The Oil of Sacrement

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In this week's Parsha, Hashem commands Moshe to gather approximately 25.5kg of prime spices: myrrh, cinnamon, cane of aromatic spice, kiddah, and a hin (about 5.7 liters) of olive oil . At first, it appears that Moshe will be commanded to make קְטֹרֶת incense, but Moshe is instructed to make שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת־קֹדֶשׁ, oil of a sacred anointment.

What is this sacred anointment?
This sacred anointment is essentially a spiced and fragrant oil. The first mention of oil in the Torah is in Sefer Bereshit, Parshat Vayeitzei, verse 28:18. Yaakov awakens after spending the night on Har HaMoriah and takes oil and anoints the stone that he had placed under his head.
וַיַּשְׁכֵּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר שָׂם מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו וַיָּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מַצֵּבָה וַיִּצֹק שֶׁמֶן עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ
Yaakov arose early in the morning and took the stone that he had placed around his head and set it as a pillar; and he poured oil on its top.

The next time oil is mentioned in the Torah is in Sefer Shemot, Parshat Terumah, verse 25:6.
שֶׁמֶן לַמָּאֹר בְּשָׂמִים לְשֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה וְלִקְטֹרֶת הַסַּמִּים
Oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for raising the smoke of the incense.

Within these two verses we see the different types of uses for oil: pure oil to anoint, a spiced anointing oil, and oil for light. To understand the significance of the שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת־קֹדֶשׁ, oil of a sacred anointment, we must first understand each individual use of oil. The commentaries explain why Yaakov anointed the stone and the unique characteristics of oil. The Ibn Ezra simply states להכירה בשובו to recognize it upon his return. Rabbeinu Bachya clarifies this understanding by explaining that oil leaves a mark and Yaakov wanted to be able to identify this stone from among all the others. Rabbeinu Bachya adds that anointing with oil is similar to performing an offering on an altar.
Another level of understanding is provided by Rav Hirsch, who explains מה השמן הזה אין מתערב בשאר משקים, just like oil doesn't mix with other liquids, so too, this stone will not mix with other objects. The Midrash Sechel Tov says that Yaakov did it to teach that in the future, Bnei Yisrael will anoint Kohanim Gedolim and kings.

Oil has very unique properties. Those who do laundry know that an oil stain is a significant stain that presents numerous cleaning challenges. Oil leaves a (nearly) permanent mark on whatever it touches. In this case, oil was specifically used for anointment for the purpose of marking the specific stone. The other property that I want to mention is that not only will oil not mix with other liquids, oil is less dense than water, and will always rise above water.
The Rashbam explains why Yaakov wanted to identify this stone. He writes that the purpose of distinguishing this stone was so that it could be used later as an altar for Bnei Yisrael in the Beit HaMikdash.

Next, the second use of oil as quoted above is שֶׁמֶן לַמָּאֹר oil for the light. Rashi explains that oil is so special that it merited to be mentioned independently and deserved its own donation. This pure olive oil required special skills to manufacture. The purpose of this oil was to be used for light of the Menorah; and the Gemara (Succah Yerushalmi 4a) teaches that the light of the Menorah illuminated the entire

Yerushalayim.
Combining these two ideas, the purpose of anointing the Ohel, Ark, Menorah, etc. … and the Kohanim becomes quite clear.

The purpose of Moshe being commanded to anoint the items mentioned in the Torah was to consecrate them, and Hashem specifically told Moshe that this must be done in a manner similar to how Yaacov did it. Rabbeinu Bachya describes that the oil that Yaakov used was provided by heaven, וירד לו השמן מן השמים ויצק עליה שמן. The method of anointment is not haphazard; it must be done as per its inception, i.e. by oil. Hashem selected oil because He wanted the Mishkan and all its holy items to be permanently marked, for everyone to recognize. Hashem also wanted all the Kohanim to be distinguished and identifiable from all of Bnei Yisrael, and when they are in the service of Hashem, they should not "mix" with anything else, and rise to the top with regard to their connection to Hashem. There is an additional requirement of the oil: to illuminate. The oil that was required for the Menorah must be pure virgin olive oil, so that it will burn clean and bright. So too, the Mishkan and everything it contained must function in a similar manner: the service must be pure and done in a way to illuminate Bnei Yisrael with Torah and Mitzvot.

This explains why Moshe was commanded to anoint with oil; however, there is a difference between the oil that Yaakov used and the oil that Moshe used. The oil Moshe used was שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת־קֹדֶשׁ, oil of a sacred anointment. This oil is unique for it is infused with the special selected spices. Furthermore, in verses 28:32, we are told that personal use of this oil is subject to Meilah, biblical misappropriation, and in verse 28:33, we are taught that reproducing this oil is punishable by וְנִכְרַת מֵעַמָּיו death by the hand of heaven.

Why is this oil different than all other oils?
The smell! Smell is a unique sense; even though the human sense of smell pales in comparison to many in the animal kingdom, the human nose has roughly 400 types of scent receptors that can detect at least 1 trillion different odors. Our sense of smell has a feature referred to as the Olfactory memory, which is the recollection of odors. Olfactory memory consists of numerous components, one of them being explicit memory. This is when someone remembers something due to an odor stimulation.

The nose's function is not limited to the sense of smell. Humans, especially infants, primarily breath through the nose. I am not surprised by this, because the Torah explicitly states, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה and he blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living soul. Our living soul is manifested through our nose. Up until the time of Yaakov, a person died when he sneezed, i.e. his life soul would depart the way it entered.

Oil, especially pure virgin olive oil as used for the Menorah or the oil of a sacred anointment, is considered healthy (within moderation), involving favorable effects on markers of cardiovascular disease (heart disease and stroke). I suspect that the Jewish importance of oil is not limited to good healthy eating. I would propose that the root of the word **שְׁמֹנֶה eight** is **שֶׁמֶן oil**. The number seven signifies nature and the number eight signifies something above nature. שֶׁמֶן oil has the inherent ability to add to nature, i.e. above nature, in the form of fire, or to sustain our bodies. Thus, when combining this amazing substance, oil, with the special spices, the result is the שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת־קֹדֶשׁ, oil of a sacred anointment, something that will permanently mark whatever it touches, as well as stimulating the sense of smell of the Kohanim and kings to remind them of their unending singular devotion to the service of Hashem. For this reason, the Torah states that אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִרְקַח כָּמֹהוּ - he who will compound anything like it… will be cut off from his people. Anyone who believes that they can

duplicate this substance that has the power to transcend nature and imbue it with scents that penetrate to our life soul, is trying to play God and is subject to death by the hand of heaven.

May we have a new King and Kohen Gadol, freshly anointed with the שֶׁמֶן מִשְׁחַת-קֹדֶשׁ, oil of a sacred anointment, and breathe new life, health, and prosperity into Bnei Yisrael; and like Yaakov, may we soon return to the holy places that we have permanently marked and merit to perform all the service that Hashem has prescribed.

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