

D'Var Torah – March 31, 2012

Last week we started reading the third book of the Torah, Vaikra, and as you may know, for the modern Jew this book presents a lot of challenges, especially because it talks about subjects and topics that are really far from us: Korbanot, sacrifices, tumah, tahara, purities, impurities... And all of them seem to be so difficult!

I remember when I was a rabbinical student in Argentina, some rabbis used to joke about Vaikra, saying that when the time for reading the book came, instead of doing a sermon about its content, it was recommended for the rabbi to start telling Hassidic stories.

But I don't want to tell you a Hassidic story right now, and I do want to talk with you about a specific element that has an important role in our Parsha (our weekly section) and which is related to all these rituals that we call sacrifices. And that element is fire.

You know that fire is an important component of Jewish life (we light Shabbat candles; we also have fire for Havdala, and also it is one of the Melajot, the forbidden works on Shabbat).

And personally, I have always felt attracted to fire because it has something magical: It is maybe the only element that can share from its own essence, without losing anything from itself: You can light a fire from another one, and the original fire won't lose power or light.

And we have just read Parshat Tzav... and Tzav is actually a continuation of the first Parsha of the book of Vaikrá, which starts the description of the different sacrifices that the people of Israel had to offer God on specific occasions. And when talking about the "Ola" sacrifice, that was a special offering that needed to be completely burnt on the altar by the Cohen (the priest), the Torah specifies that after doing the offering, the Cohen must clean all the ashes from the Altar, but additionally he must be very careful of not extinguishing the fire, so even though he will be taking out the ashes, the fire must remain on the Altar permanently.

And here we can discover a beautiful message that is hidden in a very small detail:

The Torah uses two grammatical expressions for telling us about this role of the Cohen on keeping the fire alive: On one hand it says that he must keep the fire ON the altar (in Hebrew it is: TUKAD AL HAMIZBEAJ), but on a second verse it says: INSIDE IT (In Hebrew it is: TUKAD BO).

So our sages were perplexed about that repetition (or even contradiction) in the Torah, and Rashi (the famous French interpreter), quoting the Talmud, gives us a very beautiful message:

Actually the Torah is speaking not about one fire that the Cohen must take care of, but about two different ones: The first, is the one that is ON the altar, and the second is the one that must be INSIDE it (TUKAD BO). And because it's impossible to think about a fire that could be lit inside an Altar, Rashi and the sages concluded that in the second time the Torah wasn't talking about the Altar, but actually about the Cohen himself!

So this second fire that the Cohen must be careful of keeping alive, is essentially his passion and enthusiasm, an internal fire that he must have burning inside him continuously, in order to fulfill his daily tasks.

And I think the Torah is giving us, here, a very powerful lesson about what it means to be a Jew, and how to live our lives as members of the Jewish people: As the Cohen, every one of us has our daily tasks that we have to do: We have jobs, responsibilities, work, our parnasah... and sometimes we do them with enthusiasm but sometimes not... however we must continue doing them because it is what we have to do: We just need to keep this fire ON the altar.

But there is also a second type of fire, and this is the fire that is inside us: It's our passion, our real motivations... it's also the source of our spirituality, our neshamah, our soul...

So the Torah is saying to us today: "We have to take care of this fire also! "

And I would say not only "also" but even firstly, because if we don't take care of it (of this internal fire), it would be very difficult to keep alive the other one.

Our Parsha is inviting us to think about, what is this fire that is "TUKAD BO", inside us...

- What is it that motivates me as a human being...
- What are my personal projects that can make me grow, not in terms of economic success but in spirituality...
- Could it be related to our families, to our children's education?
- Are we taking care of these priorities, or sometimes maybe our job doesn't give us enough time to do it?
- Is your faith and tradition important for you?
- How do you respond to this inner fire called Judaism?
- Do you have an active role in what happens in your congregation?
- Or sometimes you tend to delegate to others the responsibility of keeping the fire of Judaism alive?
- And if you really feel that Judaism is one of the fires that are inside you, what can you do in order to share your fire with the ones that are far from it?

Parshat Tzav tells us today that all of us, are like the Kohanim: We are called to keep alive our internal fires... The passion, the enthusiasm, our neshamot, our souls...

And if we answer to that call... If we are successful in working on that fire that is inside of us, we could aspire to a life full of meaning, and be able to share with others the warmth of our hearts... and only then, together, devoting ourselves to making this world, a better place to live.