

Parashat Vayikra, 5770, 2010:

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Our Efforts and Hashem's Help

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The dual focus of *Sefer Vayikra* is the *korbanot* (Temple sacrifices) and the Kohanim who guarded their halachic integrity. These highly dedicated servants of Hashem ensured that each step in the sacrificial process was performed with alacrity, precision, and according to the mandate entrusted to them by the Almighty. They, perhaps more than any other segment of the Jewish people, recognized the singular import of the *korbanot* as being one of the three pillars upon which the very existence of the world stood:

Shimon Hatzaddik was one of the final members of the *Knesset Hagadolah*. On multiple occasions he was known to have said: “The world stands upon three things: On the Torah [and its study], on the Sacrificial service, and upon the practice of lovingkindness.” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2, translation my own)

One of the daily Temple-based obligations of the Kohanim that appears in our *parasha* was to place fire on the copper altar upon which the sacrifices were consumed: “And the sons of Aharon the Kohan shall place fire on the altar, and they shall arrange the wood upon the fire.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 1:7, translation my own) Rashi (1040-1105) adds a fascinating comment in his explanation of this seemingly utilitarian act of the Kohanim: “Even though fire came from the Heavens [i.e. from G-d Himself], it was a mitzvah to bring [fire] from natural sources [*min hahediot*].” (Translation my own) This statement is explicitly found in the *Sifra*, the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Vayikra*, and in several places

in the *Talmud Bavli*, including *Yoma* 21b and 53a, as well as *Eruvin* 63b. In addition, it is codified by the Rambam (1135-1204) in *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Avodah, Hilchot Temidim u'Musafim* 2:1:

It is a positive Commandment for there to be fire permanently burning upon the altar. As the Torah states: “Fire shall always be burning upon the altar. It should never be extinguished” [*Sefer Vayikra* 6:6]. Even though the fire came down from Heaven, it is a mitzvah to bring fire from natural sources. As the Torah states: “And the sons of Aharon the Kohan shall place fire on the altar.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 1:7, translations my own)

While, as we have seen, the *Sifra, Talmud Bavli*, and the Rambam collectively embrace the notion, “Even though the fire came down from Heaven, it is a mitzvah to bring fire from natural sources,” we are left somewhat stymied as to the rationale inherent in this obligation. Quite simply, why was it necessary to bring earthly fire in addition to the fire that sprang forth from the Almighty? After all, Hashem certainly did not “need” our fire over and above that which He already had provided.

Harav Moshe Sternbuch *shlita* is the Vice-President of the Rabbinical Court and Chief Rabbi Ra'avad of the Edah HaChareidit in Jerusalem. In his work of Torah exegesis, entitled, *Ta'am v'Daat*, Rav Sternbuch analyzes the underlying reason as to why it was “a mitzvah to bring fire from natural sources.” He begins by citing the Taz's (Rabbi David ben Shmuel Halevi, 1586-1667) explanation of the miracle regarding “a woman, of the wives of the disciples of the prophets” (*Sefer Melachim* II: 4:1-7), who is rescued from abject poverty by the prophet Elisha. In order to place the Taz's explanation in the proper context, however, allow me to cite the original passage from *Sefer Melachim* II:

Now a woman, of the wives of the disciples of the prophets, cried out to Elisha, saying, “Your servant, my husband, has died, and you know that your servant did fear the L-rd;

and the creditor has come to take my two children for himself as slaves.” And Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me what you have in the house.” And she said, “Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house except a jug of oil.” And he said, “Borrow vessels for yourself from outside, from all your neighbors; do not borrow only a few empty vessels. And you shall come and close the door about yourself and about your sons, and you shall pour upon all these vessels; and the full one you shall carry away.” And she went away from him and closed the door about herself and about her sons; they were bringing [vessels] to her and she was pouring. And it was when the vessels were full, that she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel,” and he said to her, “There is no other vessel.” And the oil stopped. And she came and told the man of G-d: and he said, “Go sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons will live with the remainder.” (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Based upon a passage from the *Zohar*, the Taz notes in the beginning of *Hilchot Chanukah* (*Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 670:1), that Elisha initially asked the suffering woman in our narrative: “Tell me what you have in the house.” Her response was seemingly quite pedestrian: “Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house except a jug of oil.” The dialogue seems to beg an important question: If Elisha, the prophet, was about to be the vehicle for a miracle to take place, why was it necessary for there to be something in the house – let alone a simple jug of oil? The Taz’s answer contains the core of a fundamental principle of how Hashem interacts with our world and performs His miracles:

G-d, may He be blessed, does not perform a miracle to bring a blessing to this world except via something that already exists in this world. Even if the [vessel to perform the miracle and to receive the blessing] is small in number or importance. [If this vessel exists,] then, He may He be blessed, gives a blessing [by performing a miracle] to transform the small amount into a large amount. This will not take place if the vessel is completely empty, since it is not Hashem’s way to create a blessing and a miracle through something newly created. (Translation my own)

Rav Sternbuch explicates the Taz’s analysis of the Elisha narrative, and applies it to the mitzvah for the Kohanim “to bring fire from natural sources,” in the following manner:

The Holy One blessed be He gave this world to mankind. Therefore, Hashem will not perform a miracle [in this world] unless it begins through man’s actions. Therefore, our

G-d, May His Name be blessed, required in the case of the mitzvah to have fire arise from the altar, that it initially had to have had taken place solely through natural means, i.e. that the Kohanim had to first ignite the pile of wood (*atzei hamaracha*) on the altar with [natural] fire from the designated area.

Moreover, it appears that prior to the bringing of fire from natural sources, there was no fire from Heaven. Only after the natural fire had ignited the *atzei hamaracha* did the fire descend from Heaven – then it was evident to all that the fire on the altar grew larger and ascended higher and higher so that it devoured the limbs... of the sacrifice in a supernatural manner. Clearly, the beginning of this miraculous process had to be solely through man's actions [for only then did Hashem's fire descend from Heaven]. (Translation, my own)

I believe that Rav Sternbuch's exposition contains one of the essential principles of Judaism, namely, the obligation for every member of the Jewish people to try to actualize their G-d-given potential (*histadlut*) and achieve their personal best. True, each of us faces many different kinds of obstacles in pursuing this quest, and the nature of this life-long journey is by definition unique to each individual. Yet, if each of us tries to become all that we can be, then Hashem, as in days gone by, will once again perform wonders and miracles for us. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html .

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