BLESSED IS THE MATCH
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There is a poem by Hannah Senesh that begins with the prescient verse, "blessed is the match that is consumed by burning flame." It was the last poem that this heroin of Jewish history wrote before she parachuted behind enemy lines in Yugoslavia and was captured and killed by the Nazi's.

I think I first learned the poem in Sunday school when I was about 10 years old and the verse runs through my mind every Friday Night when we kindle the Shabbat Candles in our home. As Sharon strikes the match, touches it to the Sabbath candles and waves her hands three times over the burning flames I can't help but think of the incredible contradiction. Fire which has so often and is once again today a source of such incredible destruction of life and property is also used so frequently in our tradition to sanctify and make holy.

Hannah's poem continues:
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honor's sake.
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

In four lines she takes us on a journey from the small insignificant match, which so quickly and easily gives up its existence but not before it strikes a fire in the heart of the individual, not before it inspires a fire of passion and resolve towards some greater purpose. From the tiny match the fire of the heart rages forth, it becomes stronger and stronger, feeding on itself, until it is totally and completely focused on its singular and in this case blessed purpose – the sacrifice of the self for the salvation of others, the greater good. Blessed is the match, she reminds us because from one small burning timber, form a tiny spark of an idea can come inspiration and courage and the power to change the present and shape the future.

And yet, from that same tiny flame can also come a firestorm of destruction and devastation. We call the fires that we have experienced this week wildfires and they are aptly named for there destructive force knows no purpose, no direction; they go whichever way the wind and fuel take them. It is this wildness that makes them so terrifying – we just don't know what they will do next.

There is a profound difference between the fire of the soul and that of the wild. Though they both start from a tiny spark, the fire that moves a soul towards positive action begins small and becomes smaller, more intense. Picture a welder's torch as he dials in the intensity of the flame. With a fire intense enough you can with great precision cut through the hardest of materials, the most challenging of situations. But the fire of nature is just the opposite, it too starts from a small flame but instead of narrowing and growing more concentrated, it becomes broad and more prolific, it eats and consumes

everything in its path. Like a gathering storm whatever it can touch it destroys. Its purpose is its own preservation, and it will lash out at whatever it can to sustain its wild rage.

There is a well known and powerful story in the Torah about Aaron and his sons Nadav and Abihu. It was at the time that Aaron was named the high priest of Israel that he was instructed to appoint his sons as his assistants. Aaron's sacred task was to make the daily sacrifices on behalf of the community for expiation from sins and in thanksgiving for their daily blessings. He instructs Nadav and Abihu in the intricate details of how to assist him. But these two young men are pompous and self-centered, instead of doing as Aaron instructs they decide to do it there way, instead of offering a sacrifice on behalf of there community, they decide to offer their own sacrifice on their own behalf to God. It is one of those moments of vengeful divine justice, as they bring their fire pans for the sacrifice to the alter, a fire from God lashes out from heaven and consumes them in front of their father and the whole community of Israel.

According to the Rabbis of Jewish tradition Nadav and Abihu were not punished because they offered the wrong kind of sacrifice, but rather they were condemned because of the evil intent that motivated them. Nadav and Abihu, say the rabbis were ruthlessly ambitious. They were consumed with the fire of greed which raged wildly in their souls. The Midrash takes the event even further and imagines a conversation between the two brothers as they look in on Moses and Aaron from outside the tent. "Look at those two old men they say to each other, soon they will be gone and we will be the leaders of the community." Still another rabbi argues that it was not ambition alone that drew God's divine wrath but also arrogance. That they had set themselves off from the community and bragged that no woman was good enough to marry them. According to Rabbi Levi they insensitively took advantage of women's feelings, raising their expectations and hopes for a serious relationship, when they were only using them for their own entertainment.

Rabbi Morris Adler a more modern commentator believes that the fire they brought for the sacrifice, what the Torah calls an Aish Zerah an 'alien fire' was the fire of impulse and desire that burns within people and if unchecked brings people their own destruction. He writes, "they were victims of their own appetites and greed, whims and ambitions. No fire came from on high and consumed them, they were consumed by their own fierce and false ambitions.

From the spark of an idea can come a fire of passion and courage that calls a young woman to risk her life to save others, or can come the wild lust for self fulfillment that destroys everything it's path. What is the difference? What fans the flames for good or for ill? The answer from our tradition and from the example of nature is very clear. When we are consumed only with ourselves and our own survival, our own wants and desires we will eventually burn ourselves up. Forest fires eventually run out of fuel and when they do, they feed on themselves and die from within. We know human beings who do the same, who burn with such rage and intensity, always seeking more for themselves, that they destroy others in the process of trying to satisfy their own lusts.

Eventually there end is the same as the forest fires, they run out of things to consume, everything around them lays in ruins, they are isolated and alone and they flicker and die out.

But what is the key to life, it is those who have within them a ner tamid, and eternal light, a spark, a passion that is beyond them selves, that does not destroy but rather builds, inspires – themselves and others. People that shire with a divine light, who like that other candle of Jewish tradition, the Shamas candle of the hanukiah who share there light so that other may burn brightly. It is that amazing thing about fire; one candle can indeed kindle many other and yet loose none of its own light. So too one soul can kindle, inspire many others and lose none of its own light. Blessed is the match that kindles the flame inside of each of us – may we share our light.