When I came to America, I was twenty-five years old. Up until then I had always lived with my mom and that mean that I never had to cook. And I was really lucky because she was an amazing cook! Anything she would prepare - from appetizers, soups, and main courses to desserts – every dish was delicious! She loved hosting parties and our friends and family loved coming to holiday or birthday gatherings in our house knowing that wonderful food would be awaiting them. Her specialty were pirozhki - a yeast dough pastry filled with meat and cabbage or mushrooms. I can still remember the way the house smelled when she baked those pirozhkis!

But once I moved out and was on my own, I quickly realized that living on pasta alone would never be sustainable. So I did the only thing I could think of – I turned to the expert! I wrote to my mom, asking for her recipes. She would answer my handwritten letters – (remember, back then neither my mom nor I had a computer) and always enclosed one or two recipes. (I still have those amazing recipes today).

And, to my surprise, little by little I was able to recreate the dishes I loved since childhood. And then I, too, began to love inviting friends for meals. To my delight, my apartment began to smell just like our home did when I was a young girl. Just smelling those same wonderful odors gave me a sense of comfort.

I think we underestimate the power of the sense of smell and the memories and feelings that it evokes.

I have a few special stories about these kinds of memories.

For example, I remember one time Emily asked me to try to find the perfume I always wore when she was a toddler. She wanted to find it she said because that’s the smell she associated with me. But when I managed to find it on Ebay - it had been discontinued. Similarly, a friend once told me that when she switched perfume at one point, her five year old son declared– “Mommy, you don’t have mommy’s smell any more!”

It is obvious that we associate the people, events and places in our lives with the help of various smells that we connect with them.

I remember the smell of chimneys during the winter in the suburbs of St. Petersburg. The scent brings back the experience of walking from the train

station to my grandmother’s house. I can almost hear the snow crunching under my feet. Likewise I remember the smell of the New York subway. It is probably one of the first smells I associate with coming to the United States in 1997, and it still smells the same way. So every time I am on the subway, the smell immediately reminds me of a difficult but exciting time in my life.

Whether the smell brings forth happy or sad times – whether the odors are pleasing or unpleasant- no one can question the power of the human sense of smell and its impact on our emotions.

This has been true throughout all of human history.

In the ancient times in Israel, where it is almost always very hot, the sense of smell was even more important. For example, the smell of a dead animal or even a dead person would serve as a warning to people of a possible danger of contamination. That is why we Jews bury the deceased within 24 hours of death. The Halacha - Jewish Law – drew on this one day time span to ensure that bodies didn’t decompose before burial.

But when talking about smells, it is the smell of food that I would like to focus on. Just thinking about a Memorial Day or July 4th BBQ is one of my favorites. Do you agree? Not only do we smell the delicious coals and food on our grills, but we see the smoke going up from our neighbors’ backyards as they celebrate these holidays with their special food preparations.

Believe it or not, it is reflecting on those BBQs that brings me to this week’s Torah portion.

As we begin the third book of the Pentateuch, Leviticus, we discover some BBQ recipes. You think I am kidding? Just listen to verses 4-6 from the first chapter:

“And a man shall lean his hand [forcefully] upon the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted for him to atone for him.

And he shall slaughter the young bull before the Lord. And Aaron's descendants, the kohanim, shall bring the blood, and dash the blood

upon the altar, around [the altar] which is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

And he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its [prescribed] sections.”

In other words, God instructs Moses and the Israelites on how to prepare a BBQ for Him. By doing so, the smell, which rises from the burnt offerings on the altar, will please God.

(As you know, we are not supposed to have an image of God, but nonetheless, we still attribute some of the senses that we human have, to the Almighty. The sense of smell is, of course, one of them.)

During this week’s Torah Study, we looked at the text of one of the Psalms that describes gods from the small “g” - idols – noticing that they have eyes but don’t see, ears but don’t hear and noses but don’t smell. That is because they are created by people and as such, they are not real. But in contrast, God, whom we cannot see but who is very real, can even smell delicious steak, sorry – can even smell a burnt offering - which will be later consumed by the priests.

You know that Jews no longer practice the ritual of burnt offerings. We stopped doing that after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. To substitute for the discontinued offerings, which took place three times a day, we now offer prayers three times a day at - Shacharit (morning), Mincha (afternoon) and Ma’ariv (evening).

But what about pleasing God with the delicious smells of the burnt offering? Does God no longer need to indulge in the aroma of a good meal?

It’s a hard question to answer. But when I bake challah for Shabbat, I believe that God is very pleased - maybe not as much as you are - because He only gets to smell the challah, while you get to taste it!

And speaking of challah - there is only one Shabbat left before we take a break from challah, pasta and pizza because we will be observing Passover.

Our homes will be filled with the smell of Pesach, which is another smell that we are all familiar with, and which we associate with celebrating this special time of year with family and friends. I think the smell of maror (horseradish) and the distinctive smell of gefilte fish is in our Ashkenazi DNA. How else would you explain the fact that when I smelled it in Israel, at my first Seder, I recognized it right away, even though I never had been to a Seder in Russia. And even though we only have the shank bone as a symbol of the Pascal offering, the combinations of all the smells from the items displayed on the Passover table are certainly pleasing not only to you, but to God as well.

Friends, I know it is early, but I want to wish you a good Passover, a zissen Pesach - and may you always experience the beautiful smells of life, which bring you good memories.