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IT WAS TAUGHT IN THE ACADEMY OF ELIYAHU, WHOEVER STUDIES TORAH LAWS
EVERY DAY IS ASSURED THAT HE WILL BE PRESENT IN THE 'WORLD TO COME'

Smelling Fragrances on Yom Kippur

There are five physical pleasures that are forbidden on Yom Kippur;¹

1) Eating & drinking, 2) washing any part of the body, 3) anointing oneself with oils, 4) wearing leather shoes and 5) marital relations.² One could dedicate a whole essay on each of these categories alone, explaining why they are restricted on a simple and more mystical level. The focus of this essay, however, is on a form of pleasure that seems to be very much allowed on Yom Kippur - it is the enjoyment of **pleasant fragrances**.

Why would this form of physical pleasure be permitted? Surely on a day like Yom Kippur, where we find *prishut* (physical abstinence) to be the main theme, smelling nice fragrances should have also been forbidden?

Indeed we find that not only is it permitted to smell fragrances on Yom Kippur, but in many communities it is in fact **encouraged** to do so. For example, in some Sephardi communities a member of the congregation is appointed on Yom Kippur to pass around rose water, fragrant spices or myrtle (*hadass*) for the congregants to recite a blessing on.

There is also an old established *minhag* (custom) amongst the Afghan and Persian communities to pour **rose-water** on the hands of the Kohanim just before they ascend to bless the congregation at the climatic *Ne'ilah* service near the end of Yom Kippur.

We will try to look into the sources of these minhagim and how they marry with the opinions of the early and late halachic authorities. We also hope to display a deeper insight into the topic of the "sense of smell" and the surprisingly significant role this precious gift plays in the spiritual scheme of things.

1. עיין א"ח סימנים תרי"ב - תרטו.

2. ע' סל' תריא, ס"א, כה"ח אות ה'.

Our halachic journey begins with the **Seder HaYom**³ - a sefer written in the year 5359 (1598) by HaRav Moshe ben Yehuda Machir, who was an immense Rabbinic figure from the saintly town of Sefat and also a disciple of the holy Ari z'l. The Seder HaYom was troubled that on holy days such as Shabbatot and Yamim Tovim, due to the shortened prayer service, a person would not have the opportunity to fulfil his obligation to recite **one hundred blessings** every day.

From the era of King David a decree was established that a Jew must recite a hundred b'rachot every day in order to uplift a terrible tragedy that was occurring at that time.⁴ On a normal weekday a person can fulfil this obligation relatively easily by simply davening Shaharit, Mincha and Arvit, reciting the various berachot before and after eating and drinking, as well as reciting the other blessings of the typical daily routine.⁵ However, on Shabbatot and Yamim Tovim one would be missing many of these b'rachot due to the shortened prayer service. The same would apply on Yom Kippur where we would be missing over twenty b'rachot.

In order to reconcile this issue the Seder HaYom re-introduced an old custom that was originally practiced by some of the Sages of the Talmudic period. The Talmud in tractate Menahot⁶ records that the great Amora, **Rav Hiya** the son of Rav Oya, would make a special effort to partake in smelling fragrances and eating delicacies on Shabbatot and Yamim Tovim in order to help reach his quota of a hundred blessings. In keeping with this practice, the Seder HaYom advised that on Yom Kippur each person should take with him to synagogue some sort of *besamim* (fragrant substance) or *hadassim* (myrtle) and to recite blessings on them every hour or so.⁷

This brings us back to our question. If Yom Kippur is a time when physical pleasures are kept to a minimum, then why would this practice have been encouraged?

3. חיוב מאה ברכות בכל יום, דף סד.

4. עיין טור או"ח סימן מו.

5. עיין ב"י שם.

6. דף מג.

7. מיהו ע' סל' ריז ס"א ובאחרונים שם, וע"ע מ"ב סל' תריב ס"ק ח"י.

The Seder HaYom gives us a surprising and seemingly novel answer to this question:⁸

ועוד דתענוג נשמה הוא זה, ולא תענוגה דגוף, כמו שדרשו רז"ל... איזו דבר הוא שהנשמה
נהנת ממנו ולא הגוף, זהו הרית, ואם כן אין חשש לתענוג הנפש.

And furthermore [smelling fragrances] is a pleasure of the Soul and not a physical pleasure, as the Rabbis z'l expounded....⁹ "Which substance is it that the Soul derives pleasure from and not the body? It is fragrance!" And if that is so then [it is permitted] for there is no restriction on the Soul from getting pleasure [on Yom Kippur].

It is now evident that only the soul really benefits from the pleasure of smelling fragrances and not the body, which is why fragrances are permitted on Yom Kippur. However, we find that the **Knesset HaGedolah**¹⁰ disagrees with the Seder HaYom on this point. The Knesset HaGedolah (HaRav Hayim Benveniste, 1603-1673) was an important Rabbinic figure of 17th century Turkey. He ruled that it is also forbidden for the *Neshama* (higher soul) to gain pleasure on Yom Kippur and therefore one should refrain from smelling fragrances on this day. The Knesset HaGedolah therefore advised that in order to fulfill the quota of one hundred b'rachot one should rely on the blessings recited during the Torah reading of the day. Below is an extract from the Knesset HaGedolah:

נראה לי דלהריח ריח טוב ביום שציותה תורה לענות אדם נפשו אינו מן הדין
שהנשמה נהנה מן הריח...

It seems to me that to smell pleasant fragrances on a day in which the Torah commands man to inflict his 'Nefesh' is not correct, for the Neshama derives pleasure from the fragrance.

The opinion of the Knesset HaGedolah would be generally difficult to understand according to the Seder HaYom. The whole essence of Yom Kippur is designed to uplift a person in a very spiritual sense. This holy time is therefore an immensely pleasurable time for a person's soul. So it is questionable to believe that the soul should also be restricted from deriving pleasure on Yom Kippur.

8. שם

9. גמ' מנחות שם

10. סימן מו.

The Shulhan Aruch¹¹ seems to side with the Seder HaYom in this argument, as Mar'an, HaRav Yosef Caro, clearly teaches that it is forbidden to smell fragrances on the Fast of Tisha B'Av and yet, he does not mention that it is also forbidden to do so on Yom Kippur. Subsequently, we find that many of the later Sephardi and Ashkenazi halachic authorities permitted *besamim* on Yom Kippur, amongst them being the Hida,¹² the Kaf HaHaim,¹³ the Mishna Berura¹⁴ HaRav Mordechai Eliyahu zt'l,¹⁵ and HaRav Ovadia Yosef שליט"א.¹⁶

There is an obvious difficulty we can ask at this point; We all know that nice fragrances give a person a fair degree of physical pleasure as well. So why did the Seder HaYom and others maintain that this form of delight is one associated with the soul only?

The **Ben Ish Hai** addresses this question and explains as follows;¹⁷ Even though the body also derives physical pleasure from nice fragrances, nevertheless the pleasure experienced by the soul is far greater. As we know the physical delight one attains by smelling a nice fragrance immediately ceases after the fragrance has disappeared. This is unlike other forms of physical pleasure, like eating and drinking for example, where there is an existing sense of satisfaction for some time after the item has been used or consumed. The Ben Ish Hai explains that the soul, however, occupies a dimension where there is **no space or time**, therefore the pleasure it experiences from a nice fragrance is a much more powerful experience.

A well known example that highlights the special connection between the 'sense of smell' and the 'soul' is the institution to partake of *besamim* in the Havdallah service of Motzei Shabbat. The Talmud¹⁸ explains that the reason why we include *besamim* in Havdallah is because since the soul is disheartened by the departing of Shabbat, we therefore please it and enlighten it through the smelling of pleasant fragrances.

11. סימן רסה, סעי' ד.

12. ברכי יוסף, סימן תריב, סעי' ק"ב.

13. סימן תרל"ב, אות לג, ע"ע מ"א שם, אות ד.

14. שם.

15. הלכות חגים, פרק מו, אות קיד.

16. חזון עובדיה, דף רפג.

17. פרשת ואתחנן, אות א.

18. ביצה דף טז.

The **Holy Zohar** reveals on a deeper level that a person receives an “extra Soul” when Shabbat enters and this soul actually departs on Motzei Shabbat to its original abode. When this special soul returns to the upper firmament, our remaining soul is saddened for it is now left behind. So we smell fragrances in Havdallah in order to uplift and gladden our remaining soul.

Below is a caption of the precious words the Zohar reveals on this subject:¹⁹

**כד נפק שבתא בעי לארחא בבוסמין לאתיישובא נפשיה בההוא ריחא על ההוא
ריחא עילאה קדישא דאסתלק מינה... ודא איהו קיומא דנפשא.**

*When Shabbat departs we are required to smell fragrances in order to uplift one's soul using that fragrance, due to that exalted holy soul that has departed from you.
And this [fragrance] is the sustenance of the soul...*

It is interesting to see that the Zohar uses exactly the same word, **ריחא** - *Rei'ha*, for the “soul” as it does for “fragrance” (see underlined above). There seems to be a fundamental connection between the two! It would for sure be a futile exercise to try and explain the essence of this connection in the context of this essay. But perhaps we can attempt to give across enough material on the subject that will allow the readers to arrive at an individual understanding on their own, each according to their level. We will discuss this point near the end of the essay.

We have learnt so far the importance of increasing b'rachot on holy days where there is a shortage in the amount of b'rachot we normally recite. We have also learnt that fragrances, in particular, are of significant benefit to the soul. With this information in mind let us now analyse the two minhagim we mentioned at the beginning of the essay.

ויקהל רח: 19.

The **first minhag** is prevalent in many Sephardi communities and entails smelling fragrances on Yom Kippur after the recital of a blessing. In most communities the actual custom is specific to **rose-water**.²⁰ Rose-water is prepared before Yom Kippur by being diluted in water and it is then used on the day for people to either smell or wash their hands with, when necessary. The reason why it is diluted in water before Yom Kippur is because there would otherwise be an issue of **מוליד ריחא** "*molid reha*",²¹ meaning imbuing incense into a substance, which is a type of *melacha* (creative activity) that is Rabbinically forbidden on Yom Kippur, Shabbat and Yom Tov. So in order to avoid this potential transgression the water is prepared before the on-set of Yom Kippur.

A question normally arises regarding this minhag. When people wash their hands with rose-water, their skin would ultimately become imbued by the fragrant scent. In theory we would expect this to be forbidden on Yom Kippur as one would be transgressing the *issur of molid reha*?

HaRav Mordechai Eliyahu zt'l was asked this question and permitted the custom of putting rose-water on one's hands on Yom Kippur. The Rav clarified that a person's hands are considered to be **עסקניות** (fidgety) and fragrances therefore do not stay on the hands permanently. This would not be the case regarding putting fragrances in water or on one's clothing, for example, where the fragrance remains for a considerable amount of time to constitute the issue of *molid reha*. It should also be noted that if one's intention is to make a blessing on the rose-water and not to imbue it in one's skin, then there is an even greater *heter* (allowance) to do so.²²

The **second minhag** is as much fascinating as it is mind-boggling. The custom originates from the Jewish communities of Afghanistan and Iran and it is still practiced to this day. The details of the minhag are quite specific and involve the following procedure;

20. See the end of the essay for a possible insight into why specifically rose-water was used on Yom Kippur.

21. עיין הט"ז בסימן

22. כך שמעתי מפיו לחלק, דאף שהרב פעלים ח"ב סי' נא החמיר בענין הולדת ריח בגוף האדם הרי שם התיר. אם אין מכוין להוליד ריח ולכן במקומות בגוף שאין הריח בר קיומא כגון מתחת לבית השחי ובידים שנוגע תדיר בדברים אחרים אין הריח מתקיים ולכן יש להתיר.

In the late afternoon of Yom Kippur, during the repetition of the *Ne'ilah* service, the Kohanim would have their hands washed with water in preparation for blessing the congregation. After their hands were washed, just before they ascended the platform, an appointed individual would pour several drops of **rose-water** into the hands of each Kohen. The Kohanim would then ascend and begin the special mitzvah of birchat Kohanim. One can imagine what an uplifting affect the potent rose-water would have under the *talitot* (prayer shawls) of the Kohanim on this holy fast day. There are many details that make this minhag uniquely different from the first one mentioned above:

1. Firstly, the rose-water was only used in the Ne'ilah service and at no other time on Yom Kippur, or the whole year for that matter.
2. Only rose-water was used and no other fragrant substance.
3. Only the Kohanim were given this privilege and no other congregant put rose-water on their hands.
4. There was no blessing recited on the rose-water by the Kohanim.²³

We have already mentioned that the first minhag is routed in the Talmud Menahot, the Seder HaYom, Magen Avraham and Kaf HaHaim. The reason behind that minhag is to increase b'rachot on Yom Kippur. But this second minhag has little to do with the mitzvah of increasing brachot, after all the Kohanim did not recite a b'racha on the rose-water. It is likely that the reason why a blessing was not recited was because the rose-water was used as a 'perfume', in honour of the Kohanim and their vital role in the service, rather than a substance to make a b'racha on.²⁴

It is important to mention at this point how precious and fundamental our minhagim are. One must never be-little or disregard an established custom of a community. You only need to look a little under the surface to be amazed by how even the most miniscule of details is routed in pillars of immense spiritual wisdom, which we are about to witness.

23. The rose-water was then passed to the women of the congregation who did recite a blessing on it. We have also seen in the excerpts of the late Rabbi Dovid Moradoff zt'l that in Afghanistan the rose-water was given to barren women to drink (on motzei Yom Kippur) and it was believed this would help them conceive.

24. מיהו יש לפקפק בזה מהא דסי' ריז סע' ב, ואפשר דהמנהג הקדום היה לרחוץ רק במי ורדים לצורך עלייתן לדוכן, ושמענו שכך נהגו בעיר "הַרְאָט" מפי מרת דבורה עמבאלו הי'.

So what is the reason behind the minhag of “**Rose-Water at Ne'ilah**”? Is there an explanation for the many specific details of this custom as listed above? In order to answer these questions we would have to delve into the very essence of what it means to have a ‘sense of smell’ and how this is connected to the Kohanim and the Ne'ilah service.

Earlier on in the essay, after seeing the words of the Zohar, we mentioned that there seems to be a mystical connection between the ‘soul’ and the ‘sense of smell’. It is fascinating to see how strongly this is hinted to in the very beginning of the Torah. When Hashem created man, the Torah tells us that He literally blew Adam’s soul into his body through the medium of his nose:²⁵

וייצר ה' אלקים את האדם עפר מן האדמה ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים
ויהי האדם לנפש חיה

And Hashem, Elokim, created the man from dust of the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being.

An important axiom in our faith is that there is nothing random in the creation of our universe. Every physical matter that exists in the world corresponds to, or is rooted in, a much higher spiritual reality of that same thing. The Ari z'l reveals that different parts of our body, whether used for the good or for the bad (Heaven forbid), can affect the influence of specific Divine attributes on this world and in our lives. In Sha'ar HaKavanot he teaches us that one's nose, mouth, arms, hands and fingers all correspond to the Divine attribute of **Gevurah**, which means the manifestation of **strict justice** in the world - an attribute that we certainly do not want to trigger on Yom Kippur! Below is the relevant extract from Sha'ar HaKavanot:²⁶

כי הנה מקום ה' הגבורות הוא בה' מקומות כנו'... והם חוטמא, פומא, דרועין, ידין, אצבעין.
וחוטמא הוא העליון שבכולן וכשהגבורות מתקבצות ועולות ונכנסות בסוד הריח דרך נקבי
החוטם הנה הם עולות עד המוח הנק' "דעת" אשר שם עיטרא דגבורה שהיא שורש כל החמש
גבורות כנודע, ואז הם מתמתקים שם כנודע כי אין הדינים מתמתקין אלא בשורשם...

בראשית ב, ז. 25.

דף עב, ע"ב. 26.

For behold, the place of the 5 Gevurot are in the 5 places mentioned... and they are the nose, mouth, arms, hands and fingers. And the nose is the highest of all of them. And when the Gevurot gather together and arise and enter through the medium of “scent”, through the nostrils of the nose, they rise up until the brain, which is called “Da'at” that is the highest dimension of “Gevurah”, which is the root of all the 5 Gevurot, and then over there they become sweetened, for the ‘Dinnim’ (harsh judgements) can only become sweetened in their source!

With that in mind now let us mention what the Sha'ar HaKavanot reveals about the Ne'ilah service of Yom Kippur. The Ne'ilah service is known to be one of the most cosmic and spiritually potent moments in time for the whole year. The Sha'ar HaKavanot explains that at Ne'ilah the ‘doors of mercy’ begin to close. However, this is simultaneously the most opportune moment for mercy and salvation. For it is then that the five *Gevurot* mentioned above can be **sweetened** to the highest level until all that is left is Hashem's attribute of Divine mercy (*rahamim*).

It is now undeniably obvious, inasmuch as it is fascinating, as to why such a custom was established to put rose-water on the hands of the Kohanim as they bless the congregation in the Ne'ilah service. What you would ultimately be achieving is a sweetening affect of all the five *Gevurot* mentioned above. The table below spells this out clearly:

	THE 5 GEVUROT	HOW THEY ARE “SWEETENED”
1	The Nose	Scent of Rose-Water
2	The Mouth	The recital of Birchat Kohanim
3	The Arms	The arms of the Kohanim held upright
4	The Hands	The hands of the Kohanim raised upwards
5	The Fingers	The fingers of the Kohanim split

The above gives us an insight into this precious minhag that none of us could have ever fathomed before. By adding the element of rose-water to the seder of Birkat Kohanim we are able to sweeten all five levels of harshness and especially so the highest one, which is through the facet of the nose.

One last question remains... Why rose-water? Why is no other other fragrant substance used? We find the answer written clearly and beautifully in the beginning of the Introduction to the Zohar.²⁷

The Zohar quotes the famous verse from Shir HaShirim...²⁸

כְּשׁוֹשְׁנָה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים

“Like a rose among the thorns.”

and gives us the following explanation:

Who is the rose? She is Israel.

*Just as the rose, who is among the thorns, has in her red and white,
so the Community of Israel has in her justice and **compassion**.*

*Just as the rose has in her thirteen leaves (petals),
so the Community of Israel has in her **13 measures of compassion**,
which surround her from all sides.²⁹³⁰*

Gmar Hatima tova!

Rabbi Yosef Haim David

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27. דף א'.

28. ב'ב.

29. The 'rose' therefore symbolises the 13 Attributes of Mercy: *Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum, Hanun, Erech appayim, Rav hesed, Emet, Notzer hesed, la'alafim, Noseh avon, Noseh peshah, Noseh hata'ah, Venakeh.*

30. כך שמעתי מידיד נפשי רפאל עמבאלו שיחיל' ודפח"ח.