

SMELLING THE FRAGRANCE OF HOPE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

They sat to eat food. They raised their eyes, and behold! they saw a caravan of Yishma'elim coming from Gilead, their camels bearings spices, balsam and lotus... They drew Yosef and lifted him from the pit and sold Yosef to the Yishma'elim. [37:25-28]

What is the significance of what exactly the group of Arabs to whom Yosef was sold was carrying? Rashi cites a Midrash:

This teaches the reward of the righteous. Normally, Arab caravans would carry foul-smelling naphthalene and tar. Yet here, it was arranged for Yosef [that they were carrying] spices - so that he would not be harmed by the foul smell.

The issue of what the caravan of Arabs to whom Yosef was sold was carrying seems somewhat inconsequential in light of the fact he was being forcibly sold into slavery by his brothers. Pleasant-smelling spices would for most anyone be of little consolation given the circumstances. Yet the Torah goes out of its way to tell us what the group was carrying.

A person was involved in a terrifying car accident which left him in a coma for many months. One day, the devastated family received an urgent call from the nursing station at the hospital. Their initial fear quickly switches to hope and comfort when the voice on the other end tells them the man has opened his eyes. "Has he spoken?" they ask. No. "Has he motioned at all?" No. "But still," the voice says, "this is critical; a first step. Once they open their eyes, it means they're on their way to recovery."

The Jews may go down from time to time, someone once quipped, but they're never out. Even from our nation's darkest moments, there have always emerged small signs of hope and light.

Yosef is at a low point in his life, to be sure. All the same, the fragrant spices carried by his captors was a sign of hope, a hint to Yosef from Hashem that He hadn't forsaken him, despite the darkness of the moment, and the travails that yet awaited.

The message to every Jew: Even in life's most pungent moments, the fragrance of hope awaits those willing to smell it. (Mefarshim)

With Chanukah just around the corner, let's recall the Beis Yosef's famous question: Why do we celebrate Chanukah for eight days if the bottle of untarnished oil found by the Chashmonaim held enough oil to burn for one day? True the oil burned for eight days, but only seven of them were miraculous?

A separate question, less famous, is this: Isn't the miracle of the oil burning for eight days somewhat of a bittersweet triumph? After all, how many weeks and months and years went by during which the Jews were at war and the Temple under siege, and during which there was no Menorah, no sacrifices, and no Temple services at all? Is the oil burning for seven or eight days after a period of such extensive desolation so significant as to warrant a commemoration, and an entire chag?

One answer to the Beis Yosef's question, based on a gloss of the Sheiltos De-Rav Achai Gaon, is that the correct reading of the Gemara is that the flask didn't even hold enough oil to burn for one night. Perhaps some of the oil evaporated over time, because it seems unlikely they would have prepared special oil flasks for lighting the Menorah that didn't hold enough oil for one night.

But why? If one undefiled bottle remained despite years of war and siege, a miracle of no small proportions, then why not let it be a full bottle? Perhaps the point of this is to send us a message. To teach us that no matter how dark the darkness, and no matter how small the measure of oil, and how precarious the flame, that every miniscule blessing in our lives is a signpost of hope placed there by Hashem, reminding us that even in our darkest moments, He's there watching over us.

From a strictly logical stance one could argue that an eight-day stint of a lit Menorah after heathens had dominated our Temple for so long is so minor a victory as to be inconsequential. But to do so, perhaps, would be to miss the very lesson of the miracle of Chanukah.

The idea is not to grasp at straws of hope, but to be blessed with the insight to find the kernel of rebirth that is planted in the hearts of those in the throes of their greatest despair. To smell the fragrance of hope that wafts above the rancid odor of anguish. And to be touched by the One Who plants those seeds. Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2007 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and [Torah.org](#)