

**Reigniting Our Fire**  
**Rosh Hashanah Day II 5782 (2021)**  
**R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel**

The Hasidic Masters also suffered from burnout.

Allow me to share a well-known story, as retold by R. Rami Shapiro:

“When faced with a particularly weighty problem, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidic Judaism, would go to a certain place in the woods, light a sacred fire, and pray. In this way, he found insight into his dilemma. His successor, Rabbi Dov Ber, the Preacher of Mezritch, followed his example and went to the same place in the woods and said, “The fire we can no longer light, but we can still say the prayer.” And he, too, found what he needed. Another generation passed, and Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov went to the woods and said, “The fire we can no longer light, the prayer we no longer remember; all we know is the place in the woods, and that will have to suffice.” And it did. In the fourth generation, Rabbi Israel of Rishin stayed at home and said, “The fire we can no longer light, the prayer we no longer know, nor do we remember the place. All we can do is tell the tale.” And that, too, proved sufficient.” (R. Rami Shapiro, *Hasidic Tales*, p. xxi)

More than a year and a half into this pandemic, with the additional threat of burnout, I find myself thinking back to the sacred fire that we, as individuals and as a community, were able to light in the face of this global crisis. I think of the embers that allowed us to spark, and fuel, and spread a fire that kept us focused on our vision and plan. So as this pandemic continues to disrupt, impact, and transform our lives, allow me to share a few observations and a few stories about those early days and the essential embers – the attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions – that fueled our response to this terrible and tragic pandemic. In so doing, I hope that we can use this time to refocus and then refuel.

The first ember.

The Torah describes a plague that besets a home and the owner of the home is then required to call upon a Kohen (a priest) to come make an assessment of the situation. We read in Leviticus Ch. 14:

**וּיְקַרֵּא פֶּרֶשֶׁת מִצּוּרֵעַ פֶּרֶק יָד**  
(לד) כִּי תִבְאוּ אֶל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם לְאֶחְזָה וְנִתְתִּי נֹגַע צָרְעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֶחְזָתְכֶם:  
(לה) וּבֵא אֲשֶׁר לוֹ הַבַּיִת וְהִגִּיד לַכֹּהֵן לֵאמֹר כְּנֹגַע נִרְאָה לִי בְּבַיִת:

34 When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I place a lesion of *tzara'ath* upon a house in the land of your possession,

35 and the one to whom the house belongs comes and tells the kohen, saying, "Something like a lesion has appeared to me in the house,"

Our beloved commentator, Rashi picks up on the seeming tentativeness conveyed by the words “something like a lesion” and notes: “Even a Torah scholar, who knows that it is definitely a lesion [of *tzara'ath*], shall not make his statement using a decisive expression, saying, ‘A lesion has appeared to me,’ but, ‘Something like a lesion has appeared to me’” (Rashi on Leviticus 14:35). The Rambam quotes a saying of the rabbis in his explanation of this Halakha. He notes: “Teach yourself to say I do not know and you will avoid falsehood” – שמא תתבדה ותאחז – למד לשונך לומר איני יודע, שמא תתבדה ותאחז.

In the early days of the pandemic, we were blessed with humility. – כְּנֹגַע נִרְאָה לִי בְּבַיִת – Something like a plague had come into our world. In those early days, most of us refrained from using decisive expressions. We humbled ourselves and we simply did our best. Most importantly, we gave room and space for experts to guide our actions.

But more than a year and a half has passed and time has taken its toll on many of us. Partial knowledge is now mistaken for absolute expertise. Public trust is threatened by gnawing skepticism. And our patience is growing thin.

The poet Rilke, in his Letters to a Young Poet, beautifully captures the positive aspect of maintaining a humble disposition. Rilke writes:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

These days, when I catch myself being too sure of myself, I remind myself to be curious. I have begun doing so in some conversations with members of our community (and sometimes with my children as well, to their chagrin). I tell myself and sometimes others, “Is there a way of saying what you just said with a measure of curiosity?”

So that is the first ember. Let’s use humility, patience, and curiosity to reignite a steady flame in response to the darkness in our midst.

The second ember. A few tales from the Lubavitcher rebbe.

R. Mendel Kalmenson shares this story:

“A *shliach* [an emissary of the Rebbe] who was stationed in a particularly challenging location once came to see the Rebbe. The Rebbe gently asked, ‘How is your relationship with your wife?’ He then asked the *shliach* to write down the dynamics of his marriage. The *shliach* freely elaborated on his wife’s many virtues, and ended with the words ‘Perhaps I should not have been so profuse in describing my wife’s qualities.’

The Rebbe examined the page, crossed out the word “not” and underlined the word “should,” leaving the sentence to read: “I **should** have been so profuse in describing my wife’s qualities.” (Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, pp. 367-368)

In the early months of the pandemic, our sense of gratitude for the individuals, the communities, and the institutions that anchored our lives was profound. Our gratitude was profuse.

And our gratitude, more often than not, emanated from simple offerings that we once took for granted. A phone call or a socially distant visit from a friend. Our ability to pray together outdoors. A class on Zoom. A holiday gift basket. Getting the vaccine. Profound and profuse gratitude.

R. David Schochet – the president of the Council of Orthodox Rabbis of Toronto – was given this advice in his first audience with the Rebbe in 1952:

“Don’t take life for granted,” the Rebbe said. “In the morning, when you wake up, thank G-d for everything that has been given to you. Many people go to sleep at night and, when they wake up in the morning, they expect their shoes to be by their bed where they left them the night before. As they are getting dressed, they complain that the weather is too cold or too hot. Instead, they should be grateful that they are still alive, that their possessions are still with them, that a new day is beginning where they have an opportunity to do many good deeds.” (Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, p. 33)

R. Kalmenson offers this advice, following in the footsteps of the Lubavitcher Rebbe: “Create a habit of regularly offering others generous words of praise and compliment. It may not seem obvious, but every human being, no matter how accomplished or altruistic, feels uplifted when acknowledged and

affirmed. Also, [avoid] qualifying your compliments – they need not be earned, deserved, or reciprocated. Be full-hearted, not begrudging, and do not take others for granted. [...] Kindness begets kindness and generosity of spirit is contagious.” (Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, pp. 367-368)

So that is the second ember. Our fire will only be fueled by profuse gratitude.

The third ember. A story about us.

Shortly after the pandemic started, a group of lay leaders organized our CBI’s Errand Angels program. The initiative resulted in close to 300 calls that reached every community household and paired individuals, couples, and or families with volunteer shoppers and errand angels. In total over 70 volunteers participated in the initiative.

Throughout the pandemic our community delivered over 1500 Holiday baskets to every member of our community. The baskets were personally delivered by a group of dedicated volunteers...to Berkeley, Oakland, Alameda, and Walnut Creek.

During this pandemic we were blessed to hold services outdoors on a daily basis once it became permitted. In all, we held 369 services in our Alston field, serving 9711 attendees. 201 services were held indoors, once that became permitted, serving 3598 attendees. Our gatherings throughout this time provided an anchor and a frame of meaning for our members and as importantly created a space for grief and the recitation of kaddish for mourners.

Your *chesed* was also monetized.

Last year was one of our community’s most successful fundraising years. Due to your incredible generosity, this past year our leadership team could focus almost completely solely on the wellbeing of our community and members, without ongoing concern for our financial wellbeing.

And your *chesed* extended well beyond CBI.

Last year we distributed \$10,000, mostly in Israel, through *Matanot La’evyonim*, gifts to the poor. We also raised \$20,000 for Alameda’s Food Bank to provide support the needy in our midst. To cap it all up, we raised \$30,000 for GiveWell and the Malaria Consortium, an initiative in sub-Saharan Africa aimed at saving children’s life through seasonal malaria chemoprevention. It costs about \$7 to protect a child from malaria and GiveWell estimates that \$3,000 to \$5,000 will save a life. It is astounding to think that our community’s collective efforts may have saved the lives of 6 children last year. Just think about that!

Our giving...our giving of ourselves, of our time, of our resources, and of our souls, has been the third ember. Our fire can only be sustained if this year we will continue to volunteer, to attend, to deliver, to donate, to give, and to give, and to give.

The students of the Ball Shem Tov couldn’t remember how he lit the fire, what prayer he said, and at what exact place. But somehow, we merited to remember all of that:

We started the fire with humility, patience, and curiosity.

We fueled it with profuse gratitude.

And we sustained it with acts of *chesed* and love.

This is the tale that will be told about us. And this is the tale that must still guide us now.

Refocus. Refuel. And light up.