HELBENA: The Qetoret and Chanel 19

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה קַח לְךָ סַמִּים נָטָף וּשְׁחֵלֶת וְחֶלְבְּנָה סַמִּים
וְלְבֹנָה זַכָּה בַּד בְּבַד יִהְיֶה

God said to Moshe: Take aromatic spices, drops [of balsam], aromatic nail and galbanum, spices and pure resin; in an equivalent measure (Ex. 30:34)

IDENTIFYING THE HELBENA

The Torah mentions by name four of the eleven aromatic spices that were used in the making of the Qetoret, the incense that every day impregnated the Bet haMiqdash with a delicious perfume. This incense was offered (haqtara) twice a day in the Temple: in the morning and in the afternoon. The formula, an ultra fine grind powder made with the eleven spices was prepared once a year (pitum haquetoret). Previously, we mentioned the first two species that were part of the Qetoret: the Tsori and the Tsiporen (see below). The third species that the Tora mentions for the preparation of the Qetoret is the Helbena.

As we have seen with the other species, the rabbis (rishonim) did not always agree on the identification of these elements. In his book Shilte haGibborim, a monumental work devoted entirely to all the topics related to the Bet haMiqdash, Rabbi Abraham Portaleone (1542-1612) analyzes what the other sages before him wrote about the Helbena and concluded that in his opinion the Helbena is a plant known as «galbanum». Previously, he mentions the opinion of Maimonides, who says that Helbena is the sap with a honeyed consistency of dark color (debash shachor) that has a very strong fragrance. This

sap come from a tree mentioned by Maimonides, whose name in Arabic is Mei'a, and is found in Greece.

SMELLS BAD…. UNLESS YOU MIX IT!

Rabbi Portaleone does something that he usually does not do: he rejects Maimonides' opinion. Why? First, he identifies the tree Maimonides refer to, mentioning its Latin name "liquidambar orientalis". Then, he explains that this cannot be the Helbena tree, among other reasons, because the Sages of the Talmud made it very clear that all the species that were used to make the Qetoret have a very pleasant aroma, with only one exception: the Helbena. And the sap of the "liquidambar orientalis" has a really good smell. His candidate for Helbena is then the galbanum. First because the name (helbena , galbanum) attest to a similar origin, which makes the identification much more secure. Second, the rabbi offers a series of evidences and testimonies that help identifying the Helbena with the galbanum. One of the evidences he brings is that people whi live in the forest burn galbanum at night to protect themselves against wild animals. The smell of the burning galbanum is so bad that it drives away snakes and other dangerous animals. He also says that if a person rubs some galbanum on his body, the bad smell of this plant will protect that person from insects bites (see the entire analysis of the Helbena in Shilte haGibborim, Makhon Yerushalayim edition, 2009, par. 347-348).

MODERN USES OF GALBANUM

As the Rabbis explained, when galbanum is used or burned by itself, it produces a very unpleasant smell, but when added tpo the other aromatic substances, galbanum acts as a catalyst, and it actually increases their good fragrance, creating a pleasant and longer-lasting smell. Galbanum is obtained as resin from its flower. It has a sticky, rubbery consistency and a strong sour scent. It seems that galbanum is originally native to Persia. This large perennial plant can

grow up to four meters in height. The strong, sour, but distinctive smell of galbanum is still used today in the contemporary perfume industry. Fragrances like “Must” by Cartier, “Vent Vert” by Balmain, “Vol De Nuit” by Guerlain, and Silver Mountain Water by Creed, and Chanel No. 19.

THE LESSON OF THE HELBENA

The Sages learned and taught us a great lesson from the inclusion of the Helbena among the elements of the Qetoret. Since Biblical times it has been established that when a Jewish community suffers some calamity, such as epidemics or severe droughts, days of community prayer and fasting are declared. These fasts are kept on Mondays and Thursday, until the situation improves. In the treatise of Keritot 6b the Sages established a very interesting rule regarding who should participate in these public prayers. They said that these community prayers cannot be said exclusively by the most pious members of the congregation. In fact, they said that if these community gatherings and fasts do not include among their participants the “sinners” and “rebels” of the Jewish people, the fast does not serve its purpose.

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The source that the Sages used for this idea of □□inclusion is the presence of the sour Helbena among the sweet aromatic spices of the Qetoret. The Helbena by itself has a bitter and unpleasant odor, but when included, it brings out the best of all the other spices. Not all Jews are perfect, but they all need to be represented. The word TZIBUR in Hebrew “congregation”, hides an acrostic with the three categories of Yehudim that make up a congregation: = □ ,□□□□□□ = □ :□□□□ □□□□ = □□ ,□□□□□□□ “ The righteous; the individuals of a level of average observance; and the transgressors ”

The fragrance of a community – its spiritual level – will not

be ideal if it does not reach-out to those who have gone astray. We must try to bring closer and include those individuals as part of the congregation, through “teshuba” and community participation. When we see all Jews as parts of the same body, that union strengthen us and makes us worthy of HaShem’s attention and blessing.