

Making Scents of Purim

Rabbi Yoni Levin

Director of Programming, Beren and Wexner Kollel Elyon
Beren Kollel Elyon '10

In His infinite wisdom, Hashem authored the Torah, laced with countless secrets. This timeless masterpiece alludes to episodes that would eventually greet the world, and masks personalities that would alter the fate of the Jewish people. As with other characters in Tanach, Chazal search for a Biblical allusion to one of the heroes of the Purim story, Mordechai Hayehudi.

Where is Mordechai to be found in the Torah? As it is written (Shmos 30:23) : [And you shall take for yourselves] mar deror, and the Targum [Onkelos] translates this as mira dachyia.

Chullin 139b

מרדכי מן התורה מנין? דכתיב
(שמות ל:כג) [ואתה קח לך בשמים
ראש] מר דרור ומתרגמינן: מירא
דכיא.
חולין דף קל"ט:

The specific words employed by the Torah to envelop these mysteries are of great significance; the words are meant to reveal something profound about the characters hidden behind them. The words “*mar deror*,” therefore, should then indicate something insightful about Mordechai. *Mar deror* is a spice used in making the *shemen hamishcha*, the holy oil used to anoint and initiate the use of the utensils in the mishkan. What is the correlation between Mordechai and spices? What is the Torah teaching us about Mordechai’s character by concealing his name within the words “*mar deror*”?

The connection to *havdalah*

Mordechai is not the only Purim character likened to a spice. Esther follows suit with her second name, Hadassah, which the gemara (Megilah 10b) compares to a *hadas*.

In Talmudic times, the *hadas*, one of the four species taken on Sukkos, was primarily used for smelling (Sukkah 37b). In addition to its inclusion in the mitzvah of *lulav* on Sukkos, the *hadas* is also used in connection with *havdalah*.

The custom is to use a hadas [for besamim] when possible
Shulchan Aruch O”C 297:4

And it is written in the Zohar that this is based on the passuk (Yeshayahu 55:13) “and in place of sarpad will rise hadas” which precedes the passuk (56:2) “and you shall keep the Shabbos from being profaned”

Mishna Brurah 297:8

נהגו לברך על ההדס כל היכא
דאפשר
שולחן ערוך או”ח רצז:ד
וכ”כ בזוהר וסמך לדבר ותחת
הסרפד יעלה הדס וסמך ליה
שומר שבת מחללו
משנה ברורה רצז:ח

The rationale, explains the Tur, is that when an object is used for one *mitzvah* one should strive to use that item for another *mitzvah* (Brachos 39b), and, therefore, since the *hadasim* were used for the *mitzvah* of *lulav* they should also be used for the *mitzvah* of *havdalah*. Although logical, Rav Yosef Karo writes that there is a more profound meaning to the custom of using *hadasim* for *havdalah*, but does not provide the reader with any further explanation. A further analysis of the sources will help reveal this strong link between Purim, spices, and now, *havdalah* as well.

Fragrance is the spiritual sustenance

What is the source for saying hallel on Rosh Chodesh? We find that David HaMelech hints to it in Psalm 150 by mentioning the word 'praise' 12 times corresponding to the 12 months. Therefore, we repeat the last statement of praise totaling 13 praises for the 13 months in the leap year.

Shibolei HaLeket (172)

מנין שאומרים הלל בראש חדש מצינו
שרמז דוד בתהלים (קנ) הללויה הללו
אל בקדשו י"ב פעמים הללו כנגד י"ב
חדשים ולפיכך אנו כופלים כל הנשמה
על שנה מעוברת שיש לה י"ג חדשים
ועל חדש ב' ימים
שיבולי הלקט קעב

But which praise corresponds to which month? The Klausenberger Rebbe, Rav Yekutial Yehuda Halberstam, offers some insight. The first mention of praise corresponds to the first month of all the months, Nisan, and the praise that includes the blowing of the *shofar* refers to Elul, when we blow the *shofar* every morning of the entire month (Shu"t Divrei Yatziv O" C 96). It would seem very sensible that "כל הנשמה תהלל יה הללו יה", which is repeated, should correspond to the month of Adar that gets repeated on the Jewish leap year – the very month containing Purim. What's even more interesting is that this very *pasuk*, which represents the month of Adar, is also the source¹¹⁷ of making *brachos* prior to smelling *besamim*, further highlighting the correlation between Purim and the nature of smell.

The power of smell warrants a *bracha* because of the benefit and nourishment it provides the body. But it is not the nourishment of the physical body; rather, it is to the spiritual component of man that is nourished by a pleasant fragrance. This notion that the spiritual element of man is nourished by the breathtaking aromas emitted from the finest spices will be a key factor in understanding the enigma at hand.

Drinking wine is like smelling!

But before connecting the dots, it is imperative that an essential theme of Purim be addressed. There are seven liquids (water, dew, wine, milk, blood, honey, and oil) that make any food susceptible to impurity; for example, an apple that has been detached from the tree must first come in contact with one of these liquids as a prerequisite to obtaining a state of impurity. Chazal write that each of these liquids corresponds to one of the Jewish holidays: Pesach: blood, Shavuot: milk, Rosh Hashannah: honey, Yom Kippur: dew, Sukkos: water, Chanukah: oil, and Purim: wine. The connection of wine to Purim needs little defense, but a connection of wine to the sense of smell would seem unfounded. Chazal issued the well-known statement of Chazal "מיחייב איניש לבסומי" (Megilah 7b), which describes the requirement to drink wine on Purim. The Aramaic word for

¹¹⁷ Berachos 43b

getting drunk is 'לבסומי' almost identical to the Hebrew word *besamim*, spices! Does this suggest that the consumption of wine and the smelling of spices have similar effects?

R' Chanina said, anyone who can be reconciled while under the influence of wine has a quality of his Creator, as it is written (Bereishis 8:21) "and Hashem smelled the sweet savor".

Eruvin 65b

And we explained earlier that smelling is like drinking
Rashi ibid.

אמר רבי חנינא: כל המתפתה ביינו
יש בו מדעת קונו, שנאמר וירח ה'
את ריח הניחח וגו'
ערובין סה:
ואמרן לעיל דריחא דומיא דמשתייא
הוא,
רש"י שם

The word 'וירח', translated as *he smelled*, is used to prove that wine operates as a great pacifist and peacemaker. One of the most basic themes of Purim is wine, and here too, the power of smell is an underlying factor.

The motives of the *nachash* and Haman

In order to fully comprehend the unique power of smell, the malicious motives of the villain of the Purim story must be analyzed. What set off Haman on a tirade to annihilate the Jews? Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov writes in *Bnei Yisaschar* (Mamarei Chodesh Sivan 4) that the sense of smell was the only one of the senses unaffected by the sin of the snake in Gan Eden. Focusing in on the story of Adam and Chavah, particularly their sin and exile from Gan Eden, a mention of each of the five senses can be found with the exception of the sense of smell, thus serving as a basis for Rabbi Shapira's argument. Haman is considered by chazal to be a "descendent" of the *nachash*.

Where is Haman found in the Torah? As it says (Bereshis 3:11) "[Have you eaten] of the tree, [that I commanded you not to eat?]

Chullin 139b

המן מן התורה מנין? (בראשית ג') המן העץ,
[אשר צויתך לבלתי אכל ממנו אכלת:]
חולין קלט:

What were the motives of the *nachash*? The *nachash* argued that by eating the forbidden fruit, Chavah would transform into a heavenly creature, elevating her onto a plane with Hashem. Notwithstanding that his assertion was entirely incorrect, the *nachash* intended on equating all forms of creation. He desired equality, conformity, and uniformity. No individual should be superior to the next. The *nachash* believed that G-d should not have full sovereign over the world and, therefore, insisted that Chavah eat from the Tree of Knowledge hoping to equate her to the Almighty. This set of beliefs was echoed centuries later by the *nachash's* "progeny", Haman. Haman wanted every member of the kingdom to be equal, but Mordechai's stubborn refusal to prostrate to Haman and conform to the actions of others aggravated Haman tremendously. Haman relayed to the king the heinous crime of the Jews

And Haman said to King Achashverosh there is one nation scattered and alone among the nations in all the states of your kingdom, and their belief is different from other nations, and they don't conform to the rules of the king and it is not worthwhile for

ויאמר המן למלך אחשוורוש ישנו
עם אחד מפזר ומפרד בין העמים
בכל מדינות מלכותך ודתיהם שנות
מכל עם ואת דתי המלך אינם עשים

the king to leave them.

Esther 3:8

ולמלך אין שוה להניחם:

אסתר ג:ח

The crime was that Mordechai did not bow down to Haman. It had nothing to do with the unique religion and culture of Klal Yisrael. Yet Haman's complaint to Achashverosh exposed Haman's true colors. It is apparent that Haman was opposed to Klal Yisrael's unique, special, and sacred religion. Haman tried blurring the class lines as did his role model, the snake.

The strength of smell

Despite Haman's efforts, Mordechai and Esther waged a successful war against their nemesis. What was the secret weapon that overpowered Haman? The heroes of Purim tapped into a deep long-held arsenal untainted by the many generations of enemies. The power of smell endured the tactics of the snake and it was this force that ultimately dethroned Haman. The sense of smell earned its might by channeling sweet aromas to the *neshama*, providing it with spiritual nourishment and sustenance. Similar to the way the delightful aroma travels an unadulterated path directly to the *neshama*, so too Mordechai and Esther, the "*mar deror*" and the "*hadass*", maintained a clear and moral outlook. It is because of the pure connection to the *neshama* that Mordechai and Esther were able to thwart Haman's plans. They were empowered to recognize the importance of individuality, the significance of distinctiveness, and the value of hierarchy. They recognized the difference between the sanctified and the mundane, between light and darkness, between the Jewish people and the other nations, and between Shabbos and the rest of the week. It is for this reason that we incorporate the *hadass* in *havdalah*, where we mention all of these differences. And it is for this reason that we include the famed *pasuk* from Megilas Esther in *havdalah* "ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר", and for the Jews there was light, happiness joy and honor.