

DON'T PUT OUT THE LIGHT

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Have you ever driven to work and, once you got there, realized that you didn't remember driving there at all?

It happens to all of us—and not just in the car. And the result is that literally we don't see; we don't experience what's right in front of us. Even Moses had this experience. Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law and he took the sheep out into the wilderness when, the scripture tells us, "he looked" at a bush that was burning and yet not consumed. And he said to himself, "Let me turn *aside* and see this incredible sight. . . ." (Exodus 3:2-3)

From this, our sages say, we learn that there is no place that is devoid of God's presence, not even a thorn bush. God's presence is discernible in all things and all places. Even in something like a bush. The problem is, we just don't *see* it. Things only look ordinary to us, however, because we have not yet seen what is truly there. That is, we haven't made a conscious decision to perceive the extraordinary that is right there in front of us. As the Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, 1698-1760) said: "The world is full of miracles, but man takes his little hand and covers his eyes, and sees nothing."

So what about the miracle of Chanukah?

For all these eight nights of Chanukah, our rabbis say, these lights are holy. We are not permitted to use them, rather only to look at them. And they also say that they call out to us to turn aside from everything else and to *see* what is really there.

But what is it that we actually see? And what is that small flame to us? Although better question might be: What are we to it?

For in a way, fire is who we are. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches us, *aish* (fire—אש) is the power that gives movement, alteration and life to all physical beings. We could think of it as life-energy. It is the dark invisible fire by which the eternal, God-given laws of nature work in all of God's creations. These are the laws that work unconsciously in everything created. And in most creatures, they operate independent of

the will of those creatures. But there is one creature for which those laws come for free-willed acceptance. And that creature is us.

By keeping the Torah we consciously and freely take up the position that all other beings occupy unconsciously and without free will. For us the "fire" becomes "law," referred to in the Torah as *aish dat* (אש דת), the fiery law. As Rabbi Hirsch teaches, we are the fuel for keeping the fires of godliness burning on earth.

So, on each night of Chanukah, when you look at the flame, think of yourself. And ask yourself: For what purpose will I use this God-given fire, this life-energy that is mine to direct.

Bar Kappara (*tanna* who lived in transitional period between *tannaim* and *amoraim*) taught: "God said to man: 'My light is in your hand and your light is in My hand.' 'My light is in your hand': this refers to the Torah; and 'your light is in My hand': this refers to the soul. If you guard My light, I will guard your light, but if you extinguish My light, I will extinguish your light." (Leviticus Rabbah 31:4)

We leave you with a poem. It's called Don't Put Out the Light:

For You
Who made the light
And blew it into me
Who gave me my soul
To be a lantern
In Your hand,
Saying,
Don't put out the light!
Let me keep pure
This filament,
My body.
Let it be
According
To Your will,
A sheath for light,
That I may lift
My lamp
Into Your hands.

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