

The Burning Bush

I wonder if you know what stood on this spot before there was a synagogue? Answer – one of the most vital buildings in the whole city the Central Manchester Fire Station. Established here in 1866, it stood here until 1904. It then moved to the magnificent terracotta edifice which is still standing on the corner of London Road and Whitworth Street. In 1985 the Headquarters moved to Thompson Street. At that time, I received a phone call - can you come and dedicate a memorial plaque in the forecourt of the new fire station? It's a memorial to all those firemen who gave their lives in wars abroad and the Blitz at home. They were asking me for two reasons, one: because there were Jewish people amongst those memorialised and two: because of the connection with Jacksons Row. Next to the plaque stood two others: one called a keystone - a figure of a helmeted head, looking rather mythological. The Fire Brigade nicknamed it Jackson's Head.

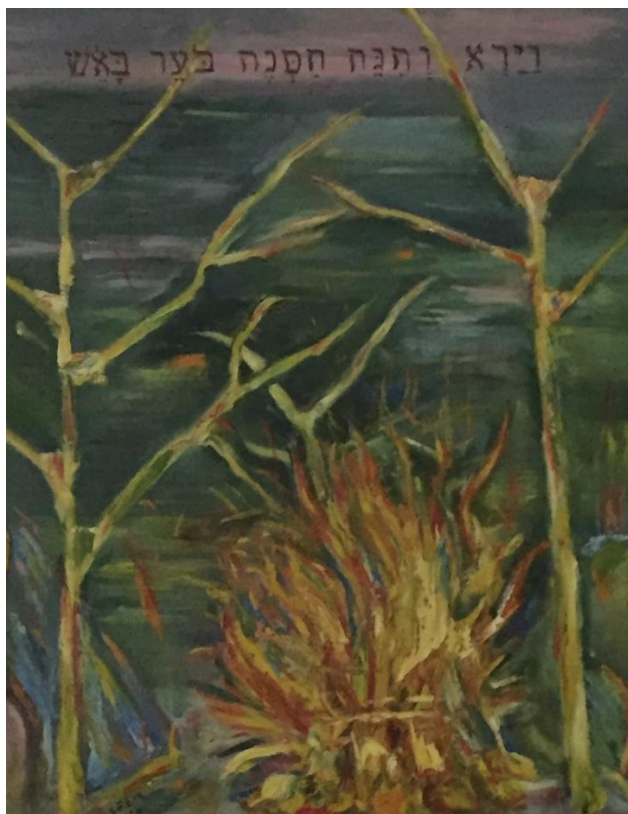
And next to it a plaque which reads: "From the former Chief Fire Station, Jacksons Row, Manchester.... A fine example of Victorian architectural sculpture, it portrays a fireman with an air of mythology represented by the long flowing hair, beard and interweaving of hose and branch pipes."



After the ceremony I had tea with the firemen. One of their officers asked me a question: if everyone is evacuated from your building during a fire, what is there left for the fire service to rescue? Before I could answer, he said – the Scrolls! Those are our instructions and we need to know where the keys are kept. I was impressed. Two of the come from former Czechoslovakia stolen by the Nazis and sponsored by our members. One is from Baghdad.

When the old predecessor of this building in Park Place Cheetham Hill, was fire-bombed in June 1941, it was completely razed to the ground. I once interviewed the former caretaker of Park Place, George Russell who described the scene of total devastation to me the morning after the Blitz bombing. All the scrolls were gone, as well as valuable archival material, records of all the names of members and their activities - gone in a night. Other local synagogues lent us their scrolls. And there are other objets d'art – the Holocaust

picture on the staircase going up to the office – the Burning Bush Picture in the Printing Room. Does anyone know at least who donated these valuable items? What would be worth doing, before we leave here is for a group of us to get together to make an inventory of all the people names here – as far as they can be remembered: in the windows, on the furniture – on the memorial boards – to make a record of who we are. I know congregations who have done this with tapestries, tableaux, illustrated scrolls and so forth.



When Moses stood before the Burning Bush; he was told, 'take off your shoes for the ground you are standing on is holy ground.' Why the removal of shoes? Scholars say that it was symbolic of renouncing ownership. True holy places cannot be owned by anyone. What makes the place holy is nothing intrinsic about the place. People sanctify places, not vice versa. And anywhere can become sacred. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes

In preparation for moving from here this is the key message. The success of our transition into our new place will depend on preserving our ties with each other and – the special objects we have and how we appreciate them and designate them potentially provide us with focal points.

After the Blitz at Park Place the people had next to nothing to remember the building by – there were notable exceptions: we have rimonim dating from 1865 in memory of Louis

Beavor— our oldest artefact. The people held together at Park Place, praying for over a decade in a prefab next to the bomb site. Please God we will follow their example – only we will have the benefit of gathering in an impressive historic building at Friends Meeting House, the wood-lined interior is in many ways reminiscent of our sanctuary here.

The Bush burned with fire – but the bush was not consumed by the flames. There is something about Eternity here: that which nothing can demolish or destroy. When one of the rabbis martyred by the Romans, Hananiah ben Teradion was burned alive wrapped in a Torah scroll, he was heard to say: "I see the parchment burning while the letters of the Law soar upward."

The Torah text is described in the Talmud Yerushalmi in a mystical way. It's called 'black fire upon white fire'. Nobody knows what that is supposed to mean. One interpretation I heard is that black fire is the letters whereas white fire is the spaces that surrounds the letters. So you not only have to read between the lines, but as Jewish commentary often delights in doing, you find meaning even between the letters!

There are many meanings attached to the Burning Bush image – like any image of picture – one of them is that it represents the people, whom Moses is anxious he will not be able to convince that they have to leave Egypt. People get attached to places – even unsafe places! Who shall I tell them sent me – and God replies 'Ehyeh asher eyheh: I am what I am' (or it can also mean 'I will be what I will be': tell them I am/I will be sent you: the One who is eternally Present.

No place, no thing, and no person is forever. There is nothing permanent except change, said the Greek Philosopher (Heraclitus). But the Burning Bush is the people as a whole through whom the Eternal speaks. And in every place where that voice is heard the people will endure.

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