

TZAV (LEVITICUS 6:1-8:36)

The Eternal Flame

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

The offerings in the Temple were brought on the Altar. Sometimes the entire offering was burnt. Other times, only a small portion of the offering was burnt, and the rest was consumed by either the Priests, or by the person on whose behalf it was offered.

Either way, the fire was an integral part of every offering. The Torah tells us, "*The fire must constantly burn on the Altar; it may not be extinguished.*" (Leviticus, 6:6)

It was the responsibility of the Kohanim to constantly add fuel to the flame so that it never went out. This Mitzvah, to keep the flame burning, was so essential that it had to be done EVEN ON THE SABBATH, when it is otherwise prohibited to light a fire. Even when the Israelites dismantled the Tabernacle to transport it to the next encampment, the fire had to be kept burning.

Fire is a multifaceted force that serves many purposes. Controlled, it is one of the most constructive forces on earth. It gives us light, heat, and edible food. It can melt metals that allow us to build. It can be harnessed to propel automobiles to transport us and produce electricity to cool us.

Uncontrolled, fire can be one of the most devastating forces on earth. Last year, in the U.S. alone, wildfires destroyed over seven million acres of forests. The world recently witnessed the death and destruction caused by burning jet fuel in Washington and New York. Half a century ago, millions of our brethren were "disposed of" in the crematoria. The Haman of this generation, Saddam Hussein, vowed in 1990 to "burn half of Israel."

We prefer to look at fire from a positive perspective. We celebrate Shabbos and Chanukah with candles. We memorialize loved ones by lighting flames. G-d spoke to Moses from a burning bush. The Nation of Israel witnessed Mt. Sinai engulfed in flames. The Temple will be rebuilt, by G-d, with "*a wall of fire around, and I will be glorious in her midst.*" (Zechariah, 2:9)

The Eternal Flame on the Altar was more than just a heat source for roasting meat and meal offerings. It was a symbol of the constant relationship between G-d and the His People. That flame had to stay kindled continuously, even when it wasn't being used. At all times, 24/7/365, we have to remain cognizant of the fact "*the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.*" (Psalms, 121:4)

The Flame of G-d's Providence burns brightly at all times. As the ancient Hebrews traveled in the desert, they were led through the darkness of each night by a divine pillar of fire. (Exodus, 13:21) May the Master of the World inspire our President with wisdom and may He protect the people of Israel, the tiny Jewish community of Iraq, and ALL innocent people from injury. May the Master of the World watch over our fighting men and women. May He protect the coalition troops from all harm, and grant them swift victory over the enemies of humanity.

May G-d bless America. Amen v'Amen.

Have a great Shabbos.

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