

The Spiritual Significance of the Qetoret
Rabbi Avraham Sutton

I. Momentous Archeological Discoveries

In March 1988, Vendyl Jones* and his team of Noahide volunteers found a clay juglet measuring approximately five inches high in a cave at Qumran, just west of the northern end of Dead Sea. The juglet contained a most unusual oil. It is believed to be the only surviving sample of the balsam oil that was prescribed in the Torah for anointing the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and its vessels, as well as the Priests [Cohanim], Prophets and Kings of Israel. The oil was still viscous, but because of its age it had solidified into a gelatin-like substance that resembled molasses. The juglet that contained the oil was wrapped in palm leaves and carefully concealed in a 3-foot deep pit that preserved it from looting and the extreme climatological extremes of the area.

[* Vendyl Jones is a Biblical Archeologist who has been digging in Qumran (near the Dead Sea) for over 20 years. To date, Vendyl has been successful in identifying the ancient site of Gilgal (the Plymouth Rock of Israel), and the threshing floor of Nachon where Uzza was smitten when he touched the Ark of the Covenant (II Samuel 6:6). These places were hitherto undiscovered until Prof. Jones located them using aerial photography and satellite remote sensing. Vendyl Jones' excavations are based on the Copper Scroll discovered in 1952 in Qumran, as well as other rabbinic sources. These sources indicate where the ancient Mishkan (Desert Tabernacle) and all the artifacts related to it were hidden at the end of the 2nd Temple period.]

Two years later (April 1992) Vendyl and his team made another discovery. In a cave not far from where the juglet of oil was found they uncovered 600 kilos of a "reddish-brown organic substance" in a rock silo that had been deliberately concealed. The silo had been constructed in such a way as to protect its contents from the surrounding environment. Subsequent palynological analysis determined that the substance contained traces of all eleven spices that were used in the manufacture of the Incense Mixture (*Pitum HaQetoret*) that was burned in the Temple.

In 1994, a sample of the incense spices was presented to Rabbi Yehudah Getz of blessed memory, late Chief Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Places in Israel. A sample was also given to Rabbi Ovadiah Yoseph, who had his own chemist analyze the mixture to confirm its organic nature. Both rabbis agreed that Vendyl could "burn" some of the incense for scientific purposes (not with fire but with hydrochloric acid). At their suggestion, he combined the spices together with Sodom Salt and Karshina Lye which were the two inorganic ingredients needed to make the Incense (*Qetoret*). Both of these inorganic compounds were also found at the site, in a refined state, ready to be combined with the organic portion consisting of spices.

The results of the tests were astonishing. Although the spice mixture had lost some of its potency over the two millennia since its burial, it was still powerful. The residue of its fragrance lingered in the vicinity for several days following the experiment. Several people who were present when the test was conducted reported that their hair and clothing retained the aroma. Even more amazing, the area in which the spices were burned had somehow changed. Before the test, it was infested with the usual variety of flies, ants, moths and other insects. But after the *Qetoret* was burned, no sign of these pests could be found. The phenomenon was remarkably consistent with the description of the effect of the incense found in Mishnah, Avot (5:5) where it says there were no flies in the area of the Temple, nor was a snake or scorpion ever able to harm anyone anywhere in the vicinity as long as the Temple stood.

The power and long-range effect of the *Qetoret's* aroma was no less astonishing, as brought out in the Talmud (*Yoma* 39b):

The goats in Jericho (just north of Qumran) would sneeze from the aroma of the *qetoret*. Women in Jericho never needed to perfume themselves due to the ubiquitous aroma of the *qetoret*. A bride in Jerusalem never needed to wear a perfume pendant (a small packet of herbs worn near the body) due to the ubiquitous aroma of the *qetoret*.

In 1995, I met Vendyl and began working with him. The following year, I met Avraham Sand of *Tiferet International Aromatherapy*. Avraham isn't an archeologist, but he is a master perfumer. For the last decade he and Rueven Prager of Begeg Ivri have been trying to unravel the secret of exactly which ingredients and processes were used to formulate the finely ground *Qetoret*. Their work was performed in close association with and under the rabbinical guidance of Rabbi Menachem Burstein, the foremost Jewish authority on the botany and chemistry of Temple artifacts. In order to sidestep the strict prohibition against experimentation with the various plant materials in their original form (see below), Rabbi Burstein advised them that there is no prohibition whatsoever against enjoying the essential oil extracts of these same botanicals. At last report, Avraham and Rueven had been able to authenticate and obtain all eleven of the original eleven incense spices, and produce them in the form of essential oils. In essence, their work and findings parallel Vendyl's discoveries of both the Anointing Oil and the *Qetoret* in Qumran.

The Talmud (*Arachin* 16a) indicates that the Holy Temple (*Beth HaMikdash*), the Desert Tabernacle (*Mishkan*), as well as all their sacred vessels -- the Holy Ark (*Aron HaKodesh*), Candelabra (*Menorah*), Incense Altar (*Mizbe'ach HaQetoret*), Showbread Table (*Shulchan Lechem HaPanim*), Garments of the High Priest (*Bigdei Cohen Gadol*), Ashes of the Red Heifer (*Efer Parah Adumah*), etc. -- were not just physical artifacts. They represented spiritual levels of closeness to God. The same is true of the Anointing Oil (*Shemen HaMish'chah*) and the Incense (*Qetoret*).

What, then, are the implications of these and other finds? Might they be a signal to us, portents of good things to come, parts of a larger drama that is unfolding here in the Land of Israel -- not only all around us, but deep down at the root of our very souls? Remember when the juglet of Oil (*SHeMeN*) was found in the Temple by the *ChaSHMoNaim*?

Remember what it signified? It was the power of Eight (*SHeMoNa*) that calls us to see miracles in the subtle order of nature, in the confusing events of our individual and collective lives, in the hidden pathways of Divine Providence that guides Israel and all Mankind from behind the scenes of history. Eight is the power that can arouse the souls of men from their collective slumber.

By reminding us of those times when God did indeed overtly "interfere" with and "alter" the "natural" course of history, it can arouse us in anticipation of the powerful revelation of His salvation that we await in our own time.

Perhaps more important, by getting back in touch with the mystery of the *Qetoret*, by unearthing its ancient secrets, we can awaken something else within in ourselves that is sorely needed at this time. Come let us explore the deeper meaning of the *Qetoret* in our time.

II. The Anointing Oil and The Qetoret

In the Torah, we find the commandment concerning the *Qetoret* immediately following that of the Anointing Oil.

God spoke to Moses, saying: Take the finest spices, 500 [shekels] of distilled myrrh, [two] half portions, each consisting of 250 [shekels] of fragrant cinnamon and 250 [shekels] of fragrant cane, and 500 shekels of cassia, all measured by the sanctuary standard, along with a hin of olive oil. Make it into *Shemen Mish'chat Kodesh* [Sacred Anointing Oil]. Blend it into a compound, as made by a master perfumer, [for] the sacred anointing oil. With it, anoint the Communion Tent, the Ark of the Testimony, the Table and all its utensils, the Menorah and its utensils, the Incense Altar, the Elevation Altar and all its utensils, the Washstand and its base. Sanctify them thus, giving them the highest degree of holiness [*kodesh kodashim*], so that anything touching them becomes sanctified. Anoint Aaron and his sons as well, sanctifying them to serve Me. Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them: This shall be the sacred anointing oil, [sanctified] to Me for all your generations. Do not pour it on the skin of any [unauthorized] person, and do not duplicate it with a similar formula. It is holy, and it must remain sacred to you. If a person blends a similar formula, or places it on an unauthorized person, he shall be cut off [spiritually] from his people (Exodus 30:22-33).

Immediately, the Torah continues:

God said to Moses: Take for yourself spices -- balsam, onycha, galbanum, [as well as other specified] spices, and pure frankincense -- equal amounts of each. [Grind each spice separately and then] blend [them together as] a *qetoret* compound, the work of a master perfumer, well-blended, free of all impurity, and holy. Pulverize a small portion of [the *qetoret* daily] and place it [on the Golden Altar] before the [Ark of] Testimony in the Communion Tent where I commune with you. It shall have the highest degree of holiness for you [*kodesh kodashim*]. With regard to the *qetoret* you are to make, do not duplicate its formula for your personal use. It must remain separate and set aside for God. If a person makes it to enjoy its fragrance, he shall be cut off [spiritually] from his people (Exodus 30:34-38).

King Solomon wrote, "Oil and *Qetoret* make the heart rejoice" (Proverbs 27:9).

A number of things stand out: First, the juxtaposition. The Anointing Oil and the *Qetoret* are incredibly connected with each other. The Torah lists four main ingredients for both: The Oil was made of equal proportions of 1) *Mor*-myrrh, 2) *Kineman*-cinnamon, 3) *Keneh Besem*-fragrant cane (sweet calamus or cinnamon bark), and 4) *Ketzia*-cassia. The *Qetoret* contained equal proportions of 1) *Nataf*-balsam, 2) *Shechelet*-onycha, 3) *Chelbenah*-galbanum, and 4) *Levonah Zakah*-pure frankincense. Although there is considerable difference of opinion regarding the actual identities of these spices, there is no question that the Oil and the *Qetoret* are intimately connected with each other. As we shall see, the *Qetoret* contains another seven ingredients, but these are only implied in the Torah, and only explicitly designated in the Oral tradition. Among these seven, we find *Mor*-myrrh and *Ketzia*-cassia, as well as three spices which are taken from different parts of the *Kineman*-cinnamon plant.

The second thing we see from the above passages is that the Oil and the *Qetoret* are both extremely holy. Holy in Hebrew is *Kodesh*. When something is *Kodesh*, it is to be set aside and kept separate. It then has the power to sanctify and elevate everything around it. This is the idea behind *Shabbat Kodesh*, the Holy Sabbath. It is the ultimate Sanctuary in Time, set aside from the rest of the days of the week, yet constantly elevating them into itself and then overflowing back into them.

The same is true of *Torah HaKedoshah* (the Holy Torah), *Lashon HaKodesh* (the Holy Tongue), *Eretz HaKodesh* (the Holy Land), *Yerushalayim Ir HaKodesh* (Jerusalem the Holy City), *Beth HaMikdash* (the Holy Temple), *Kidushin* (Marriage Sanctity). All of these have the power to elevate everything around them. This is the nature of true *Kedushah*. It elevates and then infuses everything around it with holiness. But for this very reason, it is potentially lethal if misused. Thus, we come to the third similarity. Regarding profane duplication of the formula of either the Anointing Oil or the *Qetoret*, the Torah is very explicit: the punishment is *Karet*, spiritual excision. In other words, their extremely exalted status requires that they be extra-carefully guarded and protected against misuse. Thus, while everything in the *Mishkan* and *Mikdash* is *Kodesh*, not everything is *Kodesh Kodashim*, Holy of Holies. Both the Anointing Oil and the *Qetoret* are *Kodesh Kodashim*.

The author of the *Me'am Lo'ez* (The Torah Anthology) asks a pertinent question about the above passages and makes a clear distinction between them:

According to the Talmud (*Keritot* 6b), God commanded Moses orally concerning the weight and amount of each ingredient in the *Qetoret*, just as He commanded him concerning the weight and amount of each ingredient in the Anointing Oil. Why, then, doesn't the Torah record these amounts as it does in the case of the Anointing Oil, where the precise recipe is given?

Rather, the Torah is teaching us here one law that applies to the Anointing Oil, but not to the *Qetoret*. If one wanted to make the Anointing Oil, he would need the full weight and amount of all the ingredients. It could not be even one gram less. It is forbidden to make half the recipe.

In the case of the *Qetoret*, however, it was not necessary that the full recipe be made. As long as the precise nature and proportion of the ingredients was maintained, the recipe could be made in half [third, quarter, tenth, or smaller] amounts.

The Torah shows this to us when it does not tell us the precise amount of each ingredient. As long as the proper proportions are kept, it thus does not matter if the *Qetoret* is made with the particular amount or with half or less. This is not the case with the Anointing Oil (see Kaplan, *Torah Anthology*, Volume 9, Moznaim Pub. p. 320).

III. The Qetoret and the Shattering of the Vessels

We shall return to speak more about the above quoted *Qetoret* passage. For the moment, in order to do justice to the awesome power of the subject of *Qetoret*, we feel it necessary to add another dimension to the discussion, the Kabbalistic dimension. In *Innerspace*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan of blessed memory speaks about the deeper significance of the *Qetoret* based on the teachings of the holy Ari (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, 1534-1572):

The incense consisted of ten spices or perfumes with good fragrances, and an eleventh spice, Chelbenah-galbanum, with a vile odor. These spices were each ground separately and then blended together to be used in the Temple. Since these eleven spices parallel the eleven Sefirot of the Universe of Tohu [Chaos], they are therefore said to represent the complete rectification of evil. This is indicated by the addition of the eleventh spice, Chelbenah-galbanum, which alludes to the elevation of evil back into the realm of the holy (*Innerspace*, Moznaim Publishers, 1991, p. 86).

This passage appears in the tenth chapter of *Innerspace* entitled "The Shattering of the Vessels." The "vessels" referred to here are the Sefirot of the Universe of Tohu [Chaos]. Each of these Sefirot or Vessels purposely "shattered" when God, in the process of creating the universes, allowed a tiny bit of His Infinite Light to shine into them. In the Midrash, this series of shatterings is described thus: "In the beginning, the Holy One created worlds and destroyed them, created worlds and destroyed them" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 3:7).

Actually, only seven of these Sefirot shattered, while four did not. These four might parallel the four incense spices mentioned in the Torah. As noted and as we shall discuss below, the names of the seven remaining spices are not mentioned in the Written Torah. They come to us only via the Oral Tradition from Sinai. At any rate, only the seven lower Sefirot shattered. As God's light began to enter into each Sefirah-vessel, it "shattered" and "fell," creating the basis for other, "lower," more "physical" universes -- eventually our material universe. According to the Kabbalah there were a total of seven shatterings. If we are correct, these seven shatterings parallel the spices which are not mentioned in the Torah. The four spices that are mentioned parallel the Sefirot-vessels that did not shatter.

As Rabbi Kaplan points out, the Shattering of the Vessels is also alluded to in the Torah in the account of the Eight Kings of Edom, at the end of Genesis 36. These eight kings were descendants of Jacob's twin-brother Esav.

The main point that the Torah makes about these kings is that they ruled and died in succession, one after the other. This applies to all except the eighth. Only seven died, the same seven as mentioned above. The only difference is that the primitive vessels and universes are said to have shattered and been destroyed, while the kings are said to have died. Dying and shattering [and being destroyed] are thus different metaphors for the same events.

IV. The Tzimtzum

It is important to point out that God doesn't make mistakes. He is the ultimate Master Craftsman. Were He creating a world only for His own purposes, He would have immediately created a perfect world, as He is certainly capable of doing. But His intention was for mere corporeal man to live in a physical environment, to face temptation and overcome it by the power of his own free will, and thereby merit awesome rewards for his efforts.

In order to create this environment, He had to "hide" Himself, make as if He isn't here - probably the most "difficult" thing God ever had to do. In this sense, creating a world that both completely conceals and subtly reveals Godliness is an incredible feat for God. At first the "darkness" that is created is merely a result of withdrawing and concealing His light. Eventually, it involves the creation of a seemingly independent force of evil that actively fights the light.

Free will is the key here. Free will must be maintained in perfect balance. Were light (good) outweighed by the breakdown of light (darkness and evil), or vice versa, even just a little, man could not be held responsible for his actions. He could not be rewarded for doing good or held accountable for choosing evil. Free will is absolutely necessary for man to receive his ultimate reward.

Thus, in order to create an environment in which man could have free will, God withdrew His Light, thereby creating a *Challal* [Hollow, Void, Vacated Space]. This original withdrawal of light is called *Tzimtzum* [Self-constriction], for God's Light contracted within Itself, leaving this so-called Void. He then shone His Light back into the newly created Vacated Space, but not in the same manner as before its removal. Rather, He reintroduced His Light back into the Vacated Space in a highly measured form, to prevent it from becoming filled too quickly with too much Light, which would cause it to "collapse" back into His Infinite Being. And then, even in this highly measured form, at a certain point in the process, the first shattering took place, the net effect of which was to separate out a major part of the light (it recoiled and ascended back above), with only the tiniest fraction descending below in the form of sparks or micro-chips of light (*Etz Chaim* 11:9). Still, the remaining light was so great, so powerful, that the initial shattering was followed by at least six more. All of these were caused by purposely bringing too much light into too limited a vessel - in order to create an environment in which God's Infinite Light would be fractured (bifurcated) to the point of near total invisibility.

Of course, the image of God withdrawing His Light and then reintroducing it should not be taken literally. God exists equally everywhere, at all times. "Withdrawing His Light" from the "Vacated Space" to "make room" for Creation in no way implies that He was or is no longer there. God was equally here, there and everywhere both before and after He created the Vacated Space.

The difference between "before" and "after" exists only from our vantage point. As the Ari explains and as we saw above, the reason God constricted His Light and created the Vacated Space was so that man could have independent existence and free will. God certainly exists within all Creation, for without Godliness nothing can exist. Yet if God's Existence were clear and obvious in this world, man would not have free will. For this reason, God withdrew His Light, as it were, concealing Himself from man, making it seem to man's limited vision as if there is a vacuum, a place devoid of Godliness.

In this sense, God "had" to filter His light, diminishing it many times over to enable man to interact with Him. This is why He "created worlds and destroyed them..." The intention is not that He made a mistake and "scrapped" His first world. On the contrary, that world and all the worlds that followed it were extremely exalted and sublime -- too exalted and too sublime. They still revealed too much Light. Many contractions were therefore necessary to filter and measure the Light even more. Only after such a step-down devolution could the process that began with the original Tzimtzum be brought to its intended conclusion, i.e. a physical world in which God's Light would be almost completely undetectable. It is this step-down devolution that the Midrash describes as the Holy One creating and destroying universes.

V. The Big Bang?

This Kabbalistic teaching concerning the primordial shattering is not speaking about physical vessels. The Sefirot of the Universe of Tohu preceded and were the basis for the physical world. This implies an interesting parallel between this series of shatterings and the powerful galactic and supernova explosions that occurred when God began to "materialize" the physical universe into existence.

According to the latest scientific thinking, the matter of the universe originated in a huge explosion of energy called "The Big Bang." [The name "Big Bang" is actually very misleading. It gives the mistaken impression that there was some kind of explosion of matter.] All the energy in our universe, all the galaxies, stars, planets, earth itself, its oceans and mountains, plant life, all that supports human life, and human life itself, in short, everything in our universe, came from the energy that was released in the Big Bang. This original explosion of pure energy was followed by countless Little Bangs (supernova explosions of energy that eventually, after many stages of expansion and contraction and expansion, coalesced into matter and then into stars and planets).

We can now understand how the modern theory of the Big Bang is the "physical" counterpart to the Kabbalistic teaching of the Shattering of the Vessels. [What all this has to do with the *Qetoret* we will see momentarily.]

At first, the universe was only protons, neutrons, and other subatomic particles made of quarks. These formed into hydrogen and helium molecules. Why only hydrogen and helium? Well, for one thing, they are the "lightest" elements in existence. In addition, the temperatures were so high during those early seconds of the primitive "physical" universe that no "physical" matter could exist.

The fact that these first "explosions" could not have involved physical matter can be seen by the fact that their temperatures were trillions times trillions of times that of our present sun. These temperatures preclude the existence of physical matter. There simply is no such thing as physical matter when you are speaking of such heat.

Scientists are thus forced to admit that we are not talking here about physical matter (which came much later), but rather "mathematical abstractions." In the language of Kabbalah, these "abstractions" parallel the Sefirot of the Universe of Tohu that served as the basis for what later came to be our present universe. More correctly, what scientists call the "Big Bang" might have been the last of the Sefirot of Tohu [Chaos] shattering, i.e. the interface between the Universes of Yetzirah and Asiyah, between spiritual energy and so-called physical energy.

Let it be clear, I am not making a scientifically verifiable claim here, merely suggesting a very interesting parallel based on these and other highly significant teachings which were revealed by the Ari in the 16th century.

At any rate, what happened after the Big Bang? Hydrogen and helium, the "hottest" and therefore "lightest" elements in existence which were supposedly produced in those first few moments of the early universe, eventually "cooled" off and congealed into stars. In other words, the light-hot energy of the big bang "congealed" into the relatively darker-cooler matter of the stars. [Stars are still very very hot!] Subsequently, all the other heavier elements were manufactured inside the "blast-furnaces" of the stars. The four most abundant elements in the universe are, in order, 1) hydrogen, 2) helium, 3) oxygen and 4) carbon. Oxygen, and especially carbon, which are necessary to support organic life, came much later, after many successive shatterings.

VI. The Sefirot and the Qetoret Spices

One more point of clarification before we get to the *Qetoret*. We have seen that, according to the Ari, the primitive Sefirot of the Universe of Tohu were purposely created in a way that they would shatter when the light entered them. We can take this at face value, and view it like we would view any powerful chemical or nuclear reaction involving the powerful forces of nature. Or, although it sounds strange, we can go up a little higher and see that, at the level at which these powerful events took place, God's Light, meaning His Presence, His Consciousness, was incredibly more revealed than it is now. It was so revealed, so felt, that these Sefirot themselves were imbued with a form of angelic consciousness. In this sense, they "knew" and "understood" that they had a mission. Their mission was to create lower and lower universes which would allow for the existence of a world in which human beings could have free will. In order to do this, it was necessary to diminish the awesome power of the Godly light. In order to do this, they had to sacrifice themselves and die, i.e. shatter.

This is very deep. They "knew" they had to die. Although they were extremely exalted and holy, they "understood" that they contained something, some negative charge, which made them potentially dangerous. In other words, they were good and holy, but they were also imperfect and flawed as long as they didn't fulfill the mission for which they were created. And what was this mission?

We said that it involved diminishing God's light in order to allow for the creation of lower universe and hence the possibility of free will. In essence, their mission was to become the basis for the existence of evil.

We can now see the connection between the Shattering of the Vessels and the *Qetoret*. The sparks of light that fell as a result of those shatterings became the basis of a set of lower dimensions in which God's Existence and Light became more and more occluded, until a "realm of evil" came into existence which overtly fights God's Light. The *Qetoret*, with Chelbenah, the evil-smelling eleventh spice, represents the elevation and extraction of holy sparks of light out of that realm. Another parallel is that the Shattering of the Sefirot-vessels is the spiritual counterpart of bringing about heavier and heavier elements, eventually carbon, which could support life.

The grinding the incense spices in order to make the *Qetoret* thus parallels both of these. In other words, the ingredients of the *Qetoret* correspond to the Sefirot of the Universe of Tohu and to the elements that were created in the Big Bang and subsequently broken down into the heavier elements with each successive little bang.

Returning to how the Kabbalah views this, Rabbi Kaplan thus explains, "The vessels were created flawed so that the actual source of evil should be something good which has fallen. Had evil been created as an independent entity, man would not have had the ability to rectify it in the form of *teshuvah*-repentance. Since evil originated in the highest vessels, it could now be reelevated to this level" (*Innerspace*, p. 85).

Referring to the above passage, he explains further in Part II of *Innerspace*:

We discussed the root of evil in connection with the Shattering of the Vessels. We saw that, ultimately, evil comes from good; it is the fallen aspect of good. The Ari points out that God could have created evil as an independent entity, but He chose to make it through the process of the Shattering of the Vessels: evil had to be created as the fallen aspect of good so that one could raise it back to its source. Had it originated as evil, a human being would never have been able to reelevate it. In that case, only God could.

In the account of Creation, we first have "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth." This alludes to the realm of good. We then have "The earth was Tohu [without form] and Bohu [empty], with darkness on the face of the depths"...which is evil coming out of good. Finally, that very evil is reelevated and transformed into good when God says, "Let there be light"... Even without using any Kabbalistic terminology, we see this process [of good descending to evil and then reverting to higher good] in the beginning of Genesis.

Our sages teach us that one of the main reasons why we were placed in the physical world was to overcome evil. It is in this way that we actually emulate God. The *Zohar* (1:4a) expresses this by stating that we too are to "turn darkness into light." Ultimately, there is one Source of everything that exists, even evil. It is not that God actually created evil, but it is through His will that the possibility of evil exists. [The main thing to know is that] everything comes from God and must return to Him (*Innerspace*, p. 159).

VII. The Angel of Death

Rabbi Kaplan continues:

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 89a) teaches that Moses was taught the mystery of the incense by the Angel of Death. [The Angel of Death had revealed to Moses that the *Qetoret* has the power to nullify any evil decree, even that of death.] It is for this reason that when a plague broke out among the Israelites in the wilderness Moses ordered Aaron to walk through the camp with the incense. ["Aaron took the incense pan as Moses had commanded him... He offered the incense to atone for the people... and the plague was checked" (Numbers 17:12-13).] From here we see that the eleven perfumes have the power to overcome death and evil (*Innerspace*, p. 86).

Why does *Qetoret* overcome death and evil? Where does it get this power? It gets it from the fact that the grinding of the spices for the *Qetoret* parallels the shattering and death of the original Sefirot. The original Sefirot were "light" with a slight admixture of "darkness." That darkness could not manifest as full-fledged "evil" until the light itself was broken down into tiny photon-packets or micro-chips. That breakdown of the light is called death and darkness, the ultimate concealment of God's light. But the *Qetoret*, in the very way it is made, and especially in the number and nature of its ingredients, has the power to overcome death and darkness, and completely transform all evil -- in ourselves and in the world -- into good.

VIII. Chelbenah - The Evil Smelling Spice

Above we quoted Rabbi Kaplan saying:

The incense consisted of ten spices or perfumes with good fragrances, and an eleventh spice, Chelbenah-galbanum, with a vile odor... which alludes to the elevation of evil back into the realm of the holy.

It would be interesting to conjecture that Chelbenah, one of the four main *Qetoret* spices listed in the Torah, corresponds to none other than carbon, one of the four primary elements found in the early universe, and along with oxygen, the one most essential to support life! Rabbi Kaplan continues:

Following the idea of the ten fragrant spices and the single unpleasant one, the Talmud (*Keritot* 6b) states: "Every communal fast that does not include sinners of Israel is not a fast." This is derived from the fact that the incense included Chelbenah-galbanum. Just as the Chelbenah was necessary to give the other spices exactly the right fragrance, a congregation is not complete without someone who has also fallen and who must reelevate himself through repentance. In particular, when a difficult punishment has been decreed against Israel because of some evil deed, this very evil must be taken and elevated. **Thus, the idea of transforming evil by elevating it back to its source in holiness is intimated in the incense.** It is for this reason also that a communal fast must include "the sinners of Israel."

Rabbi Kaplan goes on to speak about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He draws a parallel between their sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the original Shattering of the Vessels.

But we will stop here for the moment and attempt to develop on some of the basic ideas already mentioned. In the remainder of this essay we will bring the entire text of the *Qetoret* from the traditional Siddur (Prayer Book) and then deepen our appreciation of it by bringing other biblical, rabbinical, and kabbalistic texts to bear.

IX. The Text of the Siddur

Above, we read the commandment of the *Qetoret* in the Torah. Most, not all, of this commandment is brought in the Siddur:

God said to Moses: Take for yourself spices -- balsam, onycha, galbanum, [as well as other specified] spices, and pure frankincense -- equal amounts of each. [Grind each spice separately and then] blend [them together as] a *qetoret* compound, the work of a master perfumer, well-blended, free of all impurity, and holy. Pulverize a small portion of [the *qetoret* daily] and place it [on the Golden Altar] before the [Ark of] Testimony in the Communion Tent where I commune with you. It shall have the highest degree of holiness for you (Exodus 30:34-36).

It was also said: Aaron must burn the *qetoret* spices on [the Golden Altar] early each morning when he cleans the [Menorah] lamps. He must also burn the *qetoret* when he lights the lamps towards evening. It is a daily *qetoret* offering before God throughout all your generations (*ibid.* 30:7-8).

We are already familiar with the first passage (Exodus 30:34-36). The second passage (30:7-8) is significant because it shows how intertwined the *Qetoret* is with the Lighting of the Menorah in the morning and evening. Here again we see the intimate connection between *Shemen* and *Qetoret*. This is not the Anointing Oil, but it is Oil.

Only two additional points need concern us here concerning the first passage. First, it is worth paying attention to the omission of its two concluding verses describing the death penalty for anyone who misappropriates the *Qetoret*. This omission is conspicuous.

Second, we noted above that the Written Torah mentions the four main spices in the *Qetoret*. It is only through oral transmission that we know of the other seven, making a total of eleven. The sages nevertheless take the trouble to tell us how the extra seven are alluded to in the terse language of the Written Torah. Again, on the same page of the Talmud (*Keritot* 6b), they explain thus: The verse says: "Take for yourself *spices* -- balsam, onycha, galbanum, *spices*, and pure frankincense." If the Torah only meant that the four main substances should be taken and nothing else, it should simply have said, "Take for yourself balsam, onycha, galbanum and pure frankincense." The Torah repeats the word *spices* (*samim*) twice. This indicates that there were other spices.

Since the Torah does not designate what they are, it seems obvious that the first mention of the word *samim*-spices (after "take for yourself") would denote two spices. This is based on two Talmudic rules: "The minimum number to which the plural form of a noun (in this case, *samim*) can refer is two" and "Always go for the minimum unless otherwise indicated." We then have three specified spices - balsam, onycha and galbanum - bringing the count to five.

The Torah then mentions the word *samim* a second time. This informs us that, in addition to these five, there were another additional five. This doubles the amount, making a sub-total of ten. Pure frankincense rounds out the total to eleven. [As opposed to the first *samim*, the second *samim* cannot denote two. Its placement in the verse mitigates against this. We thus conclude that the first *samim* denotes two spices, while the second denotes five.] In sum, there were seven spices in addition to the four mentioned in the Torah, making a total of eleven (see Kaplan, *Torah Anthology*, Volume 9, pp. 311-312).

The Siddur now continues, paraphrasing various sources in the Talmud (*Keritot* 6a), in effect creating a totally unique text defining the properties of the *Qetoret*:

The Rabbis taught: How was the *qetoret* compounded? It contained 368 *maneh* [measures]. 365 of these corresponded to the number of days in the solar year, one measure a day, half in the morning and half towards evening. The other three measures were those that the Cohen Gadol would bring [into the Holy of Holies] as a double handful on Yom Kippur. He would replace them in the mortar on the eve of Yom Kippur and regrind them thoroughly to make [the *qetoret* compound] extra fine.

The *qetoret* contained eleven spices. There were seventy measures each of (1) balsam, (2) onycha, (3) galbanum, and (4) frankincense. There were sixteen measures each of (5) myrrh, (6) cassia, (7) spikenard, and (8) saffron. There were twelve measures of (9) costus, three measures of (10) aromatic bark, and nine measures of (11) cinnamon.

[Also used to prepare some of the spices for the *qetoret* were:] nine *kabin* of Karshina lye, three *se'in* and three *kabin* of Cyprus wine. If Cyprus wine was not available, aged white wine could be used instead. There was a fourth of a *kab* of Sodom salt, and a small quantity of smoke-producing herb. Rabbi Nathan of Babylon says: A minute quantity of Jordan amber was also added. If [any kind of bee or fruit] honey was added, the *qetoret* was rendered unfit. If one omitted from [or added to] the [original eleven] spices, he was liable the death penalty.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: The balsam was simply the resin that drips from balsam trees. Why was Karshina lye used? To rub the onycha to make it more pleasant. Why was Cyprus wine used? To soak the onycha to make it more pungent. Isn't water from [the springs of] Raglayim good for this? But it would have been disrespectful to bring water from [the springs of] Raglayim into the Holy Temple.

For someone who really wants to understand what is going on here in the text of the Siddur, a lot of concentration is needed. First, always try to pay attention to who says what. What are the names of the Rabbis? The first passage from the Talmud opened with "The Rabbis taught." In Aramaic this is *Tanu Rabbanan*. This indicates an Oral Transmission which, in this case at least, is unanimously accepted. This is important in a system of transmission in which minute distinctions are the stuff of major differences of opinion. The second and third passages ("The *qetoret* contained" and "Also used to prepare") are part of the same transmission. In the middle of the third passage, however, we find the name of Rabbi Nathan of Babylon. Apparently, he received an additional tradition that was not included in the general transmission. Nobody seems to disagree with him, except concerning the identity of Jordan amber.

According to one opinion, this was a pleasant smelling herb that grew near the Jordan River, in which case it was used to strengthen the fragrance of the *tziporen-onycha*. According to another opinion, Jordan amber is foam from the Jordan River. It was smeared on the mortar in which the incense spices were ground so that they would not stick to it and cause the amount to be decreased (*Torah Anthology*, Volume 9, p. 322).

The fourth passage mentions Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel who, as we shall see shortly, is also known by his initials RaShbaG.

Finally, the fourth passage mentions the possibility of soaking the *tziporen-onycha* in *Mey Raglayim*, but concludes that it would have been disrespectful to bring such water into the Temple. Here too there are two opinions regarding the identity of this *Mey Raglayim*. According to one, these were waters from a spring where raw wool was washed and combed. Since the washing process involved beating and stamping on the wool with one's feet (*raglayim*), the stream was called *Ein Rogel* ("the spring of the feet"; Rashi, Radak on II Samuel 17:17).

A second opinion maintains that urine is called *Mey Raglayim* because it is water (*mey or mayim*) that is discharged from between the two legs (*raglayim*). Because of its high acidity, urine would also have been good to soak the *tziporen*. Nevertheless, whether as water from *Ein Rogel* or urine, it is clear why *Mey Raglayim* was forbidden to use in the preparation of the *Qetoret*. Both are associated with impurities that are washed away. Therefore, out of respect for the sanctity of the Temple, neither type of *Mey Raglayim* was used (see *Etz Yoseph, Otzar HaTefillot*, p. 78).

Now, as we read the fifth, sixth and seventh passages, continue paying special attention to the names. Again, we have Rabbi Nathan (supposedly the same Rabbi Nathan of Babylon as above), and Rabbi Yehudah, who will be identified shortly as Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (the Prince), the man who redacted the Mishnah. Note that it isn't clear in the Siddur if Rabbi Yehudah is coming to disagree with Rabbi Nathan or not. Finally, we have Bar Kappara, whose injunction against mixing honey in the *Qetoret* we shall discuss below.

It was taught: Rabbi Nathan says: While grinding the *qetoret*, [the Cohen] would chant: *Pulverize it finely, finely pulverize it*, for [the rhythm of] the voice is good for [the grinding of] the spices. If half the recipe [for the annual amount of *qetoret*] was compounded, it was still kosher [permitted]. We have not received a tradition with regard to a third or a quarter. Rabbi Yehudah said: This was the rule: If the right proportion [of all the spices] was maintained, it was kosher, even if half [the daily amount] was compounded. But if even one of its spices was left out, [the one compounding it was] liable the death penalty.

It was taught: Bar Kappara says: Once in sixty or seventy years, half [the required annual amount of *qetoret*] came from the accumulated surpluses [left over from the three measures set aside each year for Yom Kippur]. Bar Kappara also taught: Had even a minuscule amount of [bee or fruit] honey been added to the *qetoret*, no one could have resisted [the pleasantness of] its fragrance. Why, then, was no honey blended into it? Because the Torah stated: *You may not burn any leaven or honey as a fire offering to God.*

The God of [all heavenly and terrestrial] hosts is with us -- the God of Yaacov is our assurance [and inspiration] forever, selah! O God of hosts, happy is the man who trusts [only] in You! O God, save [us]! O King, answer us on the day we call! You are a hiding place for me -- protect me from affliction! Encompass me with songs of [Your] deliverance forever, selah! May the offering of Yehudah and Yerushalayim be pleasing to God as in olden days and ancient years.

This seventh and last passage ("The God") ends with a prayer that our "offering" be pleasing and acceptable to God. Below, we shall see that the *Qetoret* has the power to nullify the effects of *Lashon Hara* (slander, evil speech). Here, we will just point out that Torah and Prayer - which is what the Siddur is made up of - are meant to be the most powerful use of language for good. Sometimes it is so easy to say words - especially words that are not our own and that we are told to "recite" - and to that degree they lack depth and meaning. But the secret of true prayer is to put yourself behind your words, to put "umph" in your words, especially into words that have been spoken in purity for millennia. This elevates your thoughts and words into a true "offering" to God.

X. Proportions

The following table, taken from Vendyl Jones' Report on the Excavations at Qumran, is based on the work of Dr. Marvin Antelmen, Chemical Advisor at Weizzman Institute, Rechovot. Dr. Antelman writes: "The following table gives the Hebrew terminology of the ingredient followed by a translation culled from various sources by the author of this report, together with the units found in the Talmud and a percentage composition based on approximations. The problem arising in the approximations are that the MANEH measurement of the Talmud is a weight measure and the SEAH and KAB are liquid and dry volumetric measures. Approximations of the materials themselves which are not really known are educated guesses. Accordingly, Cypress wine and Karshina lye have been 'guesstimated.'"

The Eleven *Qetoret* Spices as listed in the Talmud and Siddur:

Ingredient	Amount	%Comp
1) <i>ha'tzori</i> -balsam	70 maneh	13.0%
2) <i>ha'tziporen-onycha</i>	70 maneh	13.0%
3) <i>ha'chelbenah-galbanum</i>	70 maneh	13.0%
4) <i>ha'levonah-frankincense</i>	70 maneh	13.0%
5) <i>mor</i> -myrrh	16 maneh	3.0%
6) <i>ketzia</i> -cassia	16 maneh	3.0%
7) <i>shibolet nerd-spikenard</i>	16 maneh	3.0%
8) <i>kharkom</i> -saffron	16 maneh	3.0%
9) <i>ha'kosht</i> -costus	12 maneh	2.2%
10) <i>k'lufah</i> -aromatic bark	3 maneh	0.6%
11) <i>kinnamon-cinnamon</i>	9 maneh	1.7%
A) Borit Karshina-lye	9 kab	14.3%
B) Yein Kafrisin-Cypress wine	3 se'in/3kabin	16.8%
C) Melach Sedomit-Sodom salt	1/4 kab	0.3%
D) Maaleh Ashan-Smoke producer	kol shehu	0.1%
E) Kipat HaYarden-Jordan amber	kol shehu	0.1%

Technical Note: According to Rabbi Avraham Chaim Naeh, a Mishnaic maneh equals 480 grams (slightly less than half a kilogram and slightly more than 1 pound). A second opinion is that of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (The Living Torah, Exodus 30:34, p. 445; The Torah Anthology, Volume 11, p. 43), according to which a maneh equals 100 biblical shekels, or 5 pounds. Thus, according to the first opinion, 368 maneh, one year's supply of Qetoret, amounted to 368+ lbs. According to the second opinion, 368 maneh amounted to 2840 lbs.

Other ingredients used to prepare the eleven primary spices were: 9 kabin (9 quarts according to Kaplan) of Karshina-vetch lye, 3 se'in and 3 kabin (21 quarts) of Cyprus-caper wine or aged white wine, 1/4 kab (1 cup) of Sodom salt-nitrate, as well as small amounts of maaleh ashan ("smoke-producing herb" -- probably leptadenia pyrotechnica which contains nitric acid), and Jordan amber (probably cyclomen).

XI. The Death Penalty

We mentioned that two verses were conspicuously left out of the Siddur. After the command to "Take for yourself spices - balsam, onycha, galbanum and pure frankincense -- an equal amount of each ground separately, and make them into a *qetoret* mixture, the work of a master perfumer..." the Torah itself adds, "With regard to the *qetoret* you are to make, do not duplicate its formula for your personal use. It must remain separate and set aside for God. If a person makes it to enjoy its fragrance, he shall be cut off [spiritually] from his people" (Exodus 30:37-38).

As if to make up for these two missing verses, the Siddur mentions death twice in connection with the *Qetoret*: "If one omitted from [or added to] the [original eleven] spices, he was liable the death penalty," "If even one of its spices was left out, [the one compounding it was] liable the death penalty."

Whatever the reason for the omission in the Siddur, the main thing to focus on here is the fact that the Torah states explicitly that duplicating its formula for the *qetoret* mixture can incur the death penalty (*karet*, "spiritual excision"). As is often the case, the oral tradition is concerned with clarifying what is left unsaid, but nevertheless implied, in the terse language of the Written Torah. In *Keritot* 6b we thus find:

RaShbaG (Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel) taught: "We have a tradition that every sixty or seventy years the *qetoret* was compounded in half quantities. For this reason, an individual who compounds in half quantities [for his own use] is liable the death penalty. I have not received a tradition concerning third or quarter amounts. "

Rashbag's oral tradition teaches us a number of things. First, the Sages were concerned with setting up a fence to protect us from transgressing Torah law. If someone can incur the death penalty by duplicating the Torah's formula for the incense mixture, it is important to clarify exactly what that does and does not involve.

Above, we learned that the formula for 368 *maneh* was: 4 spices at 70 *maneh*, 4 at 16, 1 at 12, 1 at 9, and 1 at 3; a total of 368. Since we have a tradition that half-amounts were indeed mixed, this means that the formula involves fixed *ratios* or *proportions* as opposed to fixed *amounts*. Thus, for Rashbag, 4 spices at 70 *maneh* translates into 4 spices at a ratio of 70 to 368 (13.0%); 4 spices at a ratio of 16 *maneh* translates into 16 to 368 (3.0%), etc. As long as the proper *proportions* are maintained with respect to the total amount being made, this is considered within the Torah's definition of the incense formula. Nevertheless, Rashbag limits this only to half-amounts. A person is liable for making a personal incense mixture only if he has made it with half-amounts, as he continues, "I have not received a tradition concerning third or quarter amounts." This is exactly the position of Rabbi Nathan in the Siddur.

The Sages of the Talmud, however, take a position more like that of Rabbi Yehudah:

The Sages say: "Each day [the Cohen] would prepare and offer the *qetoret* needed for that day... as the verse states, 'With regard to the *qetoret* you are to make,' i.e. any amount you make [as long as the proper proportions are maintained]." (See *Shitah Mekubetzet*, note 4, quoting Rosh.)

In *Yerushalmi, Yoma 4:5*, we find the same symmetry. The first opinion parallels Rabbi Nathan's opinion in the Siddur. The second opinion is that of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi himself:

If the *qetoret* was mixed in half amounts, it was permitted. We have not received a tradition concerning third or quarter amounts.

Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] said: "If the ratios were maintained, it was permissible [in any amount]. And as for the tradition which seems to imply that only half-amounts are permitted, this is also referring to the maintenance of the proper ratios [i.e. when mixing half-amounts, all the spices must be mixed in half-amounts; when mixing in third, quarter or smaller amounts, all spices must be mixed in proportional amounts]" (see *Korban HaEdah, ad. loc.*).

Whereas in the Siddur, it is not obvious whether Rabbi Yehudah is coming to dispute the above opinion, here in the Talmud it is. In the end, it is Rabbi Yehudah's position which is adhered to. As Maimonides (*Laws Concerning Temple Vessels 2:8-9*) writes:

If one mixed the *qetoret* in small quantities but maintained the proper ratios, it is permissible [to be used in the Mikdash]. This applies even if he mixed half a measure for the morning offering and half for the evening. If, on the other hand, one mixed these eleven spices according to the prescribed amounts in order to enjoy its fragrance, he is liable the death penalty... even if he only made a half or a third (or less) (see *Mishneh LeMelech ad. loc.*).

XII. Teshuvah-Repentance

Details are never meant to obscure essence, but rather to give us vessels within which to receive essence. After seeing how much is involved in the *Qetoret* (all of which is a necessary preparation to get to the essence), we might tend to lose sight of the fact that a single thread runs throughout this entire discussion from beginning to end. One way of grasping this thread is to contemplate the discussion we just saw between the rabbis in more general terms. In the passage that begins *Tanu Rabbanan*, we learned that it is universally agreed upon that a maneh of incense mixture was to be offered each day of the year. The "dispute" seemed to center around how *much* incense had to be made at once (368 maneh, one for each day of the solar year, plus three extra for Yom Kippur), on the one hand, or how *little* could be made at once (half a maneh for the morning or the evening *Qetoret* offering), on the other hand.

The truth is that these are just two ways of looking at our lives. Should we see our lives on a "large" annual scale, or should we see them on a relatively "tiny" daily scale. Obviously, both have advantages and both are important. The essence is to live each day to the fullest, paying attention to all the ingredients that go into making them up. This includes seeing the ingredients that don't smell so good as an important part of life. And then, when we get to Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur, we can look back on a year full of "full" days. On Yom Kippur, our *Qetoret* will already have been ground. With our extra Teshuvah, we will just grind it finer yet, thus making sure that there is no admixture of evil that hasn't been processed and elevated back to its source.

For this is the essence, isn't it? Teshuvah is the ability to restructure a new life and a new personality out of the raw material (and even the broken pieces) we were given to work with. With Teshuvah, we can transform the greatest darkness into light, the most bitter experience into something sweet.

We saw above how powerful and far-reaching the aroma of the *Qetoret* was. It is also taught that the incredible aroma of the *Qetoret* was especially conducive to doing Teshuvah. It is taught that whoever smelled the fragrance of the *Qetoret* when it was being burned on the Golden Altar would have thoughts of Teshuvah. His heart would be purified of all evil thoughts and from the defilement of the Evil Urge (*Torah Anthology*, Volume 9, p. 307).

The aroma released from the spice compound during its processing was profuse and almost immediate. It initially saturated my hands as well as the clothes that I was wearing. Within a matter of minutes my laboratory and the surrounding area (for an area of several meters) was affected by the scent released from the spices... On the first day of processing, the aroma was so intense that I could almost taste it... Upon my return home that evening, the scent that had attached itself on my body and clothes was really apparent to both my wife and daughter. During the course of the week, the odor lessened slightly but was still noticeable in and around my lab. Within a few weeks the distinct aroma of the spices diminished to a freshness or cleanness of the air in my lab and the surrounding area. This aroma was in evidence, if even so slightly, for approximately two months. (Dr. Terry Hutter, Palynological Assessment of the Qumran Spices, May 5, 1994, in Vendyl Jones' Report on the Excavations at Qumran)

The *Qetoret* was so powerful because the nature and amount of its ingredients were commanded to Moses by God. This explains something else we saw above in the text of the Siddur, namely, that any admixture of fruit or bee honey into the *Qetoret* was forbidden. The first reason given is that nobody would have been able to stand the sweetness of its smell. If the aroma of the *Qetoret* was powerful without honey, how much more would it have been with it! But this reason is then followed by a scriptural verse in which it is explicitly stated that honey may not be offered as incense. The question is: why say that it is too powerful, why not just bring the verse? In other words, even if it wasn't so powerful, the verse would prohibit it, so again, why bring a verse?

I asked this question to one of my first teachers, Rabbi Ephraim Asher Rottenberg of blessed memory. He told me to pay attention to the words used in the text. First Bar Kappara says, "Had even a minuscule amount of honey been added (*natan*, from the verb 'to place') to the *qetoret*, no one could have resisted its fragrance." The question is then asked, "Why was no honey blended (*me'arvim*, from the verb 'to mix') into it?" The questioner understood that it is prohibited to "add" honey to the *Qetoret* in a way that it would be visible. He was merely asking why it couldn't be "blended in" unnoticeably. For this we need the verse, "You may not burn any leaven or honey as a fire-offering to God" (Leviticus 2:11). Leaven and honey both allude to pride. Leaven "puffs" our bread up with hot air. Honey, as well, if cooked on a fire, bubbles and rises more than any other liquid. More than any other quality, puffed-up pride prevents a person from recognizing his or her faults and returning in true and sincere Teshuvah. This is antithetical to what the *Qetoret* stands for.

There are other allusions in the *Qetoret*. Rabbi Moshe Sofer (*Chatam Sofer, Derashot* 18; quoted in *Siddur Chatam Sofer ad. loc.*) explains the symbolic meaning of the names of the four main incense spices, as well as the Karshina lye and Cyprus wine:

The four spices that are written explicitly in the Torah are *tzori*-balsam, *tziporen*-onycha, *chelbenah*-galbanum, and *levonah zakah*-pure frankincense. *Tzori* alludes to the Torah which is a *tzori*-balm and healing for the entire body. *Levonah zakah* alludes to God's love for His people through which He *me'laven*-whitens and bleaches their sins. Between these two are placed the *tziporen* and *chelbenah*. As known, *chelbenah* alludes to complete sinners. The *tziporen*, on the other hand, alludes to the majority of the Jewish people. Like a *tziporen*-fingernail, they are smooth and unblemished on the inside, and only darkened on the outside... It is for this reason that we are required to rub the *tziporen* with Karshina lye, to beautify it and remove its external blackness. This alludes to *teshuvah*-repentance and good deeds... Soaking the *tziporen* in Cyprus wine to make it *azah* [pungent or strong] alludes to the wine [secret teachings] of the Torah which imbues Israel with the ability to remain firm and unyielding in their faith when they walk among the nations.

XIII. Redeeming the Sparks

In Hebrew, the word *Qetoret* describes something that "rises up in circles, and whose aroma wafts and spreads" (*Keritot* 6b). In Aramaic, the language of the Zohar, *qetoret* (similar to the Hebrew root *qesher*) means "connection," connection to the Divine. It has the power to elevate us and bind us to our spiritual root (*Zohar* 3:11a). This might be the source for the following directive found in the Siddur HaRashash:

And now, with the recitation of the *Pitum HaQetoret*, intend to elevate the [sparks of] Kedushah-holiness from being lodged in the Klipot [husks of evil], bringing them back to the realm of Kedushah... Intend that the numerical value of the letters of the word *Qetoret* (*Qof, Tet, Vav, Resh, Tav*) is 715. This is exactly 11 x 65, thus alluding to the elevation of the Name Adonai (65).

The Holy Name Adonai means Lord. Complementing the Holy Name YHVH, the aspect of God's Overriding Providence that transcends creation, Adonai refers to God's Indwelling Presence, the Shechinah that accompanies Israel in its exile existence, protecting and sustaining them at all times and in all places. But the Shechinah is not only like a Mother who protects her children. In going into exile to bring her children back, she herself becomes trapped with them, dependent upon them, so to speak, to redeem her.

It is for this reason that the *Qetoret* is so essential and so precious. For when we recite the *Qetoret* with kavannah (directed intention), we not only elevate ourselves from the darkness of exile, but that aspect of God's Providence that accompanies us in exile as well. This is the intention of the verse, "*Ve'shav Hashem Elokecha et shevut'cha* -- And God your Lord will return with your captivity" (Deuteronomy 30:3). It is not written *Ve'heshiv Hashem* (God will bring back), but *Ve'shav Hashem et* (God will return with). This indicates that the Shechinah is with us in our exile, and will return with us when we are redeemed (*Megillah* 29a; *Zohar* 1:120b, 1:177a, 3:22a, 3:90b, 3:115a, 3:193a, 3:270a, 3:297a).

The Shechinah ["Divine Presence" or "Indwelling Presence"; *Malchut d'Atzilut*; God's Glory; *Em HaBanim*, "the Mother of the Souls of Israel"] is thus said to accompany Her children into exile. In *Shaar HaKavanot, Inyan Derushei Halailah, Drush Vav* (p. 56a, Attieh-Jerusalem) the Ari describes the exile of the Shechinah in terms of the concept of *ishon bat ayin* [literally, "daughter of the darkness of the eye" or "black pupil of the eye"]. He explains that *ishon bat ayin* is a feminine expression ("daughter") precisely because it refers to the Shechinah which is the Feminine Principle of Divine Providence. A complement to the Male Principle of God's Providence which brings the world to its perfection irrespective of man's actions, the Shechinah is the revelation of God's *Malchut* [Kingdom] that depends on man. [In the future, these two modes will be shown to have been one all along.]

When the Shechinah is in exile, the Divine Presence is diminished in the world. The darkness of this world literally eclipses men's minds, and they are incapable of perceiving the Hidden Hand that guides their lives and all history. At such time, the Shechinah is said to return to a prenatal state consisting of ten points all rolled into one, i.e. without any means of expression. This is the exile of the Shechinah as she descends, under the cover of night, into the darkness of evil to search for her children. [Certainly, on a higher level, the Kabbalists warn us that the light of the Shechinah is never actually in exile, never actually diminished. As we say in the Alenu prayer, "The Shechinah of Your Power is in the loftiest heights." From down here in this world, however, and from within the drama of creation, we experience ourselves and the Shechinah in exile; see *Zohar* 2:216b.]

The Ari goes on to explain that this was actually the state of the Shechinah when God first created the world [i.e. when He made the first *tzimtzum* to create the world as a stage of free will for man, and He was forced, so to speak, to conceal His light and His presence]. It is the state of the Shechinah in exile. On a smaller scale, it is also the state of the Shechinah each night. Each night, that is, creation returns to its primeval state in which God's presence is hidden, the Primal Light becomes totally fragmented [the vessels are broken], and the world becomes a *challal* [hollow void] wherein God's presence is totally undetectable. As noted, the original reason for this was in order to create an environment in which Adam [Mankind] could participate in the perfection of creation. Adam's role was to become the channel through which pure God-consciousness could flow into the world. In order to bring this situation about, God hid the Original Light [*Or Ganuz*]. This sweet, awesome, Concealed Light would then only be revealed into the darkness of this world through Adam's conscious efforts. Having participated in its revelation, He would have a portion in its sweetness.

All of this involves our perception of our mission from within the drama of history. From this point of view, the Divine Presence is totally eclipsed, the Shechinah is in total exile, perhaps more now than ever. As close as we are to the true Messianic revelation, the darkness before the dawn is almost unbearable. And yet we must know that our Mother is with us. Even when Israel finds herself "in a desolate, howling wasteland" (Deuteronomy 32:10-11), God's providence encompasses them, and protects them like the *pupil of His eye*. "Like an eagle arousing its nest, hovers over its young, so does God spread His wings, carry them, and lift them on His pinions" (ibid.).

In our prayers every morning, we thus reenact all of history in miniature. The *Qetoret*, especially, placed as it is both at the beginning and the end of the Morning Service, is one of the most important sections of the prayers for effecting redemption. All together, all the different parts of the prayers are the most powerful way to unite the Holy One and His Shechinah, YHVH (26) and Adonai (65). $26 + 65 = 91 = \text{Amen}$.

In addition to the general Name Adonai, each of the incense spices has a parallel Name or Names that is like its spiritual root. Some of these Holy Names are familiar to most people, some would be completely incomprehensible. *Tzori*-balsam, for instance, has a numerical value of 300, so the Name that corresponds to it is Elokim (with each letter spelled out). *Tzori* corresponds to the Sefirah of Keter. When we mention *Tzori*, we intend to elevate and refine the sparks of holiness that are associated with the Sefirah of Keter. The same goes for all the other spices.

In this way, when the Temple is standing, and we offer and recite the *Qetoret*, in addition to performing a physical act, we are transmuting matter into energy, elevating pure Godliness back to its source. In doing this, we not only restore things as they were before the original shatterings. Because we are bringing light out of darkness, we are adding holiness upon holiness. This is the "net gain" for all creation, in terms of which even the existence of evil was worthwhile. This is the power of our service. This is the hope that God gives us: Even in the midst of the darkest night, He is with us, helping us behind the scenes, whispering to us, allowing us to participate in His deep Plan, making all of creation dependent upon us. How much do we have to pray to have Him help us!

According to the Midrash (*Tanchuma, Tetzaveh* 14), the letters of the word *Qetoret* (Qof, Tet, Resh, Tav) can be read as an acronym: Qof stands for *gedusha*-holiness, Tet stands for *taharah*-purity, Resh stands for *rachamim*-mercy, and Tav stands for *tikvah*-hope.

XIV. Life or Death

The *Qetoret* offering is considered the most powerful form of offering prescribed by the Torah. It contains the secret of overcoming death, and completely transforming all evil -- in ourselves and in the world -- into good. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov says: "The main refinement and elevation of the sparks of holiness from the *klipot*-evil husks of impurity was effected by offering the eleven spices of the *qetoret*" (*Likutey Halachot, Yoreh Deah, Gerim* 3:16). Echoing the Ari, he adds, "It is by virtue of the *Qetoret* that the *Malchut* (Shechinah) is elevated from the *klipot* of impurity" (*Ibid. Orach Chaim, Nefilat Apayim* 4:1), and "The main purpose of the *Qetoret* (and all the other offerings) is to elevate and reveal all that is holy and good but which is presently embedded and occluded in the depths of the impure *klipot*" (*Ibid. Rosh Chodesh* 3:8).

Yet, as the above quote warns us, if made with the wrong intentions or for the wrong purposes, the *Qetoret* can kill. Is the *Qetoret* life or death? In order to grasp some of the power and depth of the *Qetoret* offering, we turn to the Torah.

The Torah records two tragic episodes in which the *Qetoret* plays a central role. First, Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, are struck dead trying to bring an unauthorized *Qetoret* offering in the newly inaugurated *Ohel Moed* (Communion Tent); see Leviticus 10:1-2 and 16:1.

Second, Korach and his party challenge Moses' and Aaron's authority. In order to prove for all time that his authority is indeed God-given, Moses sets up a test involving, again, the *Qetoret*:

This is what you must do: Let Korach and his entire party take fire pans. Tomorrow, place fire [from the altar] on them and offer *qetoret* on them before God. The man whom God chooses is already the holy one. You sons of Levi have gone too far! (Numbers 16:6-7).

The next morning, Korach stood at the entrance of the Communion Tent with 250 of his men, each one with an incense pan in his hand ready to offer the *Qetoret*. At that moment, God's Glory appeared, the ground opened up, and literally began sucking people down into the earth. A fire also descended from heaven and it consumed the 250 men who were offering the *Qetoret* (Numbers 16:18-34).

Again, as in the case of Nadav and Avihu, death struck as a result of offering the *Qetoret*. The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Korach 5*, quoted by Rashi, Numbers 16:6) asks:

Why did Moses tell them to offer the *qetoret*? [Didn't he know that they would die?] Rather, Moses was trying to warn them: "It is the way of the nations to have many different kinds of idolatrous practices and many priests to perform them. Still, you will never find all of them congregating in one temple to perform the same service. We, on the other hand, have only one God, one Ark, one Torah, one Altar, and one Cohen Gadol (High Priest), yet all 250 of you want the high priesthood! I also wish that it could be so. Take therefore the most beloved form of Divine Service, the *qetoret*. It is more precious than all the other offerings. But be careful, it contains the spice of death [or: it is a potion of death], for Nadav and Avihu were burned through it!" Moses then warned them: "The man whom God chooses is the holy one (i.e. He has already made him holy and set him aside for the task). I am warning you not to play with fire. Whomever God chooses will live. The others will die."

As the Torah records, Korach and his company were killed. Immediately after this, the congregation began to complain bitterly to Moses: "You have killed God's people!" (Numbers 17:6). Again, God's Glory appeared in a cloud and He told Moses that He would now destroy the people with a plague. Moses and Aaron threw themselves down on their faces to plead mercy. Then:

Moses said to Aaron: "Take the fire pan and place some fire on it from the altar. Offer the *qetoret* and go quickly to the community to make atonement for them. Divine wrath is coming forth from God. The plague has already begun." Aaron took the pan as Moses had told him and he ran into the midst of the assembly where the plague had already begun to kill people. He offered the *qetoret* to atone for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was checked (Numbers 17:11-13).

The *Qetoret* has now been used both to kill and to save lives. The question is still: Is it a *sam mavet* ("potion of death") or a *sam chaim* ("elixir of life")?

The *Zohar* (2:218b) states:

The *qetoret*. By inhaling the fragrance of that fine column of smoke when it rose straight up with the help of the smoke-producing herb, one's heart would become purified with joy and illumination in the service of his Master. The impurity of the *yetzer hara* [evil urge] would be removed from him and he would remain singleheartedly devoted to his Father in heaven. Why? Because the *qetoret* has the power to break the evil urge... Nothing in the world breaks the power of the Other Side [Evil] [and prevents it from speaking slander against Israel] like the *qetoret*.

Come and see. It is written: "Take the fire pan and place some fire on it from the altar. Offer the *qetoret* and go quickly to the community to make atonement for them." Why? Because, "Divine wrath is coming forth from God. The plague has already begun." Nothing breaks the power of evil like the *qetoret*. For there is nothing as precious before the Holy One as the *qetoret*...

It has therefore been decreed before the Holy One that anyone who daily contemplates and reads the portions [of the Torah] regarding the *qetoret* will be delivered... from all evil occurrences and impure thoughts, evil decrees and plague. He will suffer no harm that entire day and evil will have no power over him, if only he will meditate upon it in the proper way.

Rabbi Shimon said: If only people knew how great it is before God when they say the section of *pitum ha'qetoret* [the compounding of the incense], they would take each and every word of the section and place it on their heads like a golden crown! Whoever says *pitum ha'qetoret* each day in the morning and evening, slowly, without skipping even a single word, and understands what he is saying, is protected against all evil occurrences and evil thoughts and from an evil death. He can rest assured that he will not be harmed for that entire day in any way. He will also have a portion in the World to Come. In the time of plague there is no better remedy than the *qetoret*...

When the shaft of smoke rose up from the *qetoret*, the Cohen would see the letters of the Holy Name (*YHWH*) float upwards. Following this, holy chariots would surround him on all sides until he himself was able to ascend with light and joy. The rejoicer would rejoice, and he would bind bindings above and below in order to unify all... For this reason, we must precede the prayers each day with a recital of the *qetoret*, in order to remove impurity from the world...

In other places, the *Zohar* (3:58b, 3:149a) states, "Why is it that no other sacrifice entails as strict a punishment [when made improperly or for the wrong purposes] as the *qetoret*? Because no other sacrifice has the power to bind Israel to the supernal Unity as the *qetoret*." What is the source of this mysterious power? Why can't the forces of evil, nay, the Angel of Death himself, stand the *Qetoret*?

XV. The Mystery of the Qetoret

Above, Rabbi Kaplan quoted the Talmud (*Shabbat* 89a) which records a tradition that Moses was taught the mystery of the *Qetoret* by none other than the Angel of Death:

When Moses ascended into the spiritual dimension to receive the Torah, even the Angel of Death transmitted something to him. It is written, "He [Aaron] offered the *qetoret* to atone for the people. He stood between the dead and the living and the plague was checked." If the Angel of Death himself had not taught Moses [that only the *qetoret* has the power to overcome death], how else could he have known?!

Moses learned the mystery of the *Qetoret* from the Angel of Death. According to the Kabbalah, this means that the very existence of evil -- including that of the Angel of Death -- is maintained only by virtue of the sparks of holiness which it holds bound in its power. As we shall see, it is through the misuse of the power of speech, *lashon hara* (literally, "evil tongue"), that evil is given its power. As the *Zohar* above has taught, however, it is the *Qetoret* that can counteract this. The mystery of the *Qetoret* is its power to release these sparks and allow them to become elevated back to their source in holiness.

Note: Evil -- the power that God uses to camouflage His own Godliness from mankind, and creation in general -- is nourished by the sparks of holiness and goodness that are presently lodged in it. When every last spark of holiness is released and elevated back to its source in holiness, evil, as such, will cease to exist. Death will no longer "swallow" life (i.e. cause order to break down into seeming chaos). On the contrary, death itself will be swallowed, as per the verse, "Death will be swallowed forever, and the Eternal God will wipe the tears off every face" (Isaiah 25:8). Although this process will only reach its final culmination in the Messianic Age, it is through Israel's *avodah* (divine service) that all creation is brought constantly closer to its final perfection. It is for this reason that the prophet continues, saying, "He will [then] remove His people's disgrace from the entire earth" (*ibid.*).

We have seen how the *Qetoret* consisted of eleven spices or perfumes. The other ingredients mentioned (Karshina lye, Cyprus wine, Sodom salt, smoke-producing herb, and Jordan amber) were used to treat the eleven spices; they were not part of the *Qetoret* per se. After treating and grinding each separately, they were blended together into a special mixture to be used in the Temple. As Rabbi Kaplan noted above, the Talmud goes on to explain that ten of these spices had good fragrances, while an eleventh spice, *chelbenah*-galbanum, had an unpleasant odor. The question is, naturally, why include the latter?

XVI. Qetoret and Prayer

The answer lies in the intimate connection that exists between prayer and the *Qetoret*. First, King David equates the two: "May my prayer rise up as *Qetoret* before You, and when I lift my hands to You [may it be considered as if I had brought] a *minchah* offering of my whole being" (Psalms 141:2). Second, community prayer requires a *minyan* (quorum of ten adult men). This is also similar to the *Qetoret* that contains ten good smelling spices and one evil spice. Thus, by including the *chelbenah* along with the other ten spices, the Torah alludes to the fact that the prayers of a *minyan* cannot rise up "like *qetoret*" until an eleventh man, a sinner, joins them.

This is the meaning of the above quoted statement from the Talmud: "[If the communal prayers on] any fast do not include sinners of Israel, the fast is not considered a proper fast" (*Keritot* 6b).

God commanded that *chelbenah* be placed in the *qetoret* even though it had a very strong pungent odor. This teaches that when the community comes together to make a fast or for any other reason, they must include sinners with them. They should not say, "Let us separate from the sinners so that they not cause us more harm than good. Let the stench of their evil deeds not ruin the perfume of what we are trying to do."

They should realize that every fast that does not include the sinners of Israel is not acceptable by God. God does not want the wicked to be destroyed - rather, He wants them to repent. He therefore gives them a chance and allows them time to change their ways. When the wicked repent, God's name becomes greater and more holy in the world. Therefore their fast is very precious in God's eyes...

Another reason why a fast only of good people is not acceptable is that every fast is made because of troubles that come from the world. Troubles only come from the world because of the evil done by the wicked. Therefore, if only the righteous people fast and they leave the wicked to do their evil, it is to no avail. However, if the wicked are included in the fast, God has mercy on the world because He sees that the wicked are also repenting. (*Torah Anthology*, Volume 9, pp. 328-329)

The *chelbenah* is actually necessary to give the other spices exactly the right pungency. In the same way, a congregation is not complete without someone who has also fallen and must reelevate himself through *teshuvah* [return, repentance]. The *Qetoret* spices thus teach us that even the most "evil smelling" person -- or the evil smelling part of each of us -- can and must be rectified through *teshuvah*. In admitting our mistakes and dissociating ourselves from our wrongdoings, we not only rectify the damage we have done in our own lives, we also make it possible for the community's prayers to rise up, like *Qetoret*, before God. The more profound our *teshuvah* -- the more aware we become of God's Presence in our lives -- the greater the rectification that is effected.

Perhaps this also explains the fact that the Talmud specifically mentions the prayers that are said on a "fast" day: the first stage of *teshuvah* must involve a dissociation from the very thing that led us away in the first place. Since most sins are rationalized by giving in to some physical need or desire for pleasure, it is fitting that our first act of *teshuvah* involve overcoming (by temporarily abstaining from) these very needs and desires.

It is important to point out here that this entire section of the morning prayer service in which the *Qetoret* is found (from the first blessings to the binding of Isaac, to the first declaration of the Unity, to the various offerings in the Temple) revolves around the ideas of **retrieving**, **refining**, **extracting**, and **elevating** the sparks of holiness and goodness, in ourselves and in the creation at large, from the unrefined state in which we originally received them.

This is especially clear in the case of the *chelbenah*, the spice which represents either those sparks of divine energy which we have used wrongly (sin) or the actual raw potential and vital energy which was given to us to refine and use for the service of God which we have not used at all. In either case, these sparks play a crucial role throughout the entire service. They must be found and clarified (and in the following sections, elevated) so that they can provide the powerful emotional fuel that will propel and elevate all of our prayers heavenwards. If not, our words remain mere words; our prayers are prevented from rising up to their destination. They are detoured by the very forces of constriction that prevent us from grasping the fundamental connection between what we say, what we do, and what we are. Without this connection, prayer cannot truly fulfill its purpose of bringing us close to our Source.

In sum, whether we have done wrong or whether we have not yet done right, all is not lost. On the contrary, we have been given a job. We must refine ourselves and thereby transform the world into a place where God's Presence can be felt and known. This is within the grasp of even the most "evil smelling" person among us.

XVII. The Power to Transform Evil

Much of what we have said so far is made clear in the following profound and far-reaching exposition by Rav Tzadok HaCohen of Lublin. Before we commence, let me just tell you a little about Rav Tzadok. He was an incredible genius, deep and broad-ranging, not only eclectic, but electric, or more correctly, lightning minded. He could cover the entire breadth and depth of the Written and Oral tradition in leaps and bounds. Indeed, for him the entire tradition was one unified light broken down into millions of pieces. He took the Ari's statement (*Likutey Torah, Ki Tissa, s.v. VeHaluhot*) that the Breaking of the Tablets on Sinai paralleled the original Shattering of the Vessels with deadly seriousness.

Like all the great tzadikim before and after him, Rav Tzadok delighted in showing how all the millions of pieces of Torah strewn everywhere throughout the Written and Oral Torah were and are part of that one great Light. Due to the fact that he thought and wrote in short notation form, clothing his thoughts in the language of the tradition, it is not always (!) easy to understand the drift of what he is saying. If this is true in the original Hebrew, it is all the more so in English! Nevertheless, as you have seen, we feel that it is very important to translate primary sources into a language that *can* be understood.

The importance of primary sources is that they have tremendous power. Like the *Qetoret*, however, their power must not be misused. Whether dealing with the Talmud, the Midrash, the Zohar, the Rambam, the Ari, the Baal Shem Tov, the Ramchal, the Gaon of Vilna, Rav Tzadok HaCohen, or any other Torah Master, we approach with love, respect and humility. In addition, we need to stay focused and pay attention to every word, so that we may be worthy of uncovering the depths of their teachings and extracting their meaning. For this, it is absolutely necessary to know how to ask for Divine assistance. Our approach to Torah should always be with prayer. In his introduction to the Mishnah, none other than Rambam (Maimonides) thus wrote:

After seeking wisdom with every last ounce of one's ability, a person should leave it to the Creator. He should pray to Him and plead that He build his mind and guide him to proper understanding, and reveal to him the deep secrets concealed in the Torah, as King David said, "Uncover my eyes so that I may behold the wonders of Your Torah!" (Psalms 119:18).

Why did King David ask God to open his mind's eyes? Because the words of the Torah are clear and shining in and of themselves. It is our minds that are clouded, and this prevents us from understanding what is right in front of us. We must therefore pray that our eyes be opened to see the light of the Torah and be worthy of understanding what it says.

The following piece is from Rav Tzadok's five-volume commentary on the Torah, *Pri Tzadik* ("Fruit of the Righteous"), Volume 4, *Parshat Korach*, p. 144 (72b). We will quote and try to explain and summarize as we go:

The *Zohar* (3:177b) says: "The Cohanim work quietly and in secret. [This is why they are able to assist Israel in atoning for their sins, which are usually done in secret]... With what [do they effect atonement]? With the *qetoret*, which is offered in silence..." This is consistent with the tradition recorded in the Talmud (*Arachin* 16a) that the *qetoret* atones for *lashon hara* (slander and evil speech), as it is written, "The entire congregation of the children of Israel began complaining to Moses, saying, 'You have killed God's people!'... He [Aaron] offered the *qetoret* to atone for the people" (Numbers 17:6, 17:12). The Talmud thus says: Let [the *qetoret*] that is offered in secret come and atone for [their *lashon hara*] that was spoken in secret.

Rav Tzadok was a Cohen. He understood in his genes (literally) what the silent work of the Cohanim was, the silent work of Thought, of entering the World of Thought, the closest we can get to the Temple, the microcosm of all the universes. In the Temple, the Cohanim would wear white clothes and walk barefoot. Their service was the service of *Yichudim*, silent Unifications, the service of the *Zohar*. The *Qetoret*, especially, one of the most important offerings in the Temple, was offered by the Cohen Gadol (High Priest) twice daily, in silence, and out of the sight of the people. As the Talmud says (*Yoma* 44a), a curtain was spread between the entrance to the Sanctuary (where the Golden Incense Altar was located) and the Bronze Sacrificial Altar (in the Courtyard) when the *Qetoret* was offered. It had to be done in secret.

This is consistent, Rav Tzadok says, with the Talmud's statement that the *Qetoret* which is offered in secret atones for *Lashon Hara* (slander, evil tongue) which is usually spoken in secret ("behind the back" of the person spoken about).

But Rav Tzadok is bothered by the proof verse brought by the Talmud. After posing the difficulty, he goes on to explain and tie together a number of the major themes that we have discussed to this point:

"The entire congregation of the children of Israel began complaining to Moses, saying, 'You have killed God's people!'" (Numbers 17:6). This verse seems to indicate that they spoke *lashon hara* publicly and out loud. Why is their *lashon hara* still called, "a secret thing"?

In truth, however, *qetoret* and *lashon hara* are both called "a secret thing." *Qetoret* is "a secret thing" by virtue of the *chelbenah* it contains. That is, although *chelbenah* gives off an unpleasant odor on its own, it alludes to the sinners of Israel who can also give off a pleasant odor when they join together [to pray] with the rest of the community... The *Qetoret* thus has the power to transform and rectify even the most hopeless sinners, in the mystery of the verse, "If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow; if they are red as crimson, they will become like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). This follows the explanation [of the Sages] that the word *chelbenah* contains the same letters as *levonah*-frankincense [and *levanah*-white], plus the letter *chet*.

When the evil smelling *chelbenah* is left on its own, its smell is unbearably bitter. The same is true of those who have gotten trapped in their own wickedness, or of that part of us that has become trapped in a cycle of sin and guilt. Reintegrating the evil person back into the community (or the evil part of ourselves back into our personality) is important for him and for us, because this *chelbenah* part of us contains something important for the integrity of the community (and the personality). Still, this must be remain a secret, lest the evil person (or part) think that he or she or it is okay as it is. No, there must be Teshuvah. In order to effect true rectification, we must all do Teshuvah. The community or the personality can then reclaim the very energy that (until now) was being used to undermine and subvert it.

Now, playing on the double meaning of the letters *LVNH* (*levanah* means "white" and *levonah* is "frankincense," the most exalted of the *Qetoret* spices), Rav Tzadok deftly moves from God's promise to Isaiah that Teshuvah has the power to "whiten" sins which are as red as scarlet, to the letter-construction of the Hebrew *Chelbenah* and *Levonah*. As they appear in the Siddur, the words *ha'levonah* and *ha'chelbenah* are actually identical except for one extra letter, namely, the letter *chet* in *chelbenah*. The word for "sin" also begins with the letter *chet*, and is pronounced *chet*! This *chet* represents the sin in what otherwise would be a pure thought, or the sinner in an otherwise good community.

The Sages paid close attention to the difference between this letter and its almost identical twin, the letter *heh*. As Rabbi Kaplan says in the name of the *Zohar* (3:252a), the left leg of the *chet* is attached to its roof by a very thin thread. If you break this connection and remove the left leg just a hairsbreadth away from its place, you no longer have a *chet*, but a *heh*. This is precisely the difference between *matzah*, the unleavened bread we eat on Passover, and *chametz*, leavened or fermented bread. *Matzah* and *chametz* have exactly the same letters except for the *chet* and *heh*, and the only difference between these two letters is that as soon as the left leg is removed from the *chet* by a fraction of an inch it will become a *heh*. In *chametz*, this leg acts as a channel for holy energy to be drained off to nourish Evil. In *matzah*, this channel is broken (see *Innerspace*, p. 172).

We learn from this that Evil is essentially parasitic. Since it has no life of its own, it depends on whatever "sparks" of holiness it can steal to nourish itself. This includes, when we are talking about the Angel of Death and the System of Evil that God allows to exist, stealing souls in any way it can, pulling a veil over their eyes with any ruse it can get away with. This is the secret of "Daniel Webster and the Devil," of Faust's "Mephistopheles."

This is the secret of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden. When a person first makes a deal with Evil, he doesn't realize what's involved. Evil promises lots of good things, so the one who is blinded by all the glitter doesn't pay that much attention to the little clause at the end of his contract that says "by signing this, I hereby sell my soul to the Devil." It just doesn't hit home, until it's too late. But all this is in order to give free will, to give the impression that there is something else besides the Godly Will. Otherwise, who would choose Evil, especially since Evil is the absolute absence of free will? It whispers in a person's ear that he will be free of all constraint, but in the end, the very end, Evil will be exposed for what it really was - total subjugation.

In the meantime, the letter *chet* in *chelbenah* indicates that the holy energy of the *levonah* is being drained off to nourish Evil. This situation can only be repaired by breaking the channel of sustenance, by transforming chametz into *matzah*. Only then can the sparks of holiness be extracted out of the realm of Evil, i.e. the Children of Israel taken out of Egypt. It is for this very reason that *chametz* is forbidden on Passover, when we left Egypt. In terms of the *Qetoret*, this can only be effected when the evil of the *chelbenah* is brought into close proximity with the good of the *levonah* [as they are in the Siddur]. Only then are the sparks that were held captive in Evil free at last of Evil's tyranny.

A similar difference can be seen in other pairs of words which look and/or sound almost identical but whose meanings are opposite. One such example is *challel* and *hallel*. *Challel* means to profane, while *hallel* means to praise. As we saw above, a *challal* is a hollow void, seemingly empty of the Godly spirit. *Hallel* reveals that that seeming emptiness is filled with God's light. A *challal* is also a dead body, whereas "*Nishmat kol chai tehallel Yah* - the soul-breath of all that is alive praises God!"

Rav Tzadok continues in perhaps the most dramatic crescendo of this entire passage:

This same *chet* is also the first letter of the word *choshech*-darkness, alluding to the deeds of the wicked that darken the world and obscure the Godly light. In truth, this darkness is part of God's plan, as the verse indicates, "He placed darkness as a concealment [of His light]" (Psalms 18:12). ***For man's ability to become wicked is predicated upon God's concealing His light.*** When He will reveal this primal light, however, it will become clear that... the very purpose of creation involved the possibility [i.e. free will] that man would sin and only then repent, thus becoming instrumental in revealing the Godly light from utter darkness. [Thus, in order to reveal an even greater light, God created the possibility of darkness and evil], as the *Zohar* (3:47b) states, "The greatest revelation of Godliness is the light that emerges from darkness." It is concerning this illumination that it is written, "If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow; if they are red as crimson, they will become like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). This is a mystery [the mystery of *teshuvah*-repentance]. And this is why the *qetoret* [which is the mechanism for redeeming the holy sparks of light from darkness] is called "a secret thing."

Rav Tzadok is on fire. From the *chet* of *chelbenah* (the part of us that sucks our energy in order to undermine the integrity of the whole personality), he moves to the *chet* in *choshech*-darkness. The word *choshech* can be read in two different ways, depending on where we place the little dot on the middle letter *shin* or *sin*. A dot on the right side will give us the word *choshech*-darkness. A dot on the left will yield the word *chosech*-withhold. What is darkness but the withholding of light?

Rav Tzadok now alludes to the Midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 2:5) on Genesis 1:2-3: "And the earth was Tohu and Bohu' - these are the deeds of the wicked. 'And God said: Let their be light' - these are the deeds of the righteous." Why did God create the world in this way? Why is there such darkness? It is so that we could bring ourselves and the entire world back in Teshuvah - Teshuv Heh - so that we could participate in bringing the Shechinah back to God.

This is the great mystery of the *Zohar* that "The greatest revelation of Godliness is the light that emerges from darkness," the mystery of "If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow," the power and mystery of Teshuvah. And this is why the *Qetoret* [which is the mechanism for redeeming the holy sparks of light from darkness] is called "a secret thing." It is called "a secret thing" because, at face value, Evil is a total affront to God. Its very existence is a contradiction to His. It is only on a secret level, behind the scenes, that Evil is part of God's plan. This plan will only be revealed at the end, in stages, thus giving everyone involved a chance to return in Teshuvah. But the lights won't be completely turned on in the theater until the movie is over. Then, those who are still clinging to their ways will have problems. The great Courtroom scene will commence. Evil itself will be judged. According to the Talmud (*Succah* 52a), it will be punished by being placed on the Sacrificial Altar and slaughtered. Its death will be terrible, but in dying it will metamorphose in front of our very eyes. In the end, all will see that whatever Evil had was from holiness. It had nothing of its own. [Rabbi Kaplan speaks more about this in *Innerspace*, pp. 161-162.] Those who found it so hard to dissociate from evil will also be judged. They will plead that they couldn't overcome their desires, that they had no choice. They will be shown that they indeed did have the ability to overcome their subjugation. In the end, if they return in complete Teshuvah, they too will be redeemed, even if that Teshuvah might involve dying.

XVIII. The Key to the Mystery

Qetoret is "a secret thing." Now it remains to understand how and why *Lashon Hara* can be called a secret thing. Remember, the proof verse that the Talmud brought seemed to be talking about *Lashon Hara* that was spoken in public. We resume where we left off:

This is why the *qetoret* is called "a secret thing." But *lashon hara* is also designated as "a secret thing." Why is this? And why does the Talmud (*Arachin* 15b) state: "The magnitude of the sin of one who speaks *lashon hara* is equal to that of one who commits all three cardinal sins, idolatry, promiscuity and murder, for which one must die rather than transgress." [How can *lashon hara* be more damaging than the three cardinal sins?]

But this is [the key to] the mystery itself, namely, that *lashon hara* is the very root of evil from which the [three cardinal] *klipot*-evil husks receive their lifeforce. This is illustrated in the episode of the *nachash*-serpent whose first act was to slyly whisper *lashon hara* against his Creator to Eve.

Before answering the question: Why is *Lashon Hara* considered "a secret thing"? Rav Tzadok is led to ask another related question: Why does the Talmud say that *Lashon Hara* is more serious than all three cardinal sins? In answering the second, he will return to answer the first.

Rav Tzadok has made a profound connection here between the three cardinal sins and the three cardinal husks of evil. What are these evil husks? In Ezekiel's prophecy they are called "storm wind, great cloud, and flashing fire" (Ezekiel 1:4). In Hebrew they are *ruach searah, anan gadol, v'esh mit'lakachat*. The connection between these three and the *nachash*-serpent of the Garden of Eden is alluded to in the final letters of the three principal words: *ruach*-wind, *anan*-cloud, and *esh*-fire. The final letter of *ruach* is *chet*; the final letter of *anan* is *nun*, and the final letter of *esh* is *shin*. When rearranged, they read *nun, chet, shin*, i.e. *nachash*! The *nachash* is the force that tries to force a person to deny God by committing one of the three cardinal sins! Now, what could the connection possibly be between the *nachash* and *lashon hara* (slander and evil tongue)?

This is illustrated in the episode of the sly *nachash*-serpent whose first act was to secretly whisper *lashon hara* against his Creator to Eve. We learn from this that *lashon hara* is the secret weapon of the *nachash* [from which it derives its power to wreak havoc]. This is brought out in the verse, "Who is the person who desires life, who loves the days [of this world as a preparation for] beholding the ultimate good [of God's Primordial Light]? Let him guard his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit" (Psalms 34:13-14). Only by refraining from speaking *lashon hara* [about others and within one's own mind about oneself] can a person save himself from being destroyed by the *nachash* who is actually nourished by our speaking *lashon hara*. For this is the secret of his mysterious power. This is why the Talmud referred to *lashon hara* as "the secret thing."

An equation has been set up: *Nachash* is the Master of *Lashon Hara*. He speaks from behind a curtain, from beneath the threshold of consciousness. He whispers, saying, "Who told you not to eat from the tree?" meaning, "Who said you have to listen to God's command?" meaning, "Who said He is God?" meaning "Who said there is a God?" etc. etc. It is not by chance that the *Nachash* is called sly and sneaky, for he mesmerizes us and wraps us around his finger with the power of his words. To overcome him, we must guard our tongues, watch what we say, even in our minds, i.e. not let him insinuate himself into our thought process. Only then will the Primordial Light that was hidden away be ours, not only in the Next World, but now.

With this we can now understand what the Talmud (*Shabbat* 89a) means when it declares that even the Angel of Death transmitted something to Moses... We learn from this that all the angels in heaven transmitted their particular secrets, meaning their secret powers, to Moses. Among them was the Angel of Death. He revealed to Moses that his power to kill derives from the *lashon hara* that we speak. This is the meaning of the Talmud's statement above that *lashon hara* is "a secret thing," i.e. the secret weapon that nourishes the [three] evil husks. Knowing this, Moses also understood that the only way to counteract the effect of our slander was precisely by offering the *qetoret*. For the *qetoret* is also done in secret. It therefore has the power to rectify the damage caused by our *lashon hara*, by transmuting the evil smelling *chelbenah*, which is none other than the sinners of Israel, into a good fragrance... In this way, the *qetoret* atones for *lashon hara*.

In this way, *qetoret* atones for *lashon hara*!

Rav Tzadok is not the only one to talk about this. The Ari revealed the mystery of the *Qetoret*, and the Ramchal, the Baal Shem Tov, the Gra, the Rashash, the Or HaChaim, Rebbe Nachman, the Baal HaTanya, and many others, all understood its implications. All these great Masters delved deeply into the ultimate dichotomies of existence: good and evil, light and dark, and life and death, etc. etc. But with the power of their Torah, they revealed that all the ultimate dichotomies are rooted in God's Oneness. Not that darkness, death and evil are not evil. But that even Evil, in the ultimate scheme of the One and Only God, has its place. They thus taught that the *Qetoret* has the power to refine and elevate those aspects of the fallen kings which descended and became trapped in the *Klipot*-husks of Evil, thus becoming their source of nourishment. This was the deep plan of the Creator. It was also an incredible sacrifice on the part of the original Sefirot to die in this way, thereby becoming the life-line and channel through which Evil would exist. But their death was their way of participating in God's plan and creating a way for Mankind to participate as well. The main power of the *Qetoret* is thus to raise up these sparks from the *Klipah*. In the process, the *Klipah* loses its vitality and dies. It can no longer swallow up that which is alive to keep itself alive.

But it is not enough that *they* understood it. The time has come for us to understand and play our little part in the unfolding redemption process. For living as we do towards the end of the historical process, we are sorely in need of this and other teachings to revive our souls and awaken us to our mission, the mission of the souls of Israel as the Great Sabbath approaches. In order to break through the *klipot* of our own minds and hearts, therefore, we have to know that the Torah is not just a relic of the past. It is the ultimate God-consciousness that is actually being revealed in our lives today. It is God's Shechinah and His Overriding Providence. It is a Light that is so great that no darkness can stand in its way.

In order to bring your mission alive in terms of the *Qetoret*, picture yourself standing there with Aaron, in the midst of thousands of people dying. Stand between life and death. Look at Aaron. He is obviously not just standing there. He knows what to Think. He knows the secret of the *Qetoret*. He is praying with all his heart. He is also calling to his people, singing to them, pleading with them, not to give up, not to remain trapped in their small-minded complaints against Moses, not to be fooled by the Serpent any more.

Meanwhile, the white smoke of the red *Qetoret* rises high and its aroma spreads throughout the entire camp, purifying it of the stench of death. What everyone thought was a potion of death is now stopping death. Death itself cannot stand up to the power of the *Qetoret*. The sweet aroma reminds us that evil and death have no existence of their own. All comes from God, the One who is above all dichotomies, the One who transcends all contradictions. In the face of the *Qetoret*, death itself has no existence. The *chet* of *chelbenah* and of *choshech* is transformed into the *chet* of *Chaim*, Life! No longer is the light hidden.

Still, as the Midrash and Rav Tzadok note here, there seems to be a problem. Remember, you are there with Aaron, standing between the living and the dead. Thank God, those who have not been struck by the plague yet have been saved, but what about those who have, who are in the throes of death!? Can Aaron save them?

No, the Midrash says. In order to do that, he must return to the Communion Tent with the Angel of Death himself. Sound familiar? Bring the Angel of Death, the very force of Evil, into the Communion Tent! There, in the presence of God's unmitigated light, he has no chance.

XIX. The Return of the Light

The significance of the unearthing of the *Qetoret* in our day represents the possibility of reattaining a connection that once existed. In his *Maamar HaGeulah* (Essay on Redemption), Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, 1707-1746) wrote:

Redemption requires many preparations, and extremely far-reaching and powerful actions [both on God's part and ours]. These are known to the enlightened who have attempted to walk in wisdom's ways and understood its truth. [At the time of the Redemption] when wisdom will permeate the world, all will then see and understand retroactively how great were the miracles [both hidden and revealed] that God performed for us [throughout history]. For when Israel imagined that He had hidden His face from them and forsaken them [in their exile], He was actually preparing goodness and blessing for them -- great storehouses [of spiritual illumination] whose expansiveness has no end and whose vastness has no limit. It was into these storehouses that He constantly placed all that is precious and pleasant, the treasures of kings, at all times and at every moment, until [the great day when] they would be filled [with such goodness] that the mouth cannot express, the ear cannot hear, nor even the heart contemplate. And when the time comes for the destined Rest [of the Great Sabbath] to become manifest in the world, all of these storehouses will be opened. All that is precious will emerge from them and be given to Israel in payment for the difficult service they performed in their exile.

Israel's service was difficult because the very essence of Israel, its very existence, is predicated on closeness to the Divine and the prophetic inspiration that accompanies it. In exile, these are withheld in what Ramchal calls "spiritual storehouses."

What else is in these storehouses? For one thing, the Light that God "withheld" when He first created the universe:

The [spiritual or mental] Light that the Holy One brought into existence on the first day of creation was so great that with it Adam could see from one end of the world to the other. When the Holy One foresaw the wicked deeds of the generations of the Flood and the Tower of Babel, however, He decided to store this Light away for the righteous [who would be resurrected] in the Future. It is thus written, "God saw the light, that it was good, and God separated the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:4). That is, He set it aside for the righteous (*Chagigah* 12b; see *Bereshit Rabbah* 3:6, 11:2; *Zohar* 1:31b-32a, 3:88a; *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:499; Rashi on Genesis 1:4).

The Gaon of Vilna (Gra, 1720-1797) echoed this:

The light that was created on the first day was the light with which Adam saw from one end of the creation to the other. This original light is the light of consciousness (*Or HaSechel*), the light which illumines the mind. It is through this that Adam perceived and grasped the entirety of the universe. This is the light that was hidden away for the future when (Isaiah 11:9), "The earth will be filled with the Knowledge of God" (*Aderet Eliyahu*, p. 37).

We have seen why God constricted and concealed His Light. First, if He had not done so, there would have been no possibility of creating a world. Simply, nothing else could have existed except God Himself. Second, the world He would have created would have been so perfect -- God's existence would have been so obvious -- that there would have been no place for free will and hence no possibility of ever earning our closeness to God.

But in our excitement we have jumped ahead. Surely the great day will come when our present world-cycle will have come full circle and we will be taken up into ever higher and ever greater cycles, back and up through the seven levels of the shatterings; back and up through the four primal levels that existed prior to and beyond the shatterings; back and up to the levels that preceded those and to levels that never existed, *ad infinitum* (see Ramchal in *Klach* and other places). But it is a process. Before that, many things that once existed in our own world at previous higher levels and which were subsequently hidden, will be revealed again. This includes the level of *Nevuah*-Prophecy that existed when the First Temple stood, as well as the level of *Chokhmah*-Wisdom that existed during the period of the Second Temple. This includes the First Tablets that were broken, and the Second Tablets that were whole. This includes the Tree of Life, and the incredible level of revelation that existed in the Garden of Eden. In short, this includes all that ever existed in the perfected state but was never completely revealed due to its great power and brilliance, except for a split second, and then concealed. The Midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 12:6) alludes to this:

Although everything was created full [perfect], when Adam sinned they became deficient. They will only be restored to their pristine state when the son of Peretz comes... Six things will be restored: Adam's splendor, his life, his height [to the heavens], the fruit of the earth, the fruit of the trees, and the luminaries [i.e. sun and moon which were diminished].

Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv teaches that many things will be restored to perfection which are presently fallen or in a state of exile:

In the Future, God will purify the entire earth and nullify evil along with all of its manifestations. At that time all corporeality and physicality will be distilled and transformed into supernal luminescence. The entirety of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil will literally be reconstructed into the Tree of Life... (*Leshem Sh'vo Ve'achlamah, Sefer De'ah* 2:4:10:3, p. 100 (50b)).

The *Zohar* (2:188b) sums it up this way:

The time will come when the Holy One will bring about every single **good** for Israel that was ever spoken by the true prophets [as we said, this includes restoring many good things that were once revealed for an instant and then stored away; the word "good" itself is a codeword in the *Zohar* for the "light that God called good" which was stored away for the righteous].

Deprived of all this good in their exile, Israel suffered untold agony [when the nations scorned them, saying, "Where is all the good your God promised you?"]. Without the certainty that all this good mentioned in [both the written and oral] Torah would be restored, Israel would not have been able to survive in exile.

But we go to the study halls, open our sacred texts, and behold all the good that is in store for us. We behold it written in the Torah that the Holy One has promised to restore these things, and we are consoled in our exile. In the meantime, the other nations ridicule and shame us, saying, "Where is your God? Where is all the good that you say awaits you..."

XX. Momentous Revelations in Our Days

We have seen that, according to ancient tradition, the *Beth HaMikdash* (Holy Temple), the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), as well as all their sacred vessels -- the *Aron HaKodesh* (Holy Ark), *Menorah* (Candelabra), *Mizbe'ach HaQetoret* (Incense Altar), the Showbread Table, the Garments of the *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest), the Ashes of the Red Heifer, etc. -- were not just physical artifacts. They represented spiritual levels of closeness to God, i.e., the return to the level of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the return to the level of Unity that existed before the Shattering of the Vessels.

The discovery of a juglet of Anointing Oil and 600 kilograms of *Qetoret* in our time in the Cave of the Column complex in Qumran is a tiny hint of things to come. When the actual artifacts of the ancient Temple will be unearthed, this will be a sign that their accompanying spiritual levels are about to be revealed as well.

May we merit to see the great *qedushah*-holiness, *taharah*-purity and *rachamim*-mercy of the Blessed Holy One revealed in our days. This is our great *tikvah*-hope!

-end-

PDF version by Jonathan Hirshon, June 16, 2003