



GEULAS YISRAEL

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Actually... We Did Start the Fire

An iconic bush on a lonely desert mountain hosted the first rendezvous between Moshe Rabeinu and the Shechinah. To gradually ease Moshe into the practice of speaking directly with Hashem, a modest shrub was selected over more majestic but imposing trees.

A bizarre fire which didn't consume the flammable bush provided added symbolism. At one of the lowest moments of Jewish history, after a 210-year holocaust, this miraculous and unending fire symbolized נצח ישראל or the everlasting survival of the Jewish people against all attempts to extinguish it.

Beyond the eternity of Jewish peoplehood, the unusual fire implied a different message- about the relationship between Torah and Jewish history. This second idea is based upon the science of fire.

THREE ELEMENTS OF COMBUSTION

Combustion is a chemical process which releases heat and light energy. The process of combustion depends upon three essential elements: an energy source such as fire, and a fuel, such as wood or coal, which the fire consumes and from which energy emits. The third element of combustion is ubiquitous but invisible,

and without that crucial third element the process of combustion cannot occur. That imperceptible third element is *oxygen* which “oxidizes” or reacts with fuel to form combustion particles we call energy. Combustion depends upon three elements, two of which are visible and one which isn't, but is omnipresent.

Torah is routinely compared to fire and just as with fire, Torah study requires the same three essential elements for successful combustion. Torah itself is the metaphoric *fuel*. It is studied or *consumed* by the human mind and heart. The *energy* for this process is provided by a person who *studies* Torah. However, for Torah combustion to occur a third element is crucial. A third “element”, which, like oxygen, is ubiquitous and invisible, must participate in the experience of Torah study. *That omnipresent but invisible element is Hashem Himself.* Without His assistance or סיעתא דשמיא, our study of Torah cannot succeed and Torah cannot be ignited into fire. Daily, we pray for His assistance in the study of Torah ותן בליבנו להבין ולהשכיל לשמוע ללמוד ולהבה ללמד את כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה

Physical fire requires fuel, energy and oxygen; Torah study requires the *fuel* of Torah, the *energy* of the human effort, and *Hashem's assistance.*

A FIERY BUSH WITHOUT COMBUSTION

At the encounter of the *sneh*, combustion wasn't yet possible. Our *avot* studied the will of Hashem and performed mitzvot.

The exact nature of their mitzvah observance and Torah study is difficult to determine, but the wisdom of Torah shaped their lives and carved our national identity. Avraham is rewarded for instructing his family to adhere to Torah and mitzvot: עקב אשר שמע אברהם בקלי וישמר משמרתו מצותי חקותי ותורתו

However, at this early stage of history, mass revelation had yet to occur. Additionally, for the past two centuries Hashem had been distant from our people as His presence in Jewish history was obscured. *Without Hashem's palpable presence within history combustion could not occur.* Without oxygen combustion fails. Without Hashem's palpable presence in history the bush was on fire but wasn't consumed. Fire yes, combustion no.

About a year later, upon the very same mountain, combustion would begin. Hashem promised Moshe that he would return to the mountain with the newly liberated nation, but that this time, the barren mountain would be ablaze with fire and enveloped by billowing smoke. A year later we all stood beneath a mountain top transformed from a *sneh* to *Sinai*, and spoke directly with Hashem. As Hashem's presence descended into our world and into history, combustion commenced, and the mountain burst into flames. The shift from a combustion-less *sneh* to a *Sinai*-mountain, roaring with flames, signified the palpable presence of Hashem in history. Combustion of Torah had begun.

HISTORY AFFECTS TORAH

Fire then, serves as a metaphor for the interaction between our people, Torah, and Hashem. Without Hashem there can be no fire. Just the same, as Torah combustion requires three elements, without the Jewish


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people embracing Torah, there can be no fire. Torah's fate depends upon Jewish history.

As the will of Hashem, Torah is eternal and, as the gemara asserts, predates our universe by two thousand years. As the cosmic word of Hashem, it lies beyond human reach and beyond human experience. Infinite and unfathomable.

Despite the cosmic sweep of Torah though, Hashem shrunk his will into the Torah we received which allows access to the Infinite through human study. By studying Torah and adhering to its mitzvot we magnify Torah's imprint and augment Hashem's presence in this world. For this reason, we are compared to *husbands* of Torah. In a well-known *derasha*, Chazal explained that Torah is not just our *morasha* or *heritage*, but is also our *me'orasa* our *wife*. Marriage is a dynamic which affects both

members. Torah is a guidebook for life, but also is *affected* by our lives. It is affected by our personal lives and is also impacted by the grand revolutions of Jewish history. As the Jewish people prosper, Torah thrives. When we decline, Torah itself suffers.

For full Torah fire to be kindled, Hashem's presence in our world is necessary. When that presence recedes, *chas v'shalom*, the fire ebbs. Similarly, fully-flamed Torah depends upon Jewish fortune. When we are persecuted, Torah's fire diminishes.

IMPACTING THE TEXT

Not only is the general *state* of Torah affected by Jewish history but the actual *text* of Torah changes when Jews suffer. There is a two-pasuk "stand alone section" commonly known as the section *ויהי בנסוע*, because it contains this iconic pasuk recited when opening the aron hakodesh. The gemara in Shabbat claims that this tiny section migrated from its natural location to signal an important message about Jewish exile. During Messianic times, after the completion of exile, the parsha will return to its original location. Jewish suffering caused the re-partitioning of Torah from its pristine form to our current text. The actual text of Torah was "reformatted" by Hashem to reflect Jewish history.

A similar reformatting occurs in the transition from parshat Vayigash to Vayechi. Typically, junctures between parshiyot are designated by an empty space of at least nine letters. Atypically, Vayigash and Vayechi are fused, without any intervening empty parchment. In his comments to Vayechi, the Sefat Emmet casts the textual closure as a parallel to the sunken state of our people in Egypt. The textual shrinkage mirrors our suffering in Egypt.

When we suffer, Torah contracts. Without our fuel, the combustion of Torah fails.

THE ATTACK OF TORAH

On October 7th, Torah suffered. The people of Torah were attacked on the Land upon which Torah was meant to be maximized. Worse, this brutal massacre occurred on the day we celebrate Torah. Calling this the "Simchat Torah massacre", as opposed to the "attack of October 7th" emphasizes that Torah itself was also assaulted on this day. On the day we honor a *חתן תורה* affirming our own husbandry of Torah, our marriage with Torah was viciously assaulted.

This Simchat Torah timing of the pogrom, though, provides long-term confidence. Rebbe Chanaya ben Tradyon, one of the 10 martyrs brutally murdered during the destruction of the second Mikdash, was burned alive while wrapped in a sefer Torah. As he died, he conveyed confidence to his daughter: "[Hashem] will avenge the dishonor of Torah and will [thereby] also avenge my brutal death". The dual attack on his life and on Torah assured him of the final outcome.

Our people were literally burned alive on the day wrapped with the joy of Torah. Like Rebbe Chananya, this battle may take some time, but we already know how it concludes. Hashem will avenge the Simchat Torah attack, and will avenge the attack upon our people, and our Homeland.

Jewish history will rise, and the flames of Torah will burn forever bright. ■

