

One of the themes of this week's Parsha Behaalotecha is the element of fire. The parsha begins with God telling Moses to speak to Aaron and tell him how to position the light of the seven lamps. Later we learn that "a cloud covered the Mishkan "and at evening there was over the Mishkan like an appearance of fire which remained until morning. So it was always, the cloud covered it and there was an appearance of fire at night". In chapter 11 "God's anger flared and a fire from the Lord burned among them, consuming the extremes of the camp. The people cried out to Moses ; Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. He named that place Tab'erah, for the fire of the Lord had burned among them there."

In Chapter 12 "The wrath of the Lord flared against them and He(Moses) left." The idea of fire as ascending to the heavens interested me.

Writing a few words about a Torah Parsha is much easier than it used to be thanks to the Internet. Just type in Parshaat Behaalotecha commentary and you can plagiarize, I mean quote, to your heart's desire. If you select a Chabad commentary that comments based on Kabbalah you can sound reasonably well-educated and interesting. And so you have my confession.

Rabbi Eliyahu Noson Silberberg offers a wonderful video half hour on Parshat Behaaalotecha which can really suck you in. He comments on the presence of 7 candles filling the seven branches of the menorah being carried from place to place and relates them to the 7 middot which are defined elsewhere. The term behaalotecha which roughly refers to going up, relates to the fire from the candles as one of the four basic elements - water, air, wind and fire. His Kabbalistic reference likens our soul or neshomah to a candle which is already and always lit but often surrounded by the other elements and is in need of being freed in order to burn brightly. Rabbi Silberberg tells us that in the Parsha Aaron was given the job of clearing away the debris surrounding the nashomah so that the fire of our soul can rise. His job and that of his descendants is to continue to clear the debris and awaken and fan the flame of the soul to satisfy God's commandments.

The Zohar teaches us that God will take care of our candle if we take care of his candle. What is God's candle? It is our soul. What is our candle according to Silberberg? Torah Mitzvoth are God's candles. In other words, "If you guard my candles by doing Torah's mitzvot God will look after our souls". Silberberg goes on to quote Tanya Chapter 35 from the Zohar. He tells the story of a young lad who says that Hashem is like a fire burning on the head of a wise man who keeps his eyes open to make sure the fire is going. His body is like a wick and mitzvot are the shemen or oil which keeps it burning. The oil becomes consumed in proportion to the purity of the oil, the purer the oil the cleaner the burn. A neshomah is its own entity, part of oneself, holy and connecting to God through mitzvot. The Alte Rebbe teaches us that our neshomah can't be fully consumed because it is our own and mitzvot keep the oil of the Shechina on us and keep our flame alive. You guard my candle and I'll guard yours. With a pure flame, cleared of the rubbish of life we can achieve full union with God.

We recently celebrated Shavuot. Even before matan Torah we had the candle of the nashomah but we lacked the shemen of Torah. After matan Torah we had the oil. Added to the nashomah which we received from prior generations we were able to carry out the physical acts and deeds of mitzvot. A

candle without oil is like a Jew before Shavuot. We said at Sinai that we would accept and do everything asked of us and the partnership was sealed with a covenant. But it wasn't enough to simply desire God's commandments. We need total bittel (enthusiastic commitment). This happens with the performance of mitzvot which are learned from Torah. Torah is our link to God and facilitates complete union with God. We need to pick up our own candles, guard to awaken God's candle and fulfilling mitzvot and davening to burn our own oil.

The idea that we take care of ourselves by taking care of God and God takes care of himself by taking care of us is a wonderful one. Does this mean that if we act in our own selfish interest we would be quick to take care of others by doing mitzvot? Does God really need us to guard his candle? Is the question of self-interest vs. collective good blurred by this Parshaat as interpreted by the Kabbalists? Is this why I'm not really old enough to study the Zohar? I'd better get myself a pocket full of mitzvahs before I find out the hard way.

Shabbat shalom,