

Fire in the Forest

Rabbi Megan Brumer

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There is a Hasidic story about the Baal Shem Tov. It begins in a small village where the community faced great fear. People worried about their future and did not know what to do. They turned to their teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, who carried a deep spiritual wisdom.

He walked into the forest to a special clearing he had visited many times. He gathered wood and lit a fire that glowed with a quiet holiness. Standing before the flames, he prayed words known only to him, words that rose from a heart filled with trust and hope. And somehow, through his sincerity, the people found comfort and healing.

Years passed. When the Baal Shem Tov died, his student, the Maggid of Mezritch, became the leader. Again, the community felt uncertain. The Maggid went to the forest and found the same clearing. He said, "I no longer know how to light the fire as my teacher did. But I can still come to this place. I can still offer my own heartfelt prayer." And it was enough.

Another generation came. Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov heard the cries of the people. He walked into the forest, but the path had grown faint. He said, "I cannot light the fire. I do not know the prayer. But I can still find this place where my teachers once stood. I can stand here with an open heart." And it was enough.

Years later, Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin carried the tradition. When his community faced its own struggles, he did not go to the forest at all. He said, "I cannot light the fire. I cannot say the prayer. I cannot even find the place. But I remember the story. I remember the courage and the faith that my ancestors carried. And remembering will be enough."

And the story teaches that it was. What mattered was not the perfect ritual. What mattered was the intention. What mattered was the sincerity they brought.

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As we reach the end of Thanksgiving week, this story feels especially meaningful. Because gratitude works the same way. It does not depend on having the perfect words or the perfect ritual. It is not something we perform. It is something we practice.

Gratitude can look different every year. Some years we feel it easily. Some years it takes effort. Some years our tables are full. Some years they feel a little emptier. Some years we arrive with joy; some years with worry or exhaustion.

Still, gratitude begins in the same place. It begins with noticing. It begins with remembering. It begins with saying, "There is something good here. There is something I want to honor or hold. There is something I do not want to overlook."

Like the rabbis in the story, we bring whatever we have. Maybe we know the prayer. Maybe we know only a few words. Maybe all we can do is remember the story of a blessing that carried us through a hard moment.

And that is enough.

As this week closes, may we feel grateful in whatever way we are able: Maybe through words. Maybe through a quiet moment. Maybe through remembering someone who helped us. Maybe through noticing a small kindness or a piece of beauty that softened the day.

Gratitude that rises from an honest heart is powerful. It strengthens us. It steadies us. It reminds us that even in uncertain times, there is still goodness to be found.

May we carry that kind of gratitude with us into the days ahead.