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Parashat Tzav 5784

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר? / Who is she that arises from the desert?

1.

There's a question that goes unanswered in Song of Songs:

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר

*Who is she that is coming up, arising from the wilderness?*

כְּתִימָרוֹת עָשָׂן

*Like columns of smoke*

מִקְטָרֶת מוֹר וּלְבוֹנָה

*In clouds of myrrh and frankincense?*

You see, it seems as if

In this long, winding love poem of Song of Songs

Eight chapters of gardens and trees and pomegranates, yearning, doves and foxes

The question is left, like a lot of this poem

A little unfinished, unanswered, its perfume still hanging in the air

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר

Who is this vision coming up from the wilderness? We don't know.

2.

Further, the question is asked not once but twice

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר מִתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹדָהּ

Who is she that comes up, arises from the desert –

Only this time there are no clouds of smoke, no arresting visions

This time she is

מִתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹדָהּ

Leaning upon her beloved

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר

So who is she *rising* up, up, up from the wilderness?

Is she, as in the first case, making a dramatic entrance, with wings of incense and smoke

Standing tall, a column, a palm tree?<sup>1</sup>

Or is she, as in the second instance, fragile, so fragile she is unable to walk without leaning on the one she loves?

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר

Who is it that olah / arises up from the wilderness?

3.

Considering just who she might be – who arises from the wilderness might help us this week

Understand our parasha

Wyatt taught us about the connections between the sacrifices and our prayers today so beautifully

And I noticed a few verses at the beginning of our parasha, before the section we read this morning, it says:

זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה

This is the torah, the law for the *olah* / the name we have for the sacrifice that arises

זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה

The sacrifice that is a little mysterious, a little undefined

You see, unlike the other sacrifices, it is not designated for guilt

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<sup>1</sup> [תימרה] **n.f.** (palm-like **column** (spreading at top; cf. OI<sup>s</sup> 184 b); –pl. cstr. תימרות עשן Jo 3:3 Ct 3:6 (cf. עמוד עשן in prose Ju 20:40).

Nor thanksgiving  
Nor forgiveness  
It is not really designated at all

Maybe it is the sacrifice –  
Maybe it is the prayer that cannot be classified, it defies classification  
We don't know what it is for  
It doesn't fit neatly into a category  
Maybe it is an unwieldy prayer for things to get better  
Maybe it is a prayer born from confusion or fear about our world  
I am hearing a lot of those these days  
Maybe it is prayer concerned for those we love and even for those in  
distant, far away places, empathy and love for those we don't know, will  
never know  
Maybe it is prayer born out of exhaustion, a prayer not fully formed, a  
prayer without all the proper words<sup>2</sup>

Torah is not clear

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה

What is this olah? We don't fully know, unlike the other sacrifices, this one  
is ambiguous

We just know this olah, this sacrifice or prayer ascends fully,  
that's why she is called olah / the one that rises, ascends, comes up  
Some sacrifices, some prayers are just like that  
We can't fully describe them, but we know they ascend

4.

And we learn two other clues,  
We learn two other attributes about this mysterious kind of sacrifice, this  
olah

First, the olah stays on the alter all night until the dawn

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<sup>2</sup> tradition that olah relates to thoughts

הוא העֲלָה על מוקְדָּה על־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר

The burnt offering herself shall remain on the hearth, the altar all night until morning

How does this help us?

What does this mean?

Well, those of us who know what it means to have a thought

A prayer that we hope will rise up, ascend –

Maybe something, like the olah, that does not fit neatly into a category

That is, the kind of thought, the kind of prayer where we don't know exactly what it is we seek

It is no *hiddush* / it is no big revelation to say these are the kinds of prayers that often come at night, in the middle of the night

A time when, perhaps, our defenses are down

And, our half awake, half asleep dream state allows us to imagine – for better or worse

But you see the olah / this offering that ascends, the prayer that rises

Isn't just offered in the middle of the night

It is not described as a midnight offering

Rather it is given כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה עַד־הַבֹּקֶר

*All night until morning*

Meaning that the morning, the understanding that morning will come, that dawn will break

Is a part of the essence of this sacrifice, this prayer

You see a prayer given at night and received at night

A prayer offered at night and completed at night – don't get me wrong, this is also an important kind of prayer

But our olah prayer, offered in the evening, or during the night  
A prayer that must remain until morning  
This span of time, this shift from night to day, changes the prayer  
Because our prayers, even the ones that are the most inchoate, the ones  
that resist our framing them with words  
Are transformed in the light of the morning  
Their truth – a truth that could only come in the night – is revealed more  
fully in the morning

In the mind of the Sfatai Emet

וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד

And there evening and there was morning, a first day  
The creation story, this is how creation works, first there's night, and only  
then day

So perhaps just knowing this olah prayer will still be with us in the  
morning  
Perhaps this changes our understanding of this kind of olah / this prayer  
Perhaps we don't have to be afraid in the night, to try to make it conform  
to ideas we already have  
Or wishes we already wish  
But instead we can allow this kind of prayer to reach out, and yes, reach  
up, ascend  
To unimaginable heights  
To places we don't yet know

זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה

Maybe this is the torah, the law for the olah / the sacrifice that arises  
Maybe it describes the prayers that begin in the night but still need the  
morning

5.

There is a second attribute that describes our olah / the sacrifice that  
ascends

Torah says that underneath the alter of this olah

אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תּוֹקֵד עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּבֵה

A perpetual fire will be kept burning, *not to go out*.

That is to say, underneath this sacrifice, underneath this prayer is a fire that constantly burns

One midrash says they kept this fire going in Temple times for 116 consecutive years

That they had a log pile next to the regular log pile just to make sure

In a source that feels uncannily like my Ashkenazi family's way of dealing with things, I found one source that indicated there were five log piles, just to make really sure that fire did not go out

And there are many midrash – for those of you keeping score at home – that connect this

אֵשׁ תָּמִיד this everlasting fire

With the *neir tamid* / the everlasting *light*

The light that illuminated the temple and one that is above the ark (can you see it?)

And this fire not only illuminates the *neir tamid*, the everlasting light

It illuminates us

Precisely, in each of us, says the Sfat Emet, there is an אֵשׁ תָּמִיד / a fire that cannot be put out

And even though in torah it reads like a prohibition, לֹא תִכָּבֵה / "It *may* not go out"

"Don't let it go out"

The sfat Emet says the verse is also a promise

That this fire *will not* go out

That is, no matter how confusing our moment

No matter how remote our own prayers can seem to be

No matter long the night

אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תּוֹקֵד עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ

The fire burns on the alter

Even now, even now

Not just until morning but always

זֹאת תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה

For this is the torah, the law for the *olah* / the sacrifice that arises

6.

Now maybe we can return to our question, the question posed in Shir HaShirim, not once but twice

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר

Who is she that is coming up from the wilderness?

Who is the loved one that arises, olah, from the untamed and sometimes desolate places?

Sometimes she is

כְּתִימָרוֹת עֶשֶׂן מִקְטָרֶת מוֹר וּלְבוֹנָה

Like columns of smoke

In clouds of myrrh and frankincense

A vision – plumes of smoldering spices

Waves of smoke

Drama personified

Arriving with great fanfare on wings of incense

And sometimes –

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר ?

Who is she that comes up from the wilderness?

She is

מֵתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹחָה

She is leaning on the one she loves

Unable to walk herself

Unable to withstand this wilderness of a world for one more step

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר ?

Who is she?

I think she is the olah herself: Song of Songs is describing the prayers of our innermost heart, rising up from the midbar, from the wilderness of our world

Sometimes like a queen, sometimes as frail as a child

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר ?

She is the olah / the sacrifice that can wait the whole night until morning

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה ? She is those prayers that we offer without fully knowing where they belong

But trusting that god wants them, asks us for them nevertheless

That we were put here to offer them with the efforts of our lives

And that morning will come, please god, soon and in our day