

# Moses and Drugs

We chose today for Pharmacist Shabbat in order to ensure that Bill Kassimir and Arny Wishner, pharmacists by trade who does so much for our congregation, could be back from vacation. We are also celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the father-in-law of a pharmacist, Max Fontak, so it is a very fitting Shabbat to honor our pharmacists. However, I want to take you back to two weeks ago when we read Parshat Ki Tisa, as there's an interesting reference found by Rena Klein. In the middle of the portion, we see **קח לך סמים**, "G-d said to Moses 'take for yourself herbs,'"<sup>1</sup> and then it lists four herbs (Stacte, onycha, galbanum and frankincense). It goes on to say **רקח מעשה רקח**, "this is the work of a pharmacist."<sup>2</sup> The herbs are being used to make incense which will be put in front of the Tent of Meeting. In Modern Hebrew, **סמים** is the word for drugs, indicating that Moses was in fact an early pharmacist. He had to figure out the proper concoction of these herbs to

---

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 30:34

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 30:35

make potent incense to burn before G-d. Furthermore, this incense could only be used before G-d, not for Israel's own personal use.<sup>3</sup>

Why would the incense used be so important? After all, Parshat Ki Tisa is not the only place in which it is mentioned. At the end of Eyn Keloheinu, we have a line which says אתה הוא שהקטירו אבותנו לפניך את קטרת הסמים, “You have instructed our ancestors in the making of incense.” Orthodox Siddurim then have a section called פטום הקטורת (*pitum haketoret*) from Mishnah Keritut,<sup>4</sup> listing eleven types of spices and other substances, along with their quantities, that go into the making of incense. In reading this, we see that the rabbis were aware of mixtures of various herbs and spices in making the incense, so much so that the passage contains the phrase ואם חסר אחת מכל סמניה חיב מיטה, “if one of the herbs was left out, one was liable for death.” Every ingredient was of utmost importance.

When we look at Parshat VaYikra, we see the importance of the incense. Five types of sacrifices are mentioned: Olah, Mincha, Zevah

---

<sup>3</sup> See Exodus 30:37

<sup>4</sup> Mishnah Keritut 6:1

Shlamim, Hatat and Asham. Of those five, four of them are from animals, the exception being the Mincha, or flour, offering. With so many animals being sacrificed on an ongoing basis, the Tabernacle must have stunk, and incense would have been needed to mask the smell. After all sacrifices were supposed to be ריח ניחוח<sup>5</sup>, of pleasant smell, and burning entire animals could not have had a good smell without help from aromatic substances like incense.

We see the great care that was put into making the incense for the Tabernacle. Similarly, we know from the work of pharmacists that like the recipe for the incense, precision matters. Everything must appear in exactly the right quantity, as even the most minute error of milligrams can have a disastrous effect. The attention to detail both of pharmacists today and of those from biblical and rabbinic times is essential. Someone like me might have glazed-over eyes when reading a long list of ingredients that go into a medicine; not so for pharmacists, who must be aware of every iota of its contents.

---

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 1:9

Let us honor those pharmacists who have given so much both to their professions and to the Jericho Jewish Center: Seymour Cohen, Bill Kassimir, Arny Wishner, Jake Jacobson and Sy Kirshenbaum in abstentia; and Nancy Sherman who works in pharmaceuticals. We appreciate your ongoing dedication to all that you do and are blessed to have you as part of our sacred community. Thank you for who you are, for what you do and for following in the footsteps of Moses in making “wonder-drugs” out of herbs.