

The Fire that Burns  
Parshat Tzav  
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In an era fraught with disheartening news, we seek solace and guidance from the timeless wisdom within our sacred texts.

Tzav, this week's parsha, picks up from where we left off last week, continuing with the sacrifices that are to be brought and how they are to be offered. We are then given seemingly a small but crucial detail about the fire that these sacrifices are to be burned upon:

וְהָאֵשׁ עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּוְקַד-בּוֹ לֹא תִכָּבֶה...

And the fire on the altar shall burn on it; it shall not go out. ...

Vayikra 6:5

There is to be an eternally burning flame as part of the altar. This piece is so critical to the whole operation that the same information is reiterated in the next verse, explicitly identifying it as an *אֵשׁ תְּמִיד*, an eternal flame.

The Torah does not offer extraneous information nor does it repeat itself needlessly. Thus, these seemingly redundant verses must convey a deeper meaning and serve as fertile ground for interpretation among scholars and rabbis. Rashi suggests that this repetition signifies that one who inadvertently allows this flame to extinguish transgresses the prohibition twice.

However, the Talmud in Tractate Yoma (45b) posits that we are actually referring to two fires pertaining to the two altars. Recall that there are three sections to the Mishkan, the outer and most public, the inner where the Kohanim and Leviim were allowed and the innermost Holies of Holies where God was said to reside and speak to B'nai Israel. Two of these sections held altars. The two altars in the Mishkan and later in the Beit Hamikdash were the outer altar, open to the public where animal sacrifices were offered, and the inner altar, located in the inner sanctum for the priestly class where incense was burned. According to the Talmud, the outer fire kindled the inner fire.

While this historical insight is intriguing, we no longer have a Mishkan or a Beit Hamikdash. When we encounter the numerous chapters recounting the details of the Mishkan and ritual sacrifices, we may wonder, "What relevance does this hold in my life

today? Where do I fit into this narrative?" Since the Mishkan and the Beit HaMikdash are no longer physical spaces external to us, where we can visit and experience awe, and where our sins can be expiated, we must reinterpret these teachings.

Our Torah serves as a guide for living our lives. If this is the case, what then does this eternal flame symbolize?

During a recent discussion, fourth and fifth-grade students offered profound insights as to the nature of the fire. "This fire," one said, "represents the soul of B'nai Israel as it burns for God." "The fire," said another, "is our connection to God." "And if it should go out?" asked their teacher. "We are left in the dark and cold."

For these students, the connection was clear and obvious. The eternal flame of the altar is the flame within each of us, yearning and connecting us with God. Without this flame we are nothing, not human, not Jews.

The Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812, Russia) shared a similar interpretation in his Likkutei Torah over two hundred years ago. "The altar is the heart of the Jew. And, corresponding to the two altars of the Sanctuary, the outer and the inner, are the outer and inner levels of the heart, its surface personality and its essential core."

The Alter Rebbe paints a beautiful picture. The Mishkan now resides within each of us, not as an external experience but as an internal reality. The two altars represent different aspects of our hearts. For each of us, there is a part of our heart that we willingly share with the world, and a part that is reserved, shared only with those closest to us or on special occasions. This sacred part is protected and cherished.

One might assume that since God resided in the innermost sanctum of the Mishkan, our analogy would suggest that the innermost part of our hearts would hold our sacred connection to God.

However, the Alter Rebbe offers a different perspective.

"The altar on which the continual fire was to be set was the outer one. And for the Jew, this means that the fire of their love for God must be outward, open, and revealed. It is not a private possession, to be cherished subconsciously. It must show in the face they set towards the world."

Our love for God, declares the Alter Rebbe, cannot be hidden; it must be openly expressed in the world.

For many of us, openly expressing love for God is hard to imagine. In a world often marked by skepticism, cynicism, and division, where we are surrounded by fear and hate, the act of openly proclaiming our love for the Divine seems beyond daunting. It seems ridiculous.

Yet, I firmly believe that there is immense strength and beauty in sharing our love for God.

Rabbi Shai Held, philosopher, theologian, President and Dean at the Hadar Institute in New York has this month released a new book entitled *Judaism is About Love*. This book is about openly embracing Judaism as a spiritual practice deeply rooted in love. The mitzvot that is most often commanded to us in our Torah is that of love, to love the stranger, to love each other and to love God.

Yet, frequently, it is at this juncture that we find ourselves at an impasse. Though still challenging, it is notably simpler to heed the call to love the stranger or to foster love amongst ourselves. However, when tasked with the notion of loving God, we are often left questioning, “How can we be commanded to love God?” We ponder, reflect, and debate this point. Entire classes are dedicated to exploring this topic, a depth of inquiry not echoed in the parallel commandments. It is only when we begin to conceive of loving God that we stumble.

Openly expressing our love for God is, in fact, an act of authenticity—an affirmation of our deepest beliefs and values. Our ways, traditions, and actions are not haphazardly chosen but intricately shaped by the wisdom and guidance imparted to us through the Torah, the sacred words of God. It is through the teachings of the Torah that we discern the path of righteousness and cultivate a profound connection with the Divine.

Furthermore, look around you, where you are and what we are doing. We have come together as a community to express our love and gratitude to God for the many gifts that God has given to each of us. In a world characterized by increasing polarization and fragmentation, the act of coming together in worship and praise serves as a unifying force. The words that we are saying have been carefully crafted over generations to express our collective as well as our individual love for God.

In facing life’s challenges, expressing our love for God serves as a source of strength and resilience. In times of adversity, when we are confronted with pain, grief, and despair, our faith provides us with solace, comfort, and hope. It is through our intimate relationship with the Divine that we find the courage to persevere, to endure, and to emerge from the darkness into the light.

Now, as our hearts, the dual altars of the Mishkan, are heavy with the burdens of the world, we must kindle the אֶשׁ תְּמִיד, the eternal flame so that it not only glows, but it burns. Let our love for God blaze brightly, illuminating the darkness. May our collective expressions of love serve as a beacon of hope, healing, and transformation in a world in need of love.