



Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Ki Tisa / פרשת כי תשא / 5779

## The Sweet Smell of Yerushalayim

In the beginning of the parsha, the Torah instructs us regarding the ingredients of the Ketoret (Incense). One item on the list that surprised the commentators is “helbenah” which emits a foul odor. Noting the seeming incongruence of including such an item in the seemingly sweet-smelling incense, Rashi explains:<sup>1</sup>

and helbenah: A spice with a vile odor, called galbane [in Old French], galbanum. The Scripture counted it among the ingredients of the incense [in order] to teach us that we should not look askance at including Jewish transgressors with us when we assemble for fasting or prayer. [The Torah instructs us] that they should be counted with us.

Citing the Talmud, Rashi explains that the helbenah represents the Jewish sinners who can be included as part of communal prayer services.

What is the basis of this inclusion? Why do we pray with the sinners? A cursory read of Rashi might indicate that this is a compromise. Really, we would rather pray with a community of the solely righteous. However, due to the overriding value of Jewish unity, we are granted permission to include sinners as well.

The Ran, however, raises a different possibility.<sup>2</sup> He argues that in the physical world we find entities that are repugnant on their own but when mixed with other elements contribute to eliciting the best inner fragrance from the other ingredients thereby producing a unified higher-quality smell. On its own, the helbenah emits a foul odor, but in a group, it actually succeeds in creating an overall better incense.

Similarly, the same is true with the Jewish people. As the Arizal notes, the word for community – “tzibbur” - is an acronym for “tzadikim” “beinoniyim” and “resha'im” (the righteous,

<sup>1</sup> Rashi to Shemot 30:34. Translation adapted from Chabad.org.

<sup>2</sup> Derashot HaRan, Derush 1.



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intermediates and the wicked). All Jews are part of the same holistic entity and without every single individual, no matter the person's external behavior, there is something lacking in the community as a whole. The righteous and the wicked are intricately linked to the extent that the righteous can only emit their ultimate positive fragrance when unified with the wicked.

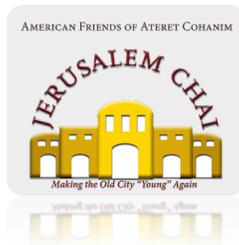
This notion of the inherent significance of each Jew for the Jewish people is highlighted in Yerushalayim. The city is the great equalizer. Yerushalayim was not granted to a specific tribe but is rather the inheritance of the entire Jewish people.<sup>3</sup> Despite the differing standards of commitment to the laws of ritual purity, the Talmud teaches that all Jews were able to interact and eat together when they ascended to Yerushalayim for their holiday pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> It is in Yerushalayim that we come together and viscerally see how all Jews are interconnected and unified.

May Yerushalayim once again retain its status as the great unifier of the Jewish people!

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<sup>3</sup> Yoma 12b.

<sup>4</sup> Yerushalmi Chagigah 3:6.



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