

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Tzav**

First - on this Shabbat Hagadol (the Sabbath before Passover), let me wish all a season of joy, of celebration, and most of all ... of freedom. Even while we are free to move about and do what we wish, we are burdened by some pain, by some failure of hope and perhaps even loss. May the celebration of this season free our hearts and our minds - and may we pray together, for those in need to find freedom for their bodies and their souls, as well.

Fire is a wonderful thing – watching flames dance to and fro provides beautiful opportunities for reflection ... even prayer. Fire is a devastating force – in just moments our lives can be ripped apart by its rage. The flame of a candle reaches up to the heavens, to grab hold of the air and move freely in space. The flame of the candle grips tightly to the wick, consuming more and more of it, hungrily diminishing its size, its value and its worth in its effort to keep burning ... keep alive. In watching the fire we witness two worlds in conflict. The flames reflect our lives. We live in two worlds simultaneously. We live in the world where we seek to fulfill our dreams, where the fire fuels the ceramic kilns of artisans, the stoves that let us cook for our families and communities, and the systems that warm our homes. We also endure the world where the flames burn our homes, parch our lands, and destroy our dreams. The same fire that cleansed and purifies our medical utensils destroys the hospital in which they are employed.

Last week we began reading of the offerings that the Torah prescribes should be made by fire on the altar. This week, we learn that this fire is to burn on the altar twenty-four hours a day. In bringing our offerings for atonement and thanks, for guilt and peace, we use the fire on the altar to engage the community and God in a way that brings acknowledgment and healing. Next week, we will read about two priests (Aaron's sons) who use the altar's fire in a way in which God did not direct. The same fire that brought healing to the worshipper moments before, immediately consumed the young men in their own heresy. The altar's fire consumes, and in doing so it brings absolution and devastation.

At weddings, I often remind couples of the dual nature of the fire. For them it is a matter of the passions that bring people together and the passions that tear them apart. We do not often think of life this way, but Elie Weisel is right, "The opposite of love is not hate; it is apathy." Love and hate are not opposites; they are the same emotion fueled by the same fire. You have to be emotionally invested in someone to hate them or to love them, for both take time and energy. Both change who we are outside of the relationship into the person we become in its midst. The difference between love and hate is how we see and use the fire. By joining and reconfiguring the Hebrew words for man and woman, ISH and ISHAH, into two different words, AISH and YAH (fire and God - it works in Hebrew even if not in English transliteration), we see the power of fire. In healthy marriages, God helps tend the fire such that it gives off light and warmth. Passionate couples radiate warmth; warmth that draws people in and creates environments of growth for all who engage. Where a couple might lose touch with Godliness; where they forget the dignity of the divine piece that exists in each of us, the fire grows out of control. It rages as an inferno that consumes everyone in its path. The flames of passion that bring two people together in love, can also fuel the flames that rip them apart. And we find ourselves living in both worlds (hopefully with different people) at the very same time.

Our challenge is to lean upon a lesson taught by the Khasidic Maggid of Mezeritch. He wrote (given the flexibility of Torah's syntax) that where we normally read Leviticus to say (about the altar's fire) "It shall not be put out," we should read it, "It will put out the 'not.'" His argument is that the fire rages destructively only when we do not pay attention to tending it and using it with love. The fire of love leads us to get rid of the negative forces, the "nots" that confront us in life. To work, the fire has to burn and be monitored in its burning continually (twenty-four hours a day) to ensure that it continues to lead us to warmth and celebration. Where it is left to feed itself, we all lose.

From the heroine Hannah Senesh, we learn, "Blessed is the match, consumed in kindling flame. Blessed is the flame that burns in the heart's secret places. Blessed is the heart that knows, for honors sake, to stop its beating. Blessed is the match, consumed in kindling flame." May the flames we encounter bring only warmth honor and dignity into the world and each relationship we experience along life's path. Shabbat Shalom.