

# **This is the Law of the Burnt Offering**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat Tzav* (Lev. 6:1-8:36)**

**By Susan Glass**

*“Tzav et-Aharon v'et-banav leimor zot torat ha-olah.”*  
*“Command Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the law of the burnt offering.’”*

This week's Parashah continues the litany of sacrificial offerings, revisiting much of what was discussed last week. There is a very detailed description of the sacrifices offered first in the Mishkan in the wilderness and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. There are sin offerings, guilt offerings, burnt offerings, and thanksgiving offerings; each one has its own regulations and procedures and provides the means to atone for wrong-doing or, in other circumstances, give thanks to God.

However, the perspective is different. In *Vayikra*, Moses speaks to the Israelite people. In *Tzav*, Moses speaks to Aaron and his sons, the Kohanim or Priests. The information has much more detail and is geared more specifically to the responsibilities of priestly service. Such matters as taking the ashes from the altar out of the camp, proper attire, who may eat the priestly portion of the sacrificial offerings, and how and when it is to be eaten are all carefully and minutely described, a set of “Standard Operating Procedures” to be followed precisely.

“The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out: every morning the priest shall feed wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it, and turn into smoke the fat parts of the offerings of well-being. A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to be extinguished.”<sup>1</sup>

The text appears simple: the fire on the altar is to be kept burning all the time. This means that not only should it never be actively extinguished, but it shouldn't even ever be allowed to go out. Each morning, the priests should replenish the wood on the altar to keep the fire fuelled, and it should never be allowed to die out. What's the big deal about the fire? Why not just rekindle it every morning if it were to burn itself out? Why such an emphasis on the altar fire being “perpetual”? Perhaps the fire represents something to do with God.

The Sefat Emet sees the fire as representing love of God. He suggests that the soul of every Jew contains a hidden point that is aflame with love for God, a fire that cannot be put out. He expands on the prohibition against letting the fire go out, and views it as a promise as well. The human soul, he suggests, contains the need to burn within it a fiery longing to worship the

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 6:5-6

Creator, and this longing has to be renewed each day. Everyone who worships God may be called a priest, and this arousal of love in Israel's hearts is the Service of the Heart, that which takes the place of sacrificial offerings.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner also looks at the meaning of fire and finds it the core symbol of transformation, the process whereby matter becomes energy, right before our eyes. The possibility of being consumed is ever present, burning up equally the sacrifices, and, with them, the designs of men.

The particular offerings referred to in *Tzav*, the *olah* and the *shlamim*, are not sin offerings, but the regular daily offerings which serve to petition God for well being and to thank God for good fortune. The consumption of the entire offering suggests that God has accepted the offering, and through that acceptance the offeror and God draw closer to one another. But, in a metaphor drawn from physics, Rabbi Kushner notes that fire represents transformation. Like the sacrificial offering, the possibility always exists that we too can be "consumed" by God, transformed through the process of offering ourselves into something that is accepted, and therefore closer, to God.

As the story of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, in next week's Parashah reminds us, there are risks in the way we approach holiness. However, the transition from sacrificial worship to prayer, now that there is no longer the Temple at which to sacrifice, does not remove the risk. The perpetual fire on the altar is still all consuming, and whether it represents God or love of God, it still reflects a powerful holiness, which requires our constant awareness. The purpose of worship today remains the goal of drawing closer to God. And worship is a two-way process. We always need to be conscious of what we bring to our worship, and the depth of spirit that supports our efforts to connect with God. It is the fire that we keep burning on the altar that assures that, when we are ready to bring our offer, it will be fully accepted by God.

One more thing. We are told that each morning, the priests were to gather the ashes around the altar and take them to a clean place outside the Israelite camp. What is particularly puzzling is the instruction that before they remove the ashes, Aaron and his sons are to put on their best "Shabbat clothes" — to dress in their linen ceremonial vestments to clean up the altar. Why dress so well when the act of gathering the ashes would likely soil the priest's garments?

Often, we feel the need to put on a particular piece of clothing to lift our spirits, or to be dressed up for a particular occasion. It can put us into a more mindful state. Some say that if you're dressed up on the outside, then you're dressed up on the inside. By instructing the priests to put on their

finest clothing for the removal of the ashes from the altar, the Torah seems to emphasize the need for the priests to pay close attention to what might appear to be the most inconsequential details of the special work. We, too, need such reminders to keep us focused on the present. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heshel said, “God is in the details.”