



Suffering and Elevation: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Tzav*

Leviticus 6:1 – 8:36

While visiting the Western Wall several years ago and looking toward the Temple Mount and at the fallen stones of the Temple near Robinson's Arch, I deeply felt a sense of grief over the loss of the *Beit HaMikdash*—the Holy Temple. I imagined the grandeur of the solemn yet joyful service—the High Priest resplendent in his vestments, the Levites singing psalms of praise to the accompaniment of harps and horns, and an awed mass of people in the courtyard. Then I thought about the sacrifices and the mass slaughter of cows and lambs; I recalled the Mishna's description of how during the *Pesach* offerings, the entire courtyard was flooded with the blood of the slaughtered lambs. I asked myself: "Why did worship of God ever include the killing of animals? Where is the holiness in the act of sacrifice?"

This week's Torah portion, *Tzav* ("command"), begins with a description of one of the sacrificial rites. "God spoke to Moses—Command Aaron and his sons: 'this is the law of the *Olah*, the burnt offering'. The paragraph goes on to describe the *Olah* ritual and commands the priests: "*Esh Tamid*—an eternal fire—shall always burn on the altar and it must never go out" (Leviticus 6:1-6).

As we read these lines we can ask: what does this all mean to us now? Are we just reading a vestigial portion that has no meaning for us or is there a message in the words that can inspire us even today? What can these words teach us as we experience suffering and struggle in our lives?

In the opening paragraph of the reading, "*Tzav et Aharon—Command Aaron*", *Tzav* means more than "command". "*Tzav et Aharon*: "et" can mean "with"—'be with and connect with Aaron'. *Tzav* is a message that forges a bond of mutual commitment and nurturing. In Hebrew, an ethical will is called a "*Tzava'ah*". The message we wish to impart to our loved ones as we face our mortality strengthens a mutual bond as our loved ones commit themselves to bearing our legacy. God wants Moses to create a demanding and loving bond with Aaron. When we communicate in the spirit of "*Tzav*", we create an intimate bond, a bond of mutual support and challenge, with our partner.

Olah refers to the burnt offering. The entire animal is consumed in the altar flames. *Olah* literally means a rising. The intent of the *Olah* ritual was to create a rising, a transcendence as the lamb is consumed in the fire. In our suffering, we feel consumed—consumed by pain, consumed by despair, consumed by anger. *Olah* challenges us to rise and to elevate, to create new holiness as we face challenges and live our ordeals. *Olah* challenges us to find blessing even as pain, anger, and despair are part of our lives.

Esh Tamid—the eternal fire. Fire is the passion at the core of our lives. The fire is eternally within us even when despair and hopelessness hide it. *Esh Tamid* teaches us

to reach within for the fire of our true selves. Our *Esh Tamid* can move us to find joy in the midst of our suffering and to inspire others to access their *Esh Tamid*. We can make our *Esh Tamid* truly eternal as we use it to provide blessing for people, for all of God's creatures, and for the Earth.

When we live with the ordeals of illness and the struggles in our lives, we can ask ourselves: How can I create blessings while my suffering, agony, and despair threaten to consume me? How can I create *Tzav*—intimate, spiritually nurturing and challenging connection with those I love? How can I turn this ordeal into an *Olah*, a rising? And how can I nurture my *Esh Tamid* and bless myself and others with my inner spirit?

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