

A SOOTHING SAVOR

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The term *re'ah niho'ah* occurs several times in the Bible. When Noah emerges from the ark after the Flood, he builds an altar to God and sacrifices a specimen of every clean animal and bird. God is said to have savored the burnt offering, as recorded in Genesis 8:21: *The Lord smelled the pleasing odor [Va-yarah Adonai et re'ah ha-niho'ah]*. This term is found again in Exodus 29:18, when God schools Moses in the ritual ordainment of priests, which involves the sacrifice of a ram on the altar: *It is a burnt offering to the Lord, a pleasing odor [Olah hu la-Adonai, re'ah niho'ah]*. The expression also appears in connection with sacrifices throughout Leviticus and Numbers. This jarring anthropomorphic phrase indicates that God in some way enjoyed the smell of the offerings.

Most Torah commentators regard it as a metaphor, signifying that God was pleased that His instructions were being followed. For instance, the Targum and Saadiah Gaon (on Gen. 8:21) explain that this term simply indicates that the sacrifice was accepted,¹ thus negating any possible anthropomorphic ideas about God. Similarly, Rashi (on Ex. 29:18) quoting Midrash *Sifrei*, states that *niho'ah* means "a pleasure before Me, in that I spoke and My will was done" [*nahat ru'ah lefanai, she-amarti ve-na'asah retzoni*]. However, these commentaries do not explain why terminology referring to smelling was chosen to indicate that God was pleased with the sacrifice.

The term may have been chosen because odors were not thought to have any physical substance: "smelling an odor" was therefore the most non-physical way of describing this spiritual interaction with God.² It is used, particularly in the Noah narrative, to emphasize the contrast between the God of Israel and gods of the Mesopotamian Deluge stories who swoop down "like flies" to eat the sacrifices, and also because of the assonance between No'ah³ (Noah) and the word *niho'ah*.

In his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:47), Maimonides notes that the Bible uses smelling terminology with respect to God, as well as hearing and seeing, but

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not tasting or touching. He explains that while the Almighty does not employ any of these senses, the Bible uses only those anthropomorphic terms in relation to God that do not imply direct physical contact (smell, sight, hearing), and avoids touch and taste, which "people immediately recognize as deficiencies."

However, the Talmud takes this terminology further, understanding "smell" in a less figurative way. The Mishnah (TB *Zevahim* 46b) explains that sacrifices must be brought to God for both their appeasing quality [*le-shem niho'ah*] and their fragrance [*le-shem re'ah*]. Not only does the sacrifice appease God, because we are doing His will, but also because it literally emits a fragrance. R. Yehudah explains in the name of Rav that this is why the animal cannot be first roasted on a spit and then burned on the altar. The fragrance is emitted only during the roasting process, so it must be burned on the altar from the outset. It is crucial that the smell of the burning sacrifice be emitted when it is on the altar. Furthermore, the Talmud (TB *Berakhot* 43b) describes pleasant odors as a thing that the soul (*neshamah*) enjoys, but not the physical body. There is thus an implication that God derives some spiritual pleasure from the smell of the sacrifice. According to this approach, what is it that God experiences when He takes in its fragrance?

To answer that question, let us first explore the meaning of the words *re'ah* and *niho'ah*. The word *re'ah* means scent, odor, or savor. It is related to the word *ru'ah* denoting breath, wind, or spirit. Both words are used in connection with God, *re'ah* to describe God enjoying the sacrifices offered, and *ru'ah* as in the phrase *a wind from God* [*ru'ah Elohim*] in the Creation story (Gen.1:2). Metaphorically speaking, *re'ah* is something God breathes in and *ru'ah* something He breathes out. Taking this a step further, *ru'ah* is something God emanates, as in the term *ru'ah Elohim* signifying divine inspiration (Gen. 41:38, Ex. 31:3, Num. 24:2, etc.); while *re'ah* is something God absorbs. The Torah anthropomorphizes God as possessing a sense of smell, but I think it should be understood as a metaphor for some kind of actual divine experience. Through sacrifice, there is a mutual give-and-take between God and man, savor (*re'ah*) from man in exchange for inspiration (*ru'ah*) from God.

A better understanding of what actually happens during a sacrifice may be gained from understanding the basic element of the classic animal sacrifices.

In every instance, the blood was offered with or without the flesh, as the Torah states: *You shall offer your burnt offerings, both the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the Lord your God. The blood of your other sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall eat the flesh* (Deut. 12:27).

Blood plays an integral role throughout the Torah. It is used for sacrifice, for purification, and as a protection (e.g., from the tenth plague). There is in all of these a link to the Divine, and, as such, it is reserved only for these occasions. Blood is for spiritual uses, not for mundane human needs. The eating of blood is proscribed because the "life" is in the blood (Num. 12:23) and it is too sacred for human consumption. The Hebrew word used here for "life" is *nefesh*, generally translated as the soul or the life force. The word first appears in the Creation story (Gen. 1:20), in the phrase *nefesh hayyah* ("living creature"); later, it is used to describe how man became *a living being* when God *blew into his nostrils the breath of life* (Gen. 2:7). The life force is thus connected both to blood and to the breath that enters through the nose. When the blood of a sacrifice is brought to the altar, the life force (*nefesh*) of the sacrificed animal is returned to God. This same concept lies behind the smell of the sacrifice going up to God, which represents the spiritual element of the animal being sent to Him.

Animal sacrifices were not the only ones that gave out a soothing savor. For example, the grain offering (*minhah*) had nothing to do with blood, yet it was pleasing to God, as stated in Leviticus 2:2: *The priest shall scoop out of it a handful of its choice flour and oil, as well as all of its frankincense; and this token portion he shall turn into smoke on the altar, as an offering by fire, of pleasing odor to the Lord.* Assuming that it is the *nefesh* which produces a *re'ah niho'ah* and that the *nefesh* is in the blood, how can a *minhah* offering produce a *re'ah niho'ah* if there is no blood involved? The answer lies in the individual who brings the offering. In TB *Menahot* 104b, R. Yitzhak notes that one who brings an animal sacrifice (*korban*) is referred to as an *adam* (Lev. 1:2), but the person who brings a grain offering (*minhah*) is called a *nefesh* (Lev. 2:1). This is because one who brought a grain offering was often a poor man: since he could not afford to pay for an animal, he substituted his own *nefesh* for that in the animal's blood. The Talmud concludes: "When poor folk bring an offering, however meager, God credits them as if they had

offered their own soul." In this way a grain offering – one without blood – can produce a *re'ah nih'o'ah*.

The notion of God "smelling" a sacrifice is now understood to be one facet of the idea that sacrifices involve a spiritual element, a *nefesh*, which enters one's body through the nose – and so too, metaphorically, with God. This would also explain why incense (*ketoret sammim*) was burned on the altar in the Holy Place and brought into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. As a sacrifice completely involved with the sense of smell, it was deemed the most holy, the most non-physical of all sacrifices. That is why it played such a critical role in the expiation process (Ex. 30:7-10) and why the recipe for its preparation was so exacting (Ex. 30:34-38; see also TB *Keritot* 6a).

In Biblical times it was the *nefesh* of an animal that was offered to God. There were sacrifices of praise (*olah*), of thanksgiving (*shelamim*), of purification (*hattat*), and of reparation (*asham*). After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, sacrifice was replaced by prayer. When we pray, it is as if we send up part of our own *nefesh* to God. Our prayers are similar in intent to the sacrifices, whether in the form of praise, of thanks, or of asking forgiveness. Today, it is our prayer which serves as a means of offering a *re'ah nih'o'ah* to God.

NOTES

1. See Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 59, and *The JPS Torah Commentary – Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991) p. 189, where it is described as "a technical term in ritual texts connoting divine acceptance of the sacrifice."
2. See Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra – Bereshit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1997) p. 210.
3. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1996) p. 81, and Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996) p. 36.