

In light of this weekend's weather, I wanted to talk about something that may help warm us up.

I don't know about you, but I can stare into a fire for hours.

Whether on a camping trip or in a cozy fireplace,  
fire captivates my attention and my imagination.

Fire is filled with mystery.

It is constantly changing, and never takes the same shape twice.

On the one hand, it seems to be alive.

It breathes, it eats, it responds to stimuli, and it can die.

On the other hand, I know it's just a chemical reaction.

Fire is one of the most destructive forces we know,  
and yet it also keeps us warm and cooks our food.

Our ancestors must have been fascinated by fire, as well.

Sometimes I imagine them sitting around a fire telling stories,  
and it's these stories that were collected over time and formed into the Torah.

Fire also plays a unique role in Judaism and is found in many forms:  
guiding, inspiring, destroying, and more.

The first place fire appears in the Torah is during a little known covenant  
between Abraham and God.

Abraham is instructed to take a number of animals and cut them in half.

God then passes through the animal parts in the form of a flaming torch.

Scholars suggest that this ceremony was modeled after an ancient middle-eastern practice.

When two people were binding themselves to a contract,

They cut animals in half and walked between the pieces, saying

"If I break this deal, may I end up like these animals."

It is also during this ceremony that God promises to give Abraham's children  
the land of Israel, but warns him that first they will have to spend 400 years in slavery.

A little later on, God uses the mystery of fire as a destructive force.

The cities of Sodom and Gomorra, known for their unabashedly evil ways,  
were destroyed in a storm of fiery hail.

This was such a powerful scene, that God warned Lot's fleeing family not to look back.

His wife couldn't resist her curiosity and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Fire was also the primary means of offering a sacrifice to God.

It was believed that God enjoyed the pleasing aroma of the burning meat  
as much as humans do.

Even as a vegetarian, I can appreciate the smell of a good Bar-B-Q.

From Abraham's first sacrifice, including when he almost sacrificed his son, Isaac,  
to the great Temple sacrifices,

fire has played a key role in offering our thanks to God.

God also uses fire as a representation of God's power.  
He first caught Moses' eye with a burning bush,  
proclaiming that Moses should remove his sandals because it was holy ground.  
God rained fiery hail (again) down upon the Egyptians in one of the plagues,  
this time mixing it with ice, too.  
God also lead the Israelites through the wilderness  
using a pillar of cloud (or smoke) during the day  
and a pillar of fire at night.  
And then, the pinnacle of our experience in the wilderness,  
the revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai,  
is characterized by the mountain being covered in flames.

Even today, fire plays a significant role in our own rituals.  
We symbolize God's constant presence through the Eternal flame.  
(even if sometimes it's a light bulb.)  
We also bookend our weekly day of rest with flickering flames.  
We begin Shabbat by performing the mitzvah of lighting candles,  
and we end Shabbat with Havdalah by praising God for making fire.  
Boreh m'orey ha'esh.

The Hebrew word for fire is "esh."

אֵשׁ

Even the letters themselves seem to be imitating flames  
as they reach for the heavens.

In fact, these letters, this concept,  
has captured my imagination and inspired me so much,  
that I created a stained glass art piece  
to express my awe.  
Since it is too fragile to travel with,  
here is a photograph to share with you. →

Fire truly is amazing.  
It has been a part of Judaism since the very beginning,  
and with the help of God and our own imaginations,  
I believe it will be an integral part for millennium to come.

May the fire of God warm our souls,  
and send us out into the cold,  
glowing from the inside out.

Shabbat Shalom!

