



Is Smudging Sage to Purify the Home Permitted According to the Torah?

Is Sage Smudging Kosher?

The question whether 'smudging' sage is kosher according to the Torah comes up frequently. Students have inquired about this ritual in my herbal workshop, when we learn about the mystical and medicinal properties of sage. 'Smudging' sage is a Native American tradition that entails tying dried sage into bundles and creating a cloud of smoke by waving it around a home or an office area. The New Age movement, which focuses on energies and spirituality connecting to nature and to the earth, has popularized this ancient practice, rehashing it in modern context. The purpose of this 'smudging' ritual is to clear out negative energy or emotions from a space, an item, or yourself, and to provide protection, to enhance intuition and bring healing and awareness to the body and mind. Teaching about the reality of negative energy, and various Torah rituals of how to eradicate it in my EmunaHealing courses has elicited questions regarding smudging sage. Since this practice is not a custom that originates in our own traditions, and we don't find any Torah sources mentioning this smudging ritual, would it be permitted to burn sage for spiritual purification? Or is every non-Jewish tradition automatically prohibited? The first thing we need to examine when considering adapting rituals from others, is whether it may be or have a trace of idol-worship. The second question is whether the ritual may be considered witchcraft, sorcery, and the like, which the Torah strictly forbids (*Devarim* 18:9-13). In my humble opinion, the answer to both questions depends on our intention. We see that clearly in *Parashat Korach*, where the use of incense and firepans brought about both death (*Bamidbar* 16:35) and stopped the plague of death (*Ibid.* 17:11-23). If you want to smudge sage in order to raise up smoke to a certain idol or deity, then surely you would be transgressing the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods in My presence" (*Shemot* 20:3). Likewise, if you burn herbs superstitiously to attain a purpose for which there is no scientific basis whatsoever, this could be considered sorcery (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry* 11:16). Alternatively, if your smudging sage is to manipulate the simple forces of nature to attain a certain aim against Hashem's desire, then you are transgressing the prohibition not to engage in magical practice (Ramban, *Devarim* 18:9). I'd like to investigate further the origins and underlying purpose of smudging sage, and whether there is any scientific support for this ritual, as well as the deeper meaning of burning herbs in *Parashat Korach*.

Jewish and Native American Herbal Rituals for Expelling Negativity

Incense burning in general is an ancient tradition that has its source in the Torah. The use of incense can be either the highest way of connecting to Hashem or the lowest way of defying Him. In our tradition too, the Israelites burned incense for protection and purification as well as connecting to the spiritual realm. Conversely, the nation of Israel also caused the wrath of Hashem for worshiping other 'gods' through incense. Just as Native Americans believe that smudging is a way to connect the material plain to the spiritual realm, the Torah likewise asserts that fragrance connects the spiritual and the physical (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 43b). When we ignite incense, the powdered plants evaporate into a smokey vapor, which permeate the entire space. We can no longer define or contain the physical substance of the incense. Like

Native Americans, Jewish sources acknowledge the existence of the spirit world. The Oral Torah and halacha is replete with discussions of spirits including negative spirits called רַעַח/רוּחַ/*ruach ra'ah* and how to get rid of this negative energy. For example, the halachic handwashing ritual must be practiced to expel negative spirits that enter the body at night (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 4:2). The spiritual power of certain plants to clear negative energy is acknowledged by many Rabbis. Rabbi Eliezer Papo (1785-1826) writes, "In the holy books, there are already some esoteric techniques to protect from negative energy, especially to carry the רוּדָה/*ruda* (rue) herb, which is very potent. It is proper to follow their advice..." (*Pele Yoetz, Ayin Hara*). The traditional ritual among Sephardi Jews of removing *Ayin Hara* or negative energy through the metal lead, according to Rav Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806), includes the use of the herb rue, as well as sprinkling salt. This is not so different from smudging the house with a sage and cedar bundle to expel negative energy, burning an incense to replace the void with positive energy, and then sprinkling sea salt across the doorways to block negative energy from returning. The claim that sage burning, or 'smudging,' is a form of sorcery or witchcraft, because it entails seeking out spirits to remove negative energies – in other words invoking the help of evil spirits to drive out other evil spirits may not be valid. Rather, it seems to me, that you can certainly smudge sage without any of those intentions, the same way that you can use general and alternative medicine, as long as you keep in mind that Hashem is the ultimate healer. Just as medicine must never be regarded as the source of our healing, so may we use herbs, provided that we refrain from attributing independent powers to the herbs, recalling that they are only means that Hashem has granted us to receive healing and a peaceful environment.

Scientific Support for the Benefits of Smudging Sage

From the Torah perspective, a remedy for healing, whether physical or spiritual, without a source in the Torah, must be בְּדוּקָה וּמִנְסָה/*baduk u'menuse* – 'verified effective' to be considered sound and excluded from any kind of sorcery. The practice of herbal smudging has long been discarded as superstition, until recent times, when its virtue has been proven by the scientific community. An article, named [11 Benefits of Burning Sage, How to Get Started, and More](#), explains that smudging sage may be purifying since it contains both antimicrobial and antibacterial properties. It may also connect to the spiritual realm and enhance intuition, increasing clarity and awareness, because it contains thujone. [Research shows](#) that thujone is mildly psychoactive. It is found in many plants used in cultural spiritual rituals to enhance intuition. Today, many people use sage specifically for anxiety, as they believe it removes the negative energies causing them to feel uneasy. Sage extract, has been shown to improve memory, reduce stress and anxiety, and soothe depression ([Salvia \(Sage\): A Review of its Potential Cognitive-Enhancing and Protective Effects](#)). In a 2007 study, exploring whether medical smoke reduces air-borne bacteria, researchers "have observed that 1 hour treatment of medicinal smoke emanated by burning wood and a mixture of medicinal herbs... on aerial bacterial population caused over 94% reduction of bacterial counts by 60 min and the ability of the smoke to purify or disinfect the air and to make the environment cleaner was maintained up to 24h in the closed room...We have demonstrated that using medicinal smoke it is possible to completely eliminate diverse plant and human pathogenic bacteria of the air within confined space" ([Medicinal Smoke Reduces Airborne Bacteria by Chandra Shekhar Nautiya](#)). Chinese Medicine practitioners frequently use smudging – or burning sage to help rid their patients of negative emotions (www.webmd.com/balance/news/20190521/are-there-health-benefits-from-burning-sage).

According to the Torah, the physical reflects the spiritual reality (*Kohelet* 7:14). Therefore, since sage has anti-microbial, anti-inflammatory, antiseptic and antibiotic properties, which prevent and combat viruses and bacteria, it makes sense that it also is helpful in treating 'spiritual viruses' expressed as negative energy.

Does the Torah Permit Expelling Negative Spirits through Natural Means?

Offensive smells, as well as negative energy and vibration are a part of daily life. Just as we may use cleaning agents and essential oils to clean the foul smell seeping from under the bathroom door, why would it be a Torah transgression to extend this physical cleaning to smudge herbs for clearing the presence of spiritual pollution such as negative energy in our environment, as long as we do not use this ritual to serve or contact any 'deity?' If it was acceptable in the Torah to use music to clear Shaul's negative spirit (I *Shemuel* 16:15-23), why wouldn't it be acceptable to use other natural means to clear negative energy? There is a practical side to beautifying and cleansing your space, home, work area from things that cause imbalance whether it be physical, emotional or spiritual. Prayerfully, we take the time to separate forbidden practices from permissible ones.

Korach's Smoke Connection

In *Parashat Korach*, we learn to divide between unholy and holy use of incense. On the one hand, incense contains the spice of death. On the other hand, burning incense is a particularly beloved form of service to Hashem. Why did Hashem choose firepans to test the assembly of Korach, who ultimately met their death through their firepans (*Bamidbar* 16:5-6,16-17), just as Nadav and Avihu before them? Why was incense invoked once again to stop the plague? (Ibid.17:11-13).

ספר במדבר פרק טז פסוק יז

וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וּנְתָתָם עֲלֵיהֶם קְטֹרֶת וְהִקְרְבָתָם לִפְנֵי הָשֵׁם אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֵתִים מִחֶתֶת וְאַהֲרֹן אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ: (יח) וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם אֵשׁ וַיִּשִּׂמוּ עֲלֵיהֶם קְטֹרֶת וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּמִשָּׁה וְאַהֲרֹן:

Let each man take his censer and place incense upon it, and let each man present his censer before Hashem; [there will thus be] two hundred and fifty censers, and let you and Aharon each [take] his censer. So, each man took his censer, and they put fire upon it and placed incense upon it, and they stood at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting with Moshe and Aharon (*Bamidbar* 16:17-18).

The rebellion of Korach brought about confusion, hatred and a breakdown of the community – in other words, negative energy. The incense reflects the opposite message, i.e. harmony and inter-connectivity. The Hebrew word for incense, קְטֹרֶת/*ketoret*, is related to the root ק-ש-ר/*kasher* – 'bind' 'tie' or 'knot.' The incense unites the essence of all forces – life, matter, and spirit – according to Hashem's extraordinary recipe ([Gold from the Land of Israel](#), pp. 256-257, adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. IV, p. 213). This explains why the ketoret sacrifice is an obligation of the community as opposed to the individual. The exception was during the consecration of the Mishkan, where the twelve *nesi'im* (heads of the tribes) offered ketoret for the sake of representing and uniting the community. When the heads of the tribes joined Korach's rebellion, they separated themselves from the community of Israel. Therefore, they met their death through burning incense, which represents ultimate unity. The incense furthermore tested the unity of the outward appearance with the innermost intention and sincerity of the person offering it. The ascending smoke of the fragrant spices must be matched by earnest feelings of the heart. The external piety of Korach and his assembly was disconnected from their innermost intentions. Their outward display of piety was tainted inwardly by impure motivations and selfish ends. Aharon's incense offering, in contrast, was a reflection of his prayer, emanating from his purity of heart. What could be more fitting imagery for the poignant prayer of the heart, uttered sincerely, than the rising wisp of smoke? (Based on [Rav Michael Hattin, The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash](#)).

Unifying the Negative Energy with the Source of All Energy – Hashem

Perhaps, we can understand the underlying reason why burning or smudging herbs or incense can expel negative energy by defining the nature of negative energy. When we regard reality with a narrow eye, disconnecting it from its higher Divine source, negative energy is created. This explains the Torah's teachings on jealousy and the evil eye, which results from a lack of trust in Hashem's Divine plan, and in His distribution of resources in the world. This implies that negative energy, in essence, is the detachment of thoughts, feelings and intentions of individuals from other people and from Hashem. To explain this concept more concretely, negative energy is created when people argue and fight, or when they speak or think badly of one another. These negative interactions arise from being jealous, depressed, or angry etc. Each of these negative emotions derive from a lack of emunah, which ultimately stems from being disconnected from Hashem. In order to overcome this disconnect, we need to broaden our perspective, to reconnect with the higher Divine source of reality. Since burning herbs causes spiritual unification, perhaps smudging may have the ability to include and connect all energy in a given space and unify it to the source of all energy – Hashem. This explains why incense in the Torah can convert destructive forces, and overcome death. This process is another way of explaining the Chassidic concept of sweetening the judgments in their root. The best way to deal with judgments and transform hardships is to gain a greater perspective reconnecting the judgments with their source in the ultimate good of the Creator. Complementing the inner work of sweetening the judgments in their roots with herb smudging may help this process along.