The “Burning Heart” from the Book of Jeremiah to the Metropolitan Opera

Dr. Alan Cooper

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Dr. Cooper earned a bachelor’s degree in Religion at Columbia University. He went on to do his graduate work at Yale University, earning a master of philosophy degree and doctorate in Religious Studies. His doctoral dissertation was on the linguistic structure of biblical poetry. He also spent a year in Jerusalem as a Hebrew University postdoctoral fellow.

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A pure heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.” (Psalm 51:12)

Know that the heart is the source of life, placed in the center of the body, corresponding to the Holy of Holies, which is the center point of the world. As it says in Zohar 3:161a-b [trans. Daniel Matt, vol. 9, p. 48], “Come and see: When the blessed Holy One created the human in the world, He designed him according to the supernal precious pattern, and placed his strength and power in the middle of the body, where the heart dwells, which is the potency and nourishment of the whole body. From there, the whole body is sustained, and all the members of the body are fed. The heart is firmly connected to a supernal place above—the brain in the head, dwelling above—and one is linked with the other. In a similar way, the blessed Holy One arranged the world. He made it one body, arranging members of the body around the heart, with the heart in the middle....”

You seduced me, YHWH, and I was seduced; You overpowered me and You prevailed. I have become a constant laughingstock, Everyone derides me. For every time I speak, I shout, “Violence”. I cry out, “Terror”!

1 See also Jacob Emden (Ya’avetz; 1697–1776), Migdal oz (commentary on the siddur), “Chapter on Virtues,” s.v. ‘עליית לב טוב’ as ascent of the pure heart.’ Before quoting the same Zohar passage as Horowitz, Emden cites 58 metaphorical uses of “heart” listed in Midrash qohelet rabba 1:36 (Jeremiah 20:9 is #38 on the list). He then adds 65 more on his own.
For the Word of YHWH has become for me
Continual shame and derision.
I thought,
   "I will not mention [God],
   I will not speak anymore in God’s Name”—
But it is like a raging fire in my heart,
Shut up in my bones;
I am too weak to endure it;
I cannot.

Rashi (1040–1105)

You seduced me: to go on your mission.
You overpowered me: You made Your strong hand heavy upon me to go against my will.
and You prevailed: And You were victorious.
everyone: All the people mock me.
Every time I speak: Every time I speak to them, I must shout and raise my voice, and I do not proclaim good for them but prophecies of violence and terror.
For the word of YHWH has become for me: Therefore, they put me to shame, for they are ashamed of me.
I thought, I will not mention God: If my heart said to me not to go on Your mission anymore, the prophecy would be in my heart like a raging fire, and against my will I must go.
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**confined in my bones**: The fire confined in my bones.

**to endure**: To bear the fire.

Near the end of his life, Francisco Goya (1746-1828) was a refugee from political terror in Spain, and this drawing, *Fuego/Fuego* or 'Fire Fire', made in chalk and crayon, dates to this period. It appears in an album, along with pictures of inmates from an asylum. The drawing shows a figure who with his arms outstretched, runs, or stumbles, engulfed with fire and smoke. Is he escaping? Or raising the alarm?

Jeremiah seeks to do the former and certainly does the latter. He cries: “I will not mention God, No more will I speak in God’s Name— But it is like a raging fire in my heart, Shut up in my bones” (cf. Jeremiah 5:14: “I am putting My words into your mouth as fire, and this people shall be firewood, which it will consume”). The Word consumes Jeremiah. He is alight with it. We talk of someone being ‘on fire’ when they are consumed with passion for something. But this is not Jeremiah’s situation. He flees from the fire like the figure in Goya’s sketch. Or he runs crying ‘Fire, fire!’ [Adapted from commentary by Timothy Gorringe, Emeritus Professor of Theological Studies, University of Exeter]

Maimonides (Rambam; 1138-1204). *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:27 (concl.)

Friedlander (trans.): A person may receive a prophecy enabling him to perfect himself but not others; but he may also receive such a prophecy as would compel him to address his fellowmen, teach them, and benefit them through his perfection.

 Shamoa ḥakmon: - אפשר שיבואה מן הנבואה המ שישלם הנביא, לא沃尔א; אפשר שיבואה ממן המ שותיב ולא קרא האנשים יולמים וישפיע עליהם מעולם.
It is clear that, without this second degree of perfection, no books would have been written, nor would any prophets have persuaded others to know the truth. For a scholar does not write a book with the object to teach himself what he already knows. But the characteristic of the intellect is this: what the intellect of one receives is transmitted to another, and so on, till a person is reached that can only himself be perfected by such an influence, but is unable to communicate it to others, as has been explained in some chapters of this treatise.

It is further the nature of this element in man that he who possesses an additional degree of that influence is compelled to address his fellowmen, under all circumstances, whether he is listened to or not, even if he injures himself thereby. Thus we find prophets that did not leave off speaking to the people until they were slain; it is this divine influence that moves them, that does not allow them to rest in any way, though they might bring upon themselves great evils by their action. E.g., when Jeremiah was despised, like other teachers and scholars of his age, he could not, though he desired it, withhold his prophecy, or cease from reminding the people of the truths which they rejected. Comp. "For the Word of the Lord was unto me a reproach and a mocking all day, and I said, I will not mention it, nor will I again speak in His name; but it was in mine heart as a burning fire, enclosed in my bones, and I was wearied to keep it, and did not prevail" (Jer. 20:8, 9). This is also the meaning of the words of another prophet, "The Lord God hath spoken, who shall not prophesy?" (Amos 3:8) Note it.
Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) on Jeremiah 20:7-9

The commentators have interpreted “For every time I speak, I shout, ‘Violence’” to mean that whenever I speak words of prophecy I shout and raise my voice to reprove them and proclaim the violence and terror that will come upon them from the enemy. But it is preferable to explain “For every time I speak” to mean that whenever I prophesy to them, I have to shout “Violence and Terror” on account of the disdain and the blows that they treat me with as in the case of Pashḥur (Jeremiah 20:1-6). Because of my prophesying in the name of YHWH as God commanded me, he beat me and imprisoned me and I had to cry out, “Violence and Terror” for what he did to me. Moreover, “The Word of YHWH has become for me continual shame and derision,” to the point that many times I said in my heart, “I will not mention God, no more will I speak in God’s Name,” meaning, I will no longer utter the name YHWH or prophesy in the Name. But what shall I do? When the Word of YHWH is the spirit of prophecy that comes upon me, it is “like a raging fire in my heart, [that fire] shut up in my bones,” and it is an unendurable burden to withhold words. He said this because of the powerful fervor that excites the spirit of the prophet when he receives the prophetic spirit.
My efforts to transform myself in all ways were going well until I fell for a girl in my class named Evelyn.\(^2\) Everything about her said “cool.” [After her boyfriend graduated, Charles became the target of her affections.] It seemed odd, but I didn’t question it. Boys hijacked by hormones don’t really think, they chase. They see risk and consequences as if through the wrong end of a telescope: smaller and pushed far away. [Charles spends time with Evelyn at the house of one of her aunts. One day, when the aunt is not present, Evelyn invites Charles to a bedroom. She undresses and the two have unprotected sex.] My body entered hers and my senses caught fire. The world slowed down and my mind sped up. My body felt stiff and numb. [A few weeks later, Evelyn declares that she is pregnant. She gives birth to a baby girl, but eventually it turns out that Charles is not the father after all.]

\(Sefer\ \text{Hasidim}\) (12\(^{th}\)-13\(^{th}\) cen.) ¶172 (ed. Reuven Margaliyot, pp. 179-180)

Three evil impulses oppress man with respect to woman, as it is said, “They commit adultery, all of them, like an oven fired by a baker.... With their hearts like an oven: through the night their baker has slept; in the morning, it flares up like a blazing fire. They all get heated like an oven...” (Hosea 7:4, 6, 7).

\(^2\) From the Metropolitan Opera summary of Act II of the opera, “Fire Shut up in My Bones” (Terence Blanchard, composer; Kasi Lemmons, librettist): “Evelyn, a beautiful young girl, interrupts Charles’s reverie. Their chemistry is clear.”
Three ovens [in the Hosea passage] correspond to three impulses with respect to the woman: (1) to see her and be seen by her, the impulsive thoughts of yearning and desire for arousal.

(2) the impulse of a burning heart that cannot be quenched, in which the heart thinks continually about the woman and is crazy for her until he is with her. This is the harshest of all.

(3) Sometimes it is accomplished by means of magical spells, even if he has never seen her.
What the sages said, “the evil impulse only rules over what the eyes see” (Soṭah 8a), refers to the impulse of yearning for arousal of desire. But the impulse of the heart burning for an unseen woman is like that of a madman, and like a pregnant woman who yearns to eat something day and night, ruminating about it and forgetting everything else on account of it. That is how the matter remains constantly in his heart. Even if he just hears about her his heart rejoices, or if he sees a member of her household. Sometimes this is by way of magic, and sometimes not.

Moses Alshekh (1508-1593), Shoshanat Amaqim on Song of Songs 1:2

Let him give me of the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is more delightful than wine.
With this [Solomon] begins to reveal the yearning of God's people in this miserable exile to cleave to God. He likens the to a fair and faithful bride, beloved of the king who has sent her away from his house. She has gone forth utterly desolate, constantly ill, lovesick for her husband, “leaning upon her beloved” (Song 8:5) while recalling the champion of her youth, the love of her espousal. And it was like a raging fire in her heart, shut up in her bones. She thought “I will speak, that I may find relief; I will open my lips and respond” (Job 32:20). Perhaps God will notice me, and his affection will be aroused by the sound of my pleas. She responded with a broken heart, a burnt body, and an embittered spirit like a tempest-tossed victim (Isaiah 54:11): “Let him give me of the kisses of his mouth” as in the old days.


Also clarified by this [lesson about the Presence and the Holy Spirit] is the great value of applying oneself to the holy Torah, which is the essence of a person’s life. This is because “If not for the lobes of the lungs fanning the heart, the heart would consume the entire body” (cf. *Tikkunei Zohar* 28a etc.). The lungs are the aspect of Torah, as explained above. That is, a person has two
conflagrations burning inside him. One is positive, the other is not; and neither is beneficial.

For there are times when the heart of a Jew burns very intensely for God, like a blazing conflagration, but it is excessive and could consume him completely. Although his fiery passion is for God, since it is in excess, it is not beneficial. It is impossible to cool and reduce this flame, so that it is within measure, except through the Torah. When he applies himself to Torah, it protects and saves him, so that he will succeed in reducing this fiery passion to its proper level.

The reverse, God forbid, is likewise so. There are times when a person burns with such great desire for the temptations of this world, that this, too, could consume his entire body, God forbid. But when he studies Torah, it protects him and saves him even from the flame of this evil fire of desire that would consume him completely, God forbid.

Conversations with Moharan ¶124 (coll. by Nathan of Breslov (Sternhartz; 1780–1844)

One he asked me innocently, “have you heard words of musar from me?” He said that he couldn’t speak words of musar because every word of his was dipped and washed in tears. For that reason, he could not say musar explicitly.

At first, we were somewhat perplexed by his saying that he did not say musar, because in our opinion all
of his words were very great words of musar, like a burning fire actually. In truth, he did not usually speak words of musar overtly like preachers. Nevertheless, his discourse only pertained to service of God, and all his words actually were like fiery coals.

Anyone who was worthy to hear a word from his mouth felt as if an actual burning fire had entered within him. It is impossible to explain or represent, neither orally nor in writing, the essence of the incendiary holiness of the words that came from his holy mouth, awesome in holiness and purity. Every single word of his, even everyday discourse—and his teaching about service of God and expounding Torah even more so—illuminated and shone and inflamed like a burning fire, “flashes of fire, a very flame [of the Lord]” (Song of Songs 8:8).

For whoever attended to his words in truth and integrity, his discourse would blossom and enter within him like an actual flame, to the point that all his auditors were drawn by his words to God with wondrous attachment, with truly burning zeal for God. For most of us, it seemed that at that moment we stood before God’s awesome holy splendor, with no choice but to do other than to act in accordance with God’s will.... For the heart was exceedingly drawn to God by his words, impossible to evaluate and measure.
Even now, those who immerse themselves in the books of our holy and awesome teacher of blessed memory and gaze on them in truth and integrity certainly will have their hearts inflamed for God, because all his words are like fiery coals.

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<th>The Jews are bound to God in soul and intellect, viz., in heart and mind. In heart: the yearning implanted in their heart like a burning fire for their heavenly parent, as it is written, “The flashes [of love] are flashes of fire, A very flame of the Lord” (Song of Songs 8:8)—encompassing all the virtues. In intellect: the upright intelligence, the intelligence of the Torah. By the two of them the Jews are drawn to God—the intellect in its own right, and the heart in its own right even without instruction from the intellect.</th>
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|גם עכשו כל מי שיעקש בספרי רבנו הקדוש והזקק זכר צדיק וקדוש לברכה והיה אשר נשתכלה בד dibכ נתחתם ודיבי ילהב לוב ממא לחשו יבורה כי כל דבריו כגלחש אש:
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Shmuel Bornsztain (Sochatchover Rebbe; 1855 – 1926), *Shem mi-Shemuel* on *Yitro* for 5676 (January 22, 1916)