

Parashat Tzav

Terumat Hadeshen: The Ritual of the Ashes

The opening mitzva of this parasha has always fascinated me. It is the Mitzva of *Terumat Hadeshen*. To explain, it is a simple Temple ritual – the first act to be performed each day. A kohein (priest) ascends the ramp to the burning pyre that sits on its top and removes a small volume of ash. He then descends and carefully places the ash in a designated spot alongside the altar. The ash is then disposed of outside the camp.¹

*"The LORD said to Moses: "Give Aaron and his sons this command: 'These are the procedures for the burnt offering: The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and **the fire must be kept burning** on the altar. The priest shall then put on his linen clothes, with linen undergarments next to his body, and shall remove the ashes of the burnt offering that the fire has consumed on the altar and place them beside the altar. Then he is to take off these clothes and put on others, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a place that is ceremonially clean. **The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out.** Every morning the priest is to add firewood and arrange the burnt offering on the fire and burn the fat of the fellowship offerings on it. **The fire must be kept burning** on the altar continuously; it must not go out.!"*

This is a remarkable passage. Let us make some observations and raise some questions:

This passage has a heading: "*Zot Torat HaOlah* - This is the procedure of the Burnt Offering." But take a look at the passage itself! Despite the Olah being mentioned in the title line, the content of the paragraph has little to do with the Olah.

What is the focus of the paragraph itself? The Torah appears to hone in upon the "fire of the Altar." The verses here are quite emphatic. Repeating over and over two instructions:

a. The fire must be continuous.

¹ See the Mishna in Tamid 1:2-4 for details.

b. The Priests must keep it going by supplying the altar with wood.²

So what is really happening here? What is the connection between the Olah and the ashes? (And what is the relationship between the ashes and the "eternal," ongoing state of the fire upon the altar?)

Just a quick idea ... I need to develop this more. I have a feeling that this is related to the purpose of the altar. In Shemot ch.29 and Bamidbar ch.29, we talk about the Korban Tamid – the twice daily sacrifice – as "Olat Tamid". It seems to me that this is the quintessential offering that seeks to constitute an ongoing and perpetual presence upon the altar. Hence "Zot Torat HaOlah" – the classic Olah, the "Tamid" is there to be a constant connection point between Israel and God on the altar. Possibly every other (individual) Olah draws its strength from that base point.

But let us move to more symbolic thoughts.

It may be that I am in a rather Pesach-focussed state of mind, and hence the notion of the deliberate and exacting removal of the ash from the Mizbeach reminded me of our action of removing Chametz. Are we removing the "waste," purging the corruption from a place of holiness?

Is there a connection?

The Sefat Emet develops a fascinating symbolic reading here. He quotes from the Midrash Tanchuma:

"The Olah is brought (to atone for) the thoughts and musings of the heart."

The human mind is at the centre here. (The Sefer Hachinuch follows a similar direction too.) And so what is meant here?

The Sefat Emet offers two lessons:

1. The need to constantly "feed" the fire of our mind and spirit:

"the Kohein shall burn wood upon it every morning: ...We must seek out, each morning, new methods and ideas in order to clarify truth - THAT is the wood (to be added to the fire) each morning... Rashi states that even though fire may

² In fulfilment, of this verse, along with the morning Korban Tamid – which is an Olah – a massive fire was created, and in the afternoon two extra pieces of wood were added to the fire of the Mizbeach. See Rambam Hilchot Temidim Umasafim ch.2 and Tamid ch.2

descend from heaven, nonetheless there is a command that fire be brought from a regular source (by human initiative.) For in truth in the heart of every Jew, one may find a source of fire, in the dimension of Torah that exists within the Jewish soul, however, in order that that small source, that focal point, might spread throughout the body, one needs methods, techniques, strategies. In addition, one needs genuine desire to annul all other aims in life let alone God's Will." (5637)

So here the Sefat Emet talks about the need for constant renewal, rekindling of our soul's energies. Moreover, whereas we do receive a certain spiritual sensitivity from God, unless we make a daily effort, the "Eternal Flame" of our soul is in danger of extinguishing!

Which brings me to the Sefat Emet's second point:

2. Purging Evil

The Sefat Emet notes a certain duality in the act of Terumat Hadeshen, a sense that two poles meet here. On the one hand, the Terumat Hadeshen is simply ash, waste... it is taken outside the camp and disposed of. It would appear to be a sample of all the ash of the Temple, all that must be burnt, with the negative symbolism of disposal of toxic fallout - undesirable ash. It has a negative reverberation. But on second thought, the fact is that Terumat Hadeshen takes place in the morning makes it the FIRST act of *Avoda* - worship - of the day. Does that count for anything? It is called "Teruma" which has the etymology of R"M indicating raising, lifting, elevating. Moreover, it is disposed of in a Makom Tahor - a pure place! It would appear to be genuinely positive!

What is the secret of this ambivalence?

The Sefat Emet notes that the Terumat Hadeshen comes at the end of the night, during which all the previous day's sacrifices have burnt throughout the night. Now, after the burning comes a "raising."

"The Mitzva of raising the ash is because in accordance with the burning of the extraneous, the waste, the superfluous; One then discovers the holiness of Man." (5636)

"The Olah comes (to atone) for the thoughts of the mind; as the Zohar says: 'That is the Olah: the bad thoughts of a person that are burned on the Altar.' This refers to the burning of the sin offering!

However, in the aftermath of the burning of the "yeast" (the evil inclination) one needs to raise the ash, because every descent is there to precipitate an ascent. Everything has a place in God's creation, as they say: "He (God) creates darkness", and so by burning the evil, one reaches the good ... and hence the raising of the ash is the ultimate purpose of the Sacrifice." (5635)

The second principle of the Sefat Emet is that we need regularly to purge, to purify ourselves by a cathartic process of removal of the bad that we have within us. Indeed, this process is hard (and takes place at "night") but the aim is to arrive in the morning at a point in which we may be raised and may ascend to the Almighty. Sometimes we must recognise that we do contain evil that must be burnt, to allow our goodness to shine. After the cathartic process of the fire, we may approach God.

PESACH

On Pesach too, we burn the Chametz that has been "left" unguarded, unrestrained, to rise. And we "guard" the Matzot, a symbol of God in our lives. After we burn and remove all leaven, we are ready to usher in the night of our Redemption.

Shabbat Shalom.