

## Parshat Tzav: Retaining the Remnants Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

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Parshat Tzav opens with an arresting image of an altar ablaze:

1 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2 Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the burnt offering: That is the burnt offering which burns on the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall burn with it. 3 And the kohen shall don his linen tunic, and he shall don his linen trousers on his flesh. And he shall lift out the ashes into which the fire has consumed the burnt offering upon the altar, and put them down next to the altar. 4 He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments, and he shall take out the ashes to a clean place outside the camp. 5 And the fire on the altar shall burn on it; it shall not go out. The kohen shall kindle wood upon it every morning, and upon it, he shall arrange the burnt offering and cause the fats of the peace offerings to [go up in] smoke upon it. 6 A continuous fire shall burn upon the altar; it shall not go out. (Leviticus 6:1-6)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב צו אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תֹּרַת הָעֹלָה הוּא הָעֹלָה עַל מִזְבֵּחַ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר וְאֵשׁ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּוָּקֵד בו: ג וְלִבְשׁ הַלְהֵן מִדֹּבַד וּמִכְסֵי־בֵד וְלִבְשׁ עַל־בְּשָׂרוֹ וְהָרִים אֶת־הַדָּשָׁן אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכַל הָאֵשׁ אֶת־הָעֹלָה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשָׂמוּ אֶצְלֵ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: ד וּפָשַׁט אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְלִבְשׁ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים וְהוֹצִיא אֶת־הַדָּשָׁן אֶל־מַחוּץ לַמִּחֲנֶה אֶל־מְקוֹם טָהוֹר: ה וְהָאֵשׁ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּוָּקֵד בו לֹא תִכָּבֶה וּבַעֵר עָלֶיהָ הַלְהֵן עֵצִים בַּבֹּקֶר בַּבֹּקֶר וְעֵרַךְ עָלֶיהָ הָעֹלָה וְהִקְטִיר עָלֶיהָ חֲלָבֵי הַשְּׁלָמִים: ו אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תִּוָּקֵד עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּבֶה: (וּיְקָרָא ו:א-ו)

The *korban olah*, or burnt offering, was a sacrifice unique for the totality of its consumption by fire. Every night, throughout the entire night, an animal would burn down to ashes on the altar, keeping the *mishkan* aglow continuously. Even during the depths of nighttime darkness, there was always a little devotional light flickering, ensuring that that hallowed space never ceased to be a place of active worship. "אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תִּוָּקֵד עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּבֶה" --A fire burned incessantly on the altar, never extinguishing.

This constancy of burning devotion became, for Chassidic masters, an analogy for the human heart on fire with spiritual passion. The Baal Shem Tov himself, and later his grandson, the Degel Machaneh Ephraim, articulated this aspiration clearly:

"And the fire of the altar shall burn with it" (Lev. 6:2)--This means that in the heart of every person a fire of enthusiasm should burn. "On the altar continuously" (paraphrase of Lev. 6:6)--[means] all the time, at every moment. (Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Tzav, "And the Lord spoke")

ואש המזבח תוקד בו היינו שיבער בלבו אש התלהבות הנ"ל על המזבח תמיד בכל עת ובכל רגע. (דגל מחנה אפרים, פרשת צו, ד"ה וידבר)

Like the *korbanot* on top of the altar constantly aflame, a person should hunger feverishly, relentlessly for God. Her ardor must never be quelled and must never be quieted.

Yet, despite this high-pitch presentation of the ideal spiritual life, the Torah's description is far more complex. The great image of the altar on fire is actually tempered by a strong focus on the embers it generated. The action of interest is not only on top of the *mizbeach* (altar), but also "*etzel ha-mizbeach*," beside it (Lev. 6:3). Our *parsha* instructs the *kohen* (priest) every single morning, first thing in the morning, to move the scorched ashes of those burned up animals to the side of the altar--gently, carefully, ritually. The remnants of the overnight fires on the holy altar had to be retained right next to the altar. And there they would remain until they built up overwhelmingly, at which point the priest would move them to a pure place ("*makom tahor*") outside of the camp. This repetitive, ritualized act, known as *terumat ha-deshen*, would be a central priestly responsibility, one that anchored the priest's daily practice. Shoveling that grit from the altar to the side of the altar was his first act of service as he began each day of devotion.

The precise attention paid to these ashes, and their conscious retention, is striking. Why hold on so preciously to these remains?

The *Sefat Emet*, in the tradition of the Chassidic thinkers already mentioned, sees in this willful juxtaposition of fire and ashes, an insight into the nature of spiritual passion. He writes:

It is known from the holy writings of the Baal Shem Tov that there must be a point of passion in the heart of the Jewish person. . . the altar [of our verses] signals to the [dynamics of] the heart. . . When enthusiasm is as it should be, bad thoughts that arise in the heart naturally burn up "as wax melts before a fire" (Ps. 68:3). And through this burning of alien thoughts in the heart, a new light emerges. This is why the verses [reference night before day]--"That is the burnt offering which burns on the altar all night" (Lev. 6:2) and then "The priest shall kindle wood upon it every morning" (Lev. 6:5). (Sefat Emet, Leviticus, Tzav, 1880)

ידוע מדברי קדשו של הבעש"ט כי צריך להיות תמיד נקודה התלהבות בלב איש ישראל . . . המזבח רמז על הלב . . . וכשהתלהבות הוא כראוי ממילא מחשבה רעה העולה על הלב נשרפת בהבל הלב כהמס דונג מפני אש כו'. וע"י שנשרפת מחשבה זרה בהבל הלב בא אח"כ אור חדש. וז"ש על מוקדה כל הלילה כו' אח"כ וביער כו'. (שפת אמת, ויקרא, פרשת צו, תר"מ)

In other words, the fire that burns inside of a person alive with religious fervor has a tremendous capacity to consume "alien thoughts"--perhaps doubts or fears or regrets that get in the way of piety. Ecstatic passion can quiet voices of uncertainty; compensate for inklings of indecision; quash intimations of temptation. In so doing, it can overcome darkness and yield radiant light.

And yet, as our verses indicate, and as the *Sefat Emet* amplifies in another *drasha*, our *mizbeach* model does not actually ask us to rid ourselves completely of darkness.

"Put [the ashes] down next to the altar" (Lev. 6:3) to show that alien thoughts also have a place after the burning, after they've been reduced to dust. (Sefat Emet, Leviticus, Tzav, 1882)

. . . ושמך אצל המזבח. להראות כי נמצא למחשבה זרה ג"כ מקום אחר השריפה שנעשית אפר כנ"ל: (שפת אמת, ויקרא, פרשת צו, תרמ"ב)

The pious act of *terumat ha-deshen*, of shoveling the detritus of fiery consumption from the center of the altar to its side, reminds us that the light does not, and need not, make darkness disappear. It merely moves it from center stage to a more peripheral place, and then honors it there. The altar juxtaposes fire and ashes because our hearts too must learn to contain and retain light and darkness. Not to ignore, throw away, or deny those parts of ourselves that threaten passion, but to give them their place. If we can cultivate an excitement that acknowledges boredom; a commitment that allows for alienation; an enthusiasm that makes space for malaise, we just might find a more sustainable, more integrated way to keep our fires burning *tamid*, continuously.

The Maggid of Mezerich was once asked how one can sustain passion for God. He responded:

"He who needs fire should look in the ashes." (Cited in Degel Machane Ephraim, Tzav, "And the Lord spoke")

"מי שצריך לאש מחפש באפר." (דגל מחנה אפרים, פרשת צו, ד"ה וידבר)

In the embers of our burned out hearts lay the sparks to light our flames anew. So keep them close, *etzel ha-mizbeach*.



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