

Light Your Own Flame

written by Yossi Katz

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A few years ago I met someone who told me the most amazing story. It seems that although he had been born into a Chassidic family, one after the other his siblings left the fold. Out of desperation, his parents sent him to Jerusalem to stay with a Yerushalmi Breslov cousin of theirs. Their hope was that the deeply religious environment would protect him from outside negative influences. Unfortunately, the plan did not work. Avi still managed to meet up with the wrong group of friends and before long was following the path of his siblings.

One Shabbat, when he was sure no one was looking, he flicked on the light switch. Suddenly he heard someone moving around right behind him. It was his Yerushalmi cousin. Startled, he expected the usual verbal reproof he had received from his concerned parents. But instead, this cousin shared a few simple words of encouragement that would change his attitude and eventually his course of life: "Avi, just know that God still loves you."

Avi began to understand that deep down, he really did crave a meaningful relationship with God. It was just that the experiences of his upbringing had convinced him that God was somehow out to get him. Now that a deeply religious man had demonstrated to him that, despite his issues, God loved him and was waiting for him, he was able to open up his heart and begin building his own personal connection to Him.

The Hebrew word for soul, *nefesh*, also means want and desire. Every pure Jewish soul craves spirituality and is passionately aflame with a desire for closeness to God. This is why, in Judaism, we always associate a candle with the soul; for example, we light a candle on a *yahrtzeit*. Like a flame, the untainted Jewish soul constantly leaps for Godliness. However, life has a knack for pushing us around and disconnecting ourselves with our spark.

The Kabbalah teaches that there are seven root character traits: Lovingkindness, Discipline, Harmony, Dominance, Splendor, Foundation and Kingship. As human beings, we have the ability to elevate and perfect these traits, or fall prey to them. Therefore we are frequently tested in each of these seven areas. According to our success, there are seven levels of Heaven or seven levels of Hell. It is for this reason that life is so hectic and unpredictable. Our life experiences are our opportunities to grow and thrive in all of these seven areas. The sheer amount of trials almost guarantees that most of us won't always live up to every challenge, that we will sometimes (or often) be routed. So what do we do?

King Solomon teaches, "A righteous man will fall seven times, and rise" (Proverbs 24:16). Even the *tzaddik*, at his lofty level, falters to an extent, and certainly we do. This is all part of living a virtuous life. Our *parashah* commands us to "kindle the *ner tamid* (eternal light)" (Exodus 27:20). The *ner tamid* resides within each of us: it is our pure soul. No matter what life throws at us, we can kindle the *ner tamid* by remembering our essence, by remembering that God loves us and

by burning brightly for closeness with Him.

The essence of every relationship is the passionate desire that each party shares with the other. Our main challenge is to see that even if we fall short in one or all seven areas, we maintain our desire for Godliness. Holding strong, even when things don't seem to go our way, proves our commitment to God! Through our steadfast dedication of trying afresh again and again, we will eventually be able to grab hold of the *ner tamid* and light all the seven blazing lights of the Menorah even in the darkest night. Amen!

Based on Likutey Halahot, Birkhot HaShachar 5