minei besamim* '...Creator of various kinds of aromatics.'

Brief Explanation of the Parameters for the Various Blessings on Fragrance

A tree (1) is distinguished from an herb (2) by having a hard, woody stem that remains from year to year. Cloves and cinnamon sticks derive from a tree and we therefore recite *...boreh atzei besamim* (1) before enjoying their scent. However, if they are crushed or ground and are primarily meant to spice foods, we recite *boreh minei besamim* (4) before smelling them. (*Halacha Berura*, Chapter 216, Subsection 17). When enjoying the fragrance of fruit such as oranges, lemons and etrog, we praise Hashem for giving a good fragrance to fruit (3). We recite the general blessing (4) over a pleasant scent which derives from an animal source. An example of this is musk perfume, which is an animal-derivative (made from the blood or other secretions of animals). On synthetic perfume most Ashkenazi poskim hold that we don't recite any blessing at all. Yet, for those who enjoy that kind of scent, according to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef [the general blessing \(4\) is recited](#). When we are not sure whether a plant is considered an herb or a tree, we may also recite this blessing – 'Creator of different types of aromatics' (4). However, we should minimize resorting to this safety net, as it is our responsibility to find out the nature of the various pleasures that we enjoy so that we can make the highest rectification, by reciting its specific blessing.

Is There a Halachic Issue Involved in Burning Incense Today?

Today, people mainly burn incense in their homes in order to produce a pleasant fragrance. Why should this be a halachic concern? In the time of the Mishna, fragrant spices were brought at the completion of the meal, as a kind of olfactory desert called '*mugmar*' (*Mishna Berachot* 6:6). Yet, throughout time, certain people burned incense as an offering to spirits and demons. To this day, this is practiced in occult, voodoo and wiccan circles. By creating a potent fragrant aroma, they attract malevolent entities that have power to extract the life-force energy from fragrance. Incense can be burned for the pleasant fragrance, yet many types of incense are manufactured for religious purposes and are intended to be offered in the name of a certain god. This may actually be written on the package itself (Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzaddok, *Kosher Torah*). For example, the incense of www.darshanincense.com, is used as an offering to *avoda zara* (idolatry), (as attested to by the owner of the company). In [The Story Behind](#), they mention that their incense is "considered to give a divine boost to invocation." They also have photos of buddhas and the like all over their website. However, their actual incense is not necessarily sold for the purpose of idolatry. Therefore, halachically, it is not forbidden to buy their products. Had the incense been previously used for *avoda zara*, it would be forbidden to get any benefit from it. In defense of burning incense, would we say that just because certain idolatrous cultures use prayer shawls and head coverings similar to our tallit and kippa, does this preclude orthodox Jewish men from wearing them? [However, regarding numerous questions associated with avoda zara, in particular when technically it isn't avoda zara, the poskim suggest that we nevertheless try to distance ourselves from avoda zara as much as possible](#). Although, it is permitted to buy incense such as darshan incense, it is not recommended. So, I suggest buying your incense from a different company that is divested of any trace of idol worship.

The Power of Incense to Engender Teshuva

The holy aromatics appear in *Parashat Ki Tisa* in two contexts. First, in the holy anointing oil (*Shemot* 30:23-25), and then in the *קֶטֶר/ketoret* – 'Temple Incense' (*Shemot* 30:34-38). The root letters of the word *קֶטֶר/ketoret* – from the Aramaic term *קֶטֶר/keter* – has the same meaning as the Hebrew word *קֶשֶׁר/keshet* – 'bond.' Thus, the incense offering establishes a bond between G-d's infinite dimensions and the spiritual Cosmos (*Maggid Devarav LeYaakov; Likkutei Torah*). The Shelah Hakodesh likewise writes that the ketoret had the special power to connect the Jewish people with their Father in Heaven (*Masechet Ta'anit Drush, Matot Masei*).

Each of the aromatics connect together and are unified when they go up in a cloud of smoke. We no longer recognize the individual plants, for each has vanished into the greater whole. This causes a *yichud shalem*, (complete unity) elevating the five parts of our soul: Nefesh, Ruach, Neshama, Chaya and Yechida, which together comprise the *gematria* (numerical value) of the words שֵׁמֶן/*shemen* and קֶטֶרֶת/*ketoret*! (1099) (*Brit Kehunat Olam, Ner Mitzvah* 6). The incense was an enlightened remedy to purify people from sin. Anyone who smelled its fragrance, when burned on the altar, would have thoughts of repentance. His heart would be purified of negative thoughts and from the defilement of the negative impulse. This would break the power of the Other Side so that it could not accuse Israel. Therefore, the incense altar is referred to as a מִזְבֵּחַ/*mizbe'ach* – ‘altar.’ [The word *miz-be'ach* derives from the Hebrew זָבַח/*zevach*, which denotes slaughter.] Even though no sacrifice was slaughtered on the incense altar, it was called a *mizbe'ach*, because it was a place where the Other Side was slaughtered (*Yalkut Meam Loez*). The word, קֶטֶרֶת/*ketoret* (709) together with its four letters equals the *gematria* of תְּשׁוּבָה/*teshuva* – ‘repentance’ (713) (*Kohelet Ya'acov*, ערך ק"ט). May learning about the *ketoret* arouse the spiritual *ketoret*, which exists within our soul as the power of *teshuva*. May it empower us to rectify everything negative and undesirable, like the unifying incense that burned in the Holy Temple!