



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parshat Tzav 5772

March 31, 2012

Something's different! This week marks the fifth installment of a new, experimental initiative: the Dvar Tzedek Text Study. Periodically over the next several months, our weekly Torah commentary will take this interactive format. We hope that you'll use our text studies to actively engage with the *parshah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- **Learn collectively.** Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Try using it as a conversation-starter at your Shabbat table.
- **Enrich your own learning.** Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- **Teach.** Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar Torah*.

Please take two minutes to tell us what you think of this experimental format by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

Parshat Tzav continues the detailed instructions about the Israelite sacrificial rituals, which began last week in *Parshat Vayikra*. As the *parshah* opens, we are told that the priests must keep the fire for the burnt offering perpetually burning on the altar.

Leviticus 6:1–2, 5–6

And God spoke to Moses, saying: “Command Aaron and his sons, saying: This is the ritual of the burnt-offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it. . .

The fire upon the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out; every morning the priest shall feed wood to it . . . A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar—not to go out.”

[adapted from JPS translation]

ויקרא ו:א-ב,ה-ו

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. צַו אֶת-
אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת-בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תּוֹרַת
הָעֹלָה הוּא הָעֹלָה עַל מוֹקְדָה עַל-
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה עַד-הַבֹּקֶר וְאֵשׁ
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תּוֹקֵד בּוֹ. . .
וְהָאֵשׁ עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תּוֹקֵד-בּוֹ לֹא
תִכָּבֵה וּבֵעֵר עָלֶיהָ הַכֹּהֵן עֲצִים בְּבֹקֶר
בְּבֹקֶר. . . אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תּוֹקֵד עַל-
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ--לֹא תִכָּבֵה.

- Why do you think the fire must be kept burning at all times, rather than only being lit when it is being used for sacrifice?
- Why does God repeat this commandment so many times?

The 19th-century Chasidic leader, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (usually referred to by the name of his most famous book, the *Sefat Emet*), reads this commandment to keep the fire on the altar continually burning as a metaphor for enthusiasm and engagement:

<p>Sefat Emet, Parshat Tzav 5640 (1880)</p> <p>... The Baal Shem Tov taught that there must always be a point of [fiery] enthusiasm in our hearts. This is the meaning of the phrase “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning.” The altar symbolizes the heart [and the fire is our enthusiasm].</p>	<p>שפת אמת ספר ויקרא פרשת צו</p> <p>... ידוע מדברי קדשו של הבעש"ט כי צריך להיות תמיד נקודה התלהבות בלב איש ישראל.</p>
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Looking at the biblical text through the Sefat Emet’s lens, this commandment gives us an opportunity to reflect on how to best keep our own fires—our passion for the pursuit of justice—burning.

- What are the benefits and challenges of keeping your passion for justice burning at all times, rather than kindling it as needed?
- Since the wood is fed to the fire only in the morning, the sacrificial flames would have been at different levels throughout the day—starting off the morning with a high blaze and ending the night with glowing coals. In your life, when are the times when your fervor for justice is at a high level? When is it at baseline?
- Who are the people—like the priest who feeds the fire each morning—who help you keep your commitment to justice high?

The Sefat Emet continues his interpretation of the “perpetual fire” on the altar:

<p>Sefat Emet, Parshat Tzav 5640 (1880)</p> <p>When Scripture here says “perpetual” it does not mean only in terms of time [i.e., that our enthusiasm must always exist], but suggests that the enthusiasm must be <i>because</i> of the promise of perpetuity [in other words, we are enthusiastic because of the promise that our inner fires will never go out]. When we commit to sustaining our engagement with all our heart and soul, then that inner fire will “not go out.”</p> <p>When our enthusiasm [toward our service] is correct, then any “distracting thought” [of fatigue or disinterest] that arises in our hearts will automatically be consumed in heat of the heart, like wax before a flame. When this distracting thought is burned in the heart, a new light will arise there. This is why “upon the altar all night” is followed by “in the morning the priest shall feed wood to it” [new energy follows the darkness of doubt]. . . . And through the burning of distracting thoughts there is renewal of energy in the morning. . . Nevertheless, it is still up to us to apply effort to bring this about.</p> <p>[Translation by Rabbi Jonathan Slater of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, adapted by AJWS]</p>	<p>שפת אמת ספר ויקרא פרשת צו</p> <p>וע"ז נאמר אש תמיד תוקד. המזבח רמז על הלב. ותמיד אינו דייקא בזמן אבל צריך להיות התלהבות על תמיד. וכשמקבל על עצמו בכל לב ונפש שלא ישתנה אז לא תכבה.</p> <p>כשהתלהבות הוא כראוי ממילא מחשבה רעה העולה על הלב נשרפת בהבל הלב כהמס דונג מפני אש כו'. וע"י שנשרפת מחשבה זרה בהבל הלב בא אח"כ אור חדש. וז"ש על מוקדה כל הלילה כו' אח"כ וביער כו' ... וכפי שריפת מחשבות זרות כך נתחדש לו בבוקר כח חדש דכתיב מחדש בכל יום כו'. אעפ"כ מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט.</p>
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- The Sefat Emet states that the fire, which symbolizes the enthusiasm in our hearts, burns perpetually because of “the promise of perpetuity.” What do you think this statement means? How do you relate to this idea?
- How does the Sefat Emet understand the role of distraction, doubt or fatigue? How do you find energy to continue to pursue justice when you experience these emotions?
- The Sefat Emet writes that while the “burning” of our “distracting thoughts” will automatically bring “a renewal of energy,” “nevertheless, it is still up to us to apply effort to bring this about.” What ideas or experiences automatically fuel your fire? What intentional actions can you take to seek out this fuel?

Conclusion

Working for justice can be a daunting proposition. That is why it is so crucial for us to invest time in examining what we can do to keep our fires—of passion, energy, and commitment—burning, and to seek out the people and resources that keep us excited and primed for action. Through engaging in this process, may we, like the sacrificial fires, be perpetually poised in readiness to be called upon for holy work.

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