

Parashat Tzav: *The Torah of Life*

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Dear Friends,

“Shabbat Hagadol”, the Shabbat before Pesach, is upon us. The parasha is called “Tzav”, and it is the second in the book of Vayikra.

Although this parasha appears suspiciously like the previous one, it is not. We may even be inclined to skip forward and say cynically: “Not again!” While it is true that they both deal with offering sacrifices, there is a tremendous difference between them. The first deals with a person’s desire to sacrifice to God, if, and only if he chooses to do so. The second opens with the word: “Tzav (Command)”! - the free choice of the previous parasha, Vayikra, has disappeared, and in its place there is an unequivocal command.

If Vayikra addresses Am Yisrael, Parashat Tzav addresses the Cohanim who serve in the Tabernacle.

Two terms or combinations of words repeat themselves several times at the opening of the parasha, turning it into one of the deepest and most exalted in the entire Torah.

“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the Torah (the ritual) of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it... The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out... A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out. And this is the ritual of the meal offering.” (Vayikra 6:1-6)

The holy fire must be kept alive day and night. Always.

The core ritual under discussion may not be about sacrifices at all. Rather, it is telling us something about fire, the fire of Life, our own personal fire, the fire that burns perpetually within us.

However, it is a fire that we did not light and one that we will not extinguish. It burns day and night - even in the darkest hours of our soul - when no hope is left in sight - and even when the sun shines brightly and no inner fire seems necessary, still, the fire of Life continues to burn - eternally.

The Rambam (in “Shmona Prakim” - his introduction to the “Sayings of the Fathers”), explains that the perpetual fire is in fact the soul itself that is burning within us. While some say that a day will inevitably come when that fire will go out, the Rambam disagrees. This is the same Rambam who has contempt for the idea of reincarnation, the rising of the dead, and the world to come, at least in its simplistic understanding. Nevertheless, he believes in the eternity of the soul - that perpetual fire - and it surviving the death of the body. The soul is not a physical entity, rather, it is pure consciousness. The world to come and the rising of the dead, according to the Rambam, are not a description of a futuristic event. It is happening here and now, in this world, in this body. However, the experience of the world to come - here and now, in this world - is guaranteed only to those who have attained an adequate level of consciousness.

“Historically” (a concept which I understand less and less), the perpetual fire described in Parashat Tzav did not, in fact, burn eternally. It went out about two thousand years ago when the Second Temple was destroyed, and with it the entire sacrificial system which lay at the core of the ancient Jewish practice came to an end. Many nations and religions would have stepped off the stage of history at this point. But the Torah of Israel did not. Not only did it not disappear, it took a quantum leap forward. Our Sages knew how to transform the altar and the perpetual fire, and move it from the massive stone building in Jerusalem into the very flimsy structures called human beings. The eternal fire was re-discovered deep within us.

The fire does not burn in “our hearts” or in “our belly”, though we may experience it there. Rambam’s fire is one of consciousness and not of locality, and as such it is able to be eternal. It manifests itself physically - i.e., comes into physical existence - in every atom, every molecule, every cell, and every organ.

The fire of Life, the fire of vibrancy, exists within all of Creation, but we cannot increase or decrease it. We can only increase our awareness of it.

The parasha states, however, that “**...every morning the Cohen shall feed wood to it...**” (Vayikra 6:5). What does that mean?

The Cohen does not light the fire, as we turn on the stove, for the fire is Divine and eternal; he only feeds it with wood. Nor can he affect the flames, because they too are Divine and eternal. He puts wood on the physical altar, thus lighting it from the perpetual, metaphysical fire. The Cohanim are responsible for the physical flame and not the eternal fire. Their greatness - their role in fact - was in knowing how to maintain a physical fire with the fire of consciousness.

Do we know how to do this?

Service of the Heart:

A drasha is not a workshop, but if it were, I would invite us all to sit down, close our eyes, breathe deeply, and relax. Then I would beckon our awareness to search for the fire that burns within us; to notice the **eternal fire of existence** which is not dependent on anything, that cannot be extinguished or increased, that is not ours or from us; that is not affected by how many hours we have slept or our lifestyle. It is not dependent on our education or achievements. It is simply there, whispering and murmuring, enlivening, and sustaining.

Try it. Actually close your eyes and seek out that awareness. Allow yourself to experience the perpetual fire burning within you. What is it like? How does it feel? See if you can allow it to linger on, even when you open your eyes again. With enough practice you may reconnect with this awareness any time throughout your day.

This practice is our way of feeding wood, i.e., awareness, to the fire - the fire doesn't change, but our experience of it does! The more we are aware of the existence of the fire within us, the more we can experience it in our physical existence, and the more alive and present we feel.

The very wise Sages must have known this great secret when they transmuted the sacrificial practice into the prayer service - the service of the heart. Instead of the Cohen feeding wood to the fire, we can now do it ourselves - feed wood to the fire, i.e., increase our awareness of the eternal fire that is there all the time.

According to Parashat Tzav, the perpetual fire is the foundation of the Torah: **“This is the Torah of the burnt offering...”**

This is the Torah that elevates us on our journey.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha