



Harmonious Passion • Parshat Tzav

The opening of *Parshat Tzav* emphasizes that the outer altar must be aflame with a perpetual fire. The priests were required to keep the fire burning, utilizing wood mixed with the parts of the burnt offering. If the fire were to go out, they would be in violation of two negative commandments, as indicated by the repetitiousness in the verses: “The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, *not to go out...* A permanent fire shall be kept burning on the altar, *you shall not extinguish it*” (Lev. 6:5-6).

Interpreters looking for deeper symbolism found it here. Fire represents the desire, warmth, illumination, and inspiration of a life infused with Divinity. This passion needs to burn continuously. Just like tending to the actual fire required constant vigilance and attendance, maintaining the metaphoric blaze and avoiding “burn out” is not a simple process.

In conceptualizing passion, psychologist Robert J. Vallerand distinguishes between two types: harmonious and obsessive. Harmonious passion occurs when a person authentically and freely desires to pursue an activity. The person remains in control and can maintain congruity with other parts of life. Harmonious passion is correlated with increased learning, enhanced performance, and higher satisfaction with life.

In contrast, obsessive passion often controls us. Even though we might be motivated to engage in an activity, we often lose the impetus when external contingencies like social approval get in the way. This more unyielding drive can lead

to internal conflicts, negative emotions, and maladaptive consequences such as suboptimal performance, burnout, and an inability to integrate the passion with other parts of our lives.

With this framework in mind, we can explore how the constant flame on the altar symbolizes harmonious, rather than obsessive passion. As mentioned, harmonious passion is not inspired by external or public validation. The continuous burning required the altar to be tended to at night as well, when the Temple was officially closed. As Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz notes, while sometimes this ceremony took place with great pomp and circumstance, it also entailed “hours upon hours of Temple service done entirely in private” (*Talks on the Parsha*). Passion cannot exclusively be in response to the validation of others. It must be nurtured even in the still of the night and in the silence of solitude.

Other indications of harmonious passion are its integrality with our core sense of identity and its congruency with other aspects of our lives. According to Rabbi Yohanan, quoted in the Talmud Yerushlami, “You shall not extinguish it” teaches that even while traveling, the flame must not go out (Yoma 4:6). Rabbi Yosef Greenwald, quoted by Rabbi Baruch Simon in his *Imrei Baruch*, offers a homiletic message related to authenticity. To keep one’s passion for the Divine ignited while grounded and centered around inherently religious dwellings is not necessarily challenging. It is when one traverses away from those protective

environments that one is challenged to keep the fire for God and Torah burning. The passion is indeed harmonious when it maintains aflame in diverse, transient, and challenging situations.

In their book *The Passion Paradox*, Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness outline several strategies to cultivate harmonious passion. One key component is developing a mastery mindset, which includes an internal desire to improve continuously. They note that both after big wins and tough losses, there is often resistance to keep up the motivation to get back to work. The “simplest and most effective” strategy to building the mastery mindset is “showing up and doing the work” every single day, even after successes and especially after failures.

Perhaps this lesson is reflected in the other opinion quoted in the Talmud Yerushalmi. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi teaches that the word “permanent”

indicates two more situations where one might think the flame does not have to be kept lit, but the law still requires it: “*Permanent*, even on the Sabbath; *permanent*, even in impurity.” Even after spiritual success as symbolized by the Sabbath, and even after spiritual failures as reflected in impurity, the fire needs to be maintained. After wins, one cannot collapse into complacency; after losses one can’t descend into resignation.

In all, the necessity to keep the fire burning continuously on the altar provides a potent paradigm for harmonious passion. By cultivating intrinsic motivation instead of pursuing external validation, by staying authentically fervent in different settings, and by constantly pursuing growth after both successes and failures, we can indeed live an illuminated life infused with an unextinguishable burning desire for the Divine.

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Character Challenge: Choose an aspect of your ethical-spiritual life where you already sense an element of passion. Intentionally cultivate harmonious passion by using some of the strategies elucidated above.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “The man who has traveled so far on the path of separation that he feels he has now no link with God. To him the Talmud says, “it shall not go out—even in a state of impurity.” For the fire does not go out. A spark always burns in the recesses of the heart. It can be fanned into flame. And if it is fed with the fuel of love, it will burn continually” (*Torah Studies: A Parsha Anthology from the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe*)