Fire as Symbol: A Brief Overview of a Burning Topic

Admiel Kosman

In Hebrew, fire is called “esh.” This word appears not only in Hebrew, but in all Semitic languages (apart from Arabic). The word occurs 380 times in the Bible, and its frequency alone should be proof of its importance as a biblical symbol or metaphor. I will try to show — building on the theories of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss — that several cultures have created myths about fire, wherein fire creates an axis between nature and culture. In short, at one end, fire is a chaotic and intimidating natural power, and, at the other end of the axis, fire is the supplier of warmth and intimate pleasure.

Even a brief overview of the world’s myths reveals a tension between fire as a natural, uncontrollable element, and domesticated fire. Because of the element’s potential to alter the state of other materials, fire became a vital force for the advancement of technology, and, at the same time, it brought about an internal change in family life. Domestic fire became a symbol of warmth and love — and self-evidently, in all cultures, domestic fire was immediately identified with the woman. A close identification was established between woman and home, hearth and stove, light and flame — all representing warmth, love, and concern for the members of the household and guests.

Two cycles formed in the human consciousness in which fire played opposing roles. There was the wild fire whose origin lay in the “outside” world, which constituted an uncontrolled, threatening element, and domestic fire, which symbolized a paradise cloaked in vegetation and thus the “force of fire” is transformed into energy in their bodies. In humans, and applied it to the “public house,” namely, the local temple. In the temple, handling of the fire was transferred to the ritual sphere and priests (men, too, of course) were entrusted with its preservation.

A new identity was created over the course of human history between fire and the presence of the god. Fire signified the god’s presence in the sanctuary, which had been built in his name; its extinguishing was considered a portent of disaster, a sign that the community had fallen into disfavor in the eyes of the god and he would no longer watch over it, leaving it exposed to the hammer blows of destiny.

In the Bible, too, the Temple priests were enjoined to preserve the eternal flame, which had originally come from heaven during the inauguration of the Temple (Leviticus 9:24); it had to be kept, never to go out, as in most temples around the world.

Such customs were deeply ingrained in the society of the early Persians (the Zoroastrians), whose few communities (mainly in India) continue to this day to maintain an eternal flame in every home and a public fire in the temple to which they apply during their prayers. In the ancient world, this was not an unusual custom. For example, in the Roman world, which inherited the custom from the Greeks, the rite of the goddess Vesta required that an eternal flame dedicated to the goddess burn in every home as well as in every local temple. These temples were round in shape, and their openings were toward the east, toward the rising sun. Once again, there is a connection between the fire that is not extinguished and the intimate, sacred place. The concept that underlay the eternal flame in the Vesta temples was that a new place of habitation could be established only if the fire came from an older temple; otherwise, the new community would be destroyed.

In Hinduism, fire energy resides in everything (similar to the view of Greek Stoicism). Lighting it in “the sky,” for example, brings down rain and thus the “force of fire” arises in the tree, making it possible to rub the tree and produce fire. Creatures are nourished by the vegetation and thus the “force of fire” is transformed into energy in their bodies. In humans,
the energy of fire exists primarily in the head, hence the radiant halo whose aura is particularly blatant above the heads of saints.

In addition to understanding the fire myth as a feminine force, or the force of Eros, we can also trace the other side of fire, the side of Thanatos, namely, fire as a destroying force. One of the most widespread uses of fire was for purification, a process carried out in the ancient world by means of burning a sacrifice (including, sometimes, human sacrifices). The prevailing assumption was that God desired these sacrifices. According to the tradition of the Jewish sages, the fact that fire in the Temple would descend from heaven in order to burn the sacrifice was a sign.

In Judaism, one can find several biblical references that can be interpreted as claims that God did not demand sacrifices other than a purified heart and helping the poor. In the talamidic period, Rabbi Levi maintained that the commandment to burn sacrifices on the altar is cited in the Torah only to distance the people from their former primitive habit: “As Israel worshiped idolatry in Egypt, and used to bring offerings to the seti-irim (demons)...said God: ‘Always bring to me their offerings into the Tabernacle, and by that they will be drawn away from the idolatry.'” When the people would no longer practice idolatry, the burning of animals would no longer be desired by God. This was explored by the 19th-century Ger Rebbe, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, in his treatise, Sefat Emet.

The Ger Rebbe begins by distinguishing between a “fire that burns” (the unruly element) and a “fire that gives light” (the domestic element). It mirrors the internal division within the Temple: the sacrifices were burnt on the altar in the Temple court while the menorah illuminated the inner Temple. The Ger Rebbe also explains this difference by invoking the element of internalization: The purpose of the first symbol is to encourage people to use the consuming fire in a positive way — in order to “burn” within them the evil urges (he calls this “turning away from the bad”); and the second element — whose purpose is to light up the world by doing good — is “more internal and close [i.e., the inner Temple is closer to the Holy of Holies than the Temple court].”

He warns us, though, that we must be mindful that a spiritual practice begins with a thorough burning of one’s own egotistical elements before those elements can show off how much of a “good influence” they are on the world outside. Thus, one may say: “All depends on the burning fire, as it is written, ‘Turn from evil’ first of all, and only then, ‘Do good.’” (Psalms 34:15)

Modern Love: A 12th-Century Liturgical Poem

CHANNA PINCHASI

A small change of context significantly changes the meaning of both metaphor and allegory. “Yedidi, hashachachta?” (“My friend, have you forgotten?”) is a piyut, a liturgical poem, written by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi in the 12th century in Spain, recently set to music and sung by Israeli composer and singer Etti Ankari. Ankari’s deep, warm voice carries the song, refreshes its allegorical meaning and breathes fresh life into its metaphorical language. Ankari’s voice directs the poem closer toward what Halevi dared to say.

This piyut, originally written for Passover, is saturated with images from the Song of Songs:

My friend, have you forgotten your being between my breasts/and why did you sell me as vassalage forever to my masters?

Did I not chase after you in a land not sown/and Sair and Mount Faran and Sinai and Sin adai?

And you had my love...

The classic interpretation of the passage speaks of a historic bond between the nation and God. Knesset Yisrael, the assembly of Israel, asks God, her beloved: “…have you forgotten?” Hearing Ankari sing these words with her warm and mellow music, one hears once again all the desire, longing, and love: This is a woman, a wife, who perhaps asks, perhaps reminds her lover: “My friend, have you forgotten…” The listener imagines the eroticism of this picture in its full strength and humanity: “your being between my breasts.”

The friend, or lover, is spoken to immediately