

Saturday is Rosh Chodesh Tamuz, which is why we have so many readings this week. Except on leap years, Tamuz begins near the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, which also means that the days then begin to shorten again. Although we have midrashim about the winter solstice, and Chanukah often coincides with it, the summer solstice goes largely unnoticed – except for a largely forgotten Ashkenazi ritual that called for throwing away any water stored in the house. This water was thought to be so poisonous that it would cause swelling, illness, and even death. Why? According to one legend, the rotation of the angels in charge of water takes place on Rosh Chodesh Tamuz, leaving the water momentarily unprotected. Others say that the constellation of Cancer fights with Libra and blood falls into the water; or this is the day that the waters in Egypt turned to blood; or as we will read next week, Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it as HaShem had commanded and blood flowed into the water. The origin of these legends is unknown, and only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century did someone come up with an explanation that makes sense to us today. Hezekiah da Silva, a Tuscan rabbi who traveled between Amsterdam, Jerusalem, and Cairo, noticed that water that had not been boiled or used for salting or pickling did cause illness, and warned his fellow Jews against using it. It is noteworthy that Tamuz 17, when days begin to become noticeably shorter, marks the beginning of the Three Weeks of Mourning, a time of increasing darkness physically and spiritually, during which many calamities have occurred. Indeed, calamity plays a major role in the lives of these ex-slaves as they learn what freedom entails. Last week it was the aftermath of the scouts' negativity; this week it is an attempted coup by Korach and his band of rebels. Instead of revisiting that inglorious event, let's focus on the significance of what happens afterward. After the families of Korach, Dathan and Aviram are swallowed into the earth "A fire came forth from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who had offered up the incense." (16:35) HaShem commands Moses to have Aaron's son Eleazar pick up the censers, throw away the fire, and "make them into flattened out plates as an overlay for the altar, for they brought them before the Lord, and have therefore become sanctified, and they shall be as a reminder for the children of Israel. ... so that no outsider, who is not of the seed of Aaron, shall approach to burn incense before the Lord ..." (17:3, 5) In the sacrificial system incense was so important that it had its own special altar in the innermost part of the sanctuary, an area only accessible to priests. The death of Aaron's two eldest sons, who had offered incense unbidden, had made it clear that offering incense is not a right to be exercised on a whim – not even for the priests; it is a sacred duty to be performed in a specific time frame, place, and manner, solely by those authorized to do so. Moses' challenge to Korach, Dathan, Aviram, and the 250 tribal leaders was a stark warning they foolishly did not heed. When the people then accuse Moses and Aaron of killing "the people of the Lord" (17:6) and HaShem once again resolves to destroy them all, Moses takes matters into his own hands with his customary chutzpah. "Take the censer and put fire from the altar top into it and put incense. Then take it quickly to the congregation and atone for them, for wrath has gone forth from the Lord, and the plague has begun." (17:11) This incense is an intricate mixture of spices, some of which actually have anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, anticancer, opiate, and hallucinogenic properties. Of course, the sages of the Talmud did not know this, so they taught in Tractate Shabbat 88b-89a that when Moses ascended to receive the Torah the angels, at first skeptical of this mere mortal's qualifications, were so impressed that they all gave him gifts. "And even the Angel of Death gave him something. ... If he were not told this remedy [the power of incense to atone], would he have known it?" Only Moses, our quintessential "God-Wrestler" could dare to authorize burning incense outside the *mishkan*. I like to think of it as the non-verbal reiteration of his words in last week's parashah, i.e., challenging HaShem to once again say "*salachti kidvarecha*, (I have forgiven, according to your word)" which HaShem does obliquely through another challenge that may be the origin of the Pope's blossoming staff in the Tannhäuser legends. Of course it is Aaron's staff that blossoms, and it too, becomes a warning sign for future rebels. Once again HaShem outlines the hierarchical structure of the Levite tribe and the privileges and duties that define each section. Because Aaron and his progeny are ultimately responsible for upholding it, they "bear the iniquity associated with the Sanctuary, and ... the iniquity of [the] priesthood." (18:1) In other words, they are to make sure that the interaction between HaShem and the people strictly adheres to the laws that govern it. The common denominator of the sacrificial system was fire, the catalyst for creating the *re'ach nicho'ach*, the "pleasing aroma" the offerings transmitted to HaShem. While most of this aroma came from burning animals, the morning and evening incense offerings were an integral part of the daily service. Along with its wide variety of pharmaceutical properties, incense is a powerful olfactory stimulant that can arouse emotions and memories. No wonder our ancestors saw such potency in incense and imbued it with so much symbolism. Today we can catch a glimmer of what they must have experienced when we smell the spices of Havdalah and evoke their sensory memory to carry us through the week until the next Shabbat. We will always experience darkness, but remembering the pleasing aroma of better times will keep the fires of hope burning.