THE AROMA OF PARADISE

By Rabbi Dan Ornstein

One early evening on a recent retreat in the Colorado Rockies, as the acrid smoke of our campfire rose in our nostrils, a friend urged me to sniff the bark of the nearby Ponderosa pine tree. “It smells like butterscotch,” he informed me with quiet excitement. I walked over to one large tree, its skin a creamy yellow-brown patchwork of scaly puzzle pieces. It exuded a slight but heady aroma of butterscotch candy.

The next day, I walked out into the early morning air. The Ponderosa pines’ wildly waving needles made me think of long-haired hippies welcoming me enthusiastically to their home. Numbering in the hundreds where I stood, the trees overwhelmed me with that “candy shop smell” which was now so thick, my nose could -as it were - taste it.

Ambling down one path of the Jewish retreat center where we were staying, I recalled taking a walk the morning before, where I spied clusters of young cones on the Bristlecone pines, gleaming emerald-green in the rising sunlight, their fragrant resin gooey over their barbed surfaces. Rubbing the resin between my fingers, I breathed in deeply its distinctive scent.

The retreat center staff runs a Jewish sleepaway camp during the summer months; they’ve taken advantage of these aromatic woods to help their campers connect spiritually with the forests through their sense of smell. On one especially large Ponderosa, they hung a sign in Hebrew and English with the words of the Jewish blessing that one recites before breathing in the scent of fragrant trees.

It was now broad daylight and other people were stirring and walking outside. For a moment, I struggled with my self-conscious resistance to looking like a dog or a fool, but I knew that this kind of reticence had no place here. Bringing my face close to the old tree trunk, I recited the words of the blessing that I had mindlessly neglected the day before:

*You are praised, Lord our God, Ruler of the cosmos, Creator of fragrant trees.*

As I took a whiff of that old tree’s bark, I paused to wonder if this was what my Jewish ancestors meant when they wrote about breathing in the smell of the trees of the Garden of Eden, the paradise of ancient myth. The Jewish mystical tradition often portrayed trees as vessels for the hidden presence of God waiting to be revealed. In much the same way that fragrant trees give off their luscious scents that awaken us, God’s wisdom can awaken the awareness of the person who pursues its secret truths.

Though I appreciate the ancient mystics’ insights, I am not a mystic. My spiritual life lies more along the lines of what some religious thinkers call “normal mysticism,” the direct experience of the miraculous and the extraordinary through the everyday. Inhaling, I felt a simple yet overwhelming gratitude for the world God gave me, especially those fragrant trees that brought me so much joy those few days in the Rockies.

A skeptic could interpret my olfactory experience among the Ponderosa and the Bristlecone as a narcissistic religious fantasy, but she would be missing the point of that experience. Ponderosa pine bark’s butterscotch smell comes from chemicals called terpenes. They keep the trees healthy through their interactions with birds that come to eat insects nesting in the bark. This amazing fact itself is cause for human wonder and gratitude, but in a purely scientific sense, these trees don’t give off smells to make humans happy. However, that doesn’t change the equally amazing fact that their aroma arouses delight in us; it’s a delight so great that it’s as if these trees were offering us their butterscotch and pine resin bouquets as gifts.

For the religious, the atheist and everyone in between, the sensory gifts found in nature are one source of what Rabbi Abraham Heschel called radical amazement: a sense of wonder at the world around and within us that cuts to the root of our human experience, beyond simple verbal description. I am currently writing a book about tree mythology in Judaism; the more research I do, the more I realize that my ancestors expressed their amazement and gratitude to God for nature by personifying it, trees especially. Whether they perceived trees literally or metaphorically interacting with humans, they grasped the wisdom hidden in each tree, roots to crown: a wisdom that I suspect can be mythically traced back to the Trees of Knowledge and Eternal Life in the Garden of Eden story.

We spend most of our daily lives barely noticing nature. Specifically, we treat trees as afterthoughts, at best mere window dressing to the scenery of the outdoors, and at worst, annoying plant growth that needs to be cleared. What if we began approaching them with deepened respect as our fellow citizens living with us across a continuum within the community of nature and life? Breathing in their wafting gifts and returning to them our gentle protections, perhaps we all, hand in leaf, could return to the mythic gates of paradise.

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