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AISHDAT DRIVES US TOWARDS GOD

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In the last *parshat hashavua* (weekly Torah portion), *V'zot ha'Berakhah*, Moses is about to die and he blesses the people. He says that from God's right hand—from the more powerful aspect of the divine—the Israelites had received *aishdat* (אִשְׁדָּת). The two words (*aish* and *dat*) are written as one in the Torah. (Deuteronomy 33:2)

What is *aishdat*?

Dat (דָּת) means law or decree. It's a word that potentially represents all of the cosmic causes and consequences linked to the Torah. It also represents Torah as the creation's blueprint, both its design tool and user's guide.

Aish (אֵשׁ), in its simplest sense, refers to fire. Here it refers to the super- or supra-natural fire, depending on one's theology, that's linked with theophany, with the visible appearance of God. But it may be more usefully understood as the energizing source of life-force. *Aish* represents the energy source that allows us to initiate movement, adapt to our changing environment, reproduce ourselves, and create the artifacts of human society and culture.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches us that *aishdat* is “fire become law”—but what does that mean?

The masterminding Divine Intelligence has “fired up” the creation, so to speak. God energized the living universe so that the natural world operates according to the Creator's laws. These laws compel and constrain all life—from the seemingly “brainless” movement of geologic formations to the apparently “mindless” wriggling of bacterium—independent of the will of any living thing.

The one exception, of course, is humankind, which is given moral free will. Unlike all other living creatures, the law is not similarly implanted in us at birth. It's mostly given to us in the Torah, to accept or reject as we see fit.

The Torah heritage, however, is not simply the written scroll; it encompasses all of the Jewish history—the price in human pain that was paid to put that scroll in our hands. So, as scripture says, “the Torah that Moses commanded us is the heritage of the *congregation* of Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 33:4)

As Rabbi Mordechai Gifter (1916-2001) points out, the Torah is not our *personal* inheritance, to dispose of as we please. It is a heritage that belongs to those who came before us—because they paid for it; and to those who will follow us—because it was bequeathed to them. We don't own it like individual proprietors own a business, free to build it up or let it languish. We own it as shareholders, with a common obligation to act for its ultimate survival and success. The mission of this Torah heritage is all of *us*, קהלת יעקב, the House of Jacob—the Jewish people.

When we take up the Torah—when we come to know it and love it truly, because in myriad ways it demonstrates the love of God for us—the fire becomes law for us too.

What does it mean to “take up” the Torah?

It means that we forego a one-day-a-week “religion” for a *way of life*, one in which we consciously put our spirits and bodies in the service of God's Torah every hour of every day.

The difficulty with this idea is that, lacking understanding of and insight into the Torah, we can hardly be inspired to place it at the center of our lives—to be willing to live and, ultimately, even die for it, using up our lives in its service.

But if there's nothing in our lives presently that we're consciously and enthusiastically willing to live and even die for, other than those we love, of course, then it's certainly worth considering.

But how is such a proposition *considered*?

We put Torah at the center of our lives only when we know it intimately, only when we see that in taking it up, the *aishdat* can drive our own day-to-day lives towards God.

But knowing and living Torah is not a solo journey; they're far too overwhelming for most of us to do alone. Realistically, we come to learn and live Torah as a congregational community.

Every congregation that seeks to instill the *aishdat*, to enable its members to strive towards God, must continually extend an invitation to learn and live Torah, offering Torah study on a weekly basis, with every member invited and ensured access to participate. And one should not need the

ability to read Hebrew with comprehension to participate in Torah study—that should be encompassed in the learning process.

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