

# Fire as Symbol: A Brief Overview of a Burning Topic

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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

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.

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 warmth. “Outside” fire is a draconic entity that maliciously “infects” everything with its amorphous trait of chaos and loss of form. The role of domestic fire, in contrast, is to forge form and overlay things with an aesthetic flavor, whether in the cooking of food or in forging the tools in the ironmonger’s workshop.

Most religions adopted the feminine-domestic symbol of the fire burning in the hearth

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.<sup>3</sup> In the ancient world, this was not an unusual custom. For example, in the Roman world, which inherited the custom from the Greeks,<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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,

<sup>1</sup> See Carl-Martin Edsman, “Fire,” in: Mircea Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 5, Macmillan, New York 1978, p. 340.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Van Der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, translated by J. E. Turner, George Allen & Unwin, London 1938, pp. 59-64.

<sup>3</sup> See Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1990, pp. 61-61; John R. Hinnells (ed.), *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, Penguin, New York 1985 s.v. “Zoroastrianism”.

<sup>4</sup> In Greek culture, the name of the quite similar goddess was Hestia.

<sup>5</sup> The shape reminds us of the womb. For more on womb-temples and womb-tombs, see Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1989, p. 1092.


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,<sup>6</sup> namely, fire as a destroying force.<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

In Judaism, one can find several biblical references that can be interpreted as claims that God does not demand sacrifices other than a purified heart and helping the poor.<sup>10</sup> In the talmudic 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 *sei-irim* (demons)...said God: ‘Always bring to me their offerings into the Tabernacle, and by that they will be drawn away from the idolatry.’”<sup>11</sup> When the people would no longer practice idolatry, the burning

of animals would no longer be desired by God.<sup>12</sup> This was explored by the 19th-century Ger Rebbe, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, in his treatise, *Sefat Emet*.<sup>13</sup>

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) 



<sup>6</sup> An Algerian saying found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the Berber House: “Man is the lamp outside and woman is the lamp of the inside.”

<sup>7</sup> The ancient Egyptians believed that this hostile power stems from the Primal Sea.

<sup>8</sup> This element appears in different ways in different religious groups. Some of the Gnostics applied hot iron to the ears of the baptized; some other cults prefer walking on fire. Some groups offer a lenient option: to replace this torturing ritual by a symbolic one (baptizing in water while being only surrounded by torches). Baptism in water before death, for some, negates the fire-baptizing in hell. For analysis of these options in the history of religions, see A. M. Hocart, *The Life Giving Myth*, Tavistock, London 1970, pp.156-159. The idea of being purified by fire is found also in the Jewish sources, but, to my best knowledge, only in metaphorical meaning. An interesting example is to be found in a Dead Sea Scrolls text called “The Thanksgiving Hymns,” Hymn 13, lines 20-27 (*The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, translated by Geza Vermes, Penguin Books, London 1997, p. 268): “Thou hast dealt wondrously with the poor one/ to manifest thy might within me/ in the presence of the son of men/ Thou hast placed him in the melting-pot/ [like gold] in the fire/ and like silver refined/ in the melting pot of the smelters/ to be purified seven times” (for the original Hebrew text, see: Jacob Licht, “*Megilath haHodayot*,” The Bialik Institute, Jerusalem 1957, Hymn 9, p. 102). Here, one meets an interesting perception of the function of the evil side of the world. According to this text, the evil people were created by god in order to function as the “fire furnace” that will melt the righteous person in his life here on earth, and would purify him to be clean and glowing in the end as silver or gold.

<sup>9</sup> See BT Zevachim, 61b (and see Leviticus 9:24 for understanding the biblical roots of that idea).

<sup>10</sup> See Samuel 1: 15-22; Amos 5:22-27; Isaiah 1:11-21; Jeremiah 7:22-23; Micah 6:7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Vayikra Rabah 22, 8.

<sup>12</sup> For an extensive discussion on this idea from the Hebrew Bible to the late Kabbalistic and Hassidic texts, see Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism*, Magnes, Jerusalem 2005 (Hebrew), pp. 62-82.

<sup>13</sup> Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, *Sefat Emet*, vol. 2, Sh’mot (parshat Parah).

## Modern Love: A 12th-Century Liturgical Poem

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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?*<sup>1</sup>

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

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This article was translated by Felice Kahn Zisken.

Listen to Etti Ankari’s recording of this *piyut* at [www.piyut.org.il/tradition/3030.html?currPerformance=4121](http://www.piyut.org.il/tradition/3030.html?currPerformance=4121)

<sup>1</sup> This refers to places where God had approached other nations to offer His Torah.