

RHETORIC IN FLAMES: FIRE INSCRIPTIONS IN ISRAELI YOUTH MOVEMENT CEREMONIALS

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THE PRACTICE of lighting "fire inscriptions" (or "fire slogans," natively known as *ktovot esh*) constitutes a climactic, highly impressive celebratory gesture in the closing phase of many Israeli youth movement ceremonials. Their effectiveness as enacted cultural forms is attested to by the fact that they have been in continuous use for about half a century now, and have become an official element of other Israeli ceremonials as well, notably military ceremonials and kibbutz celebrations as well as high-profile, national occasions such as Day of Independence festivities.

In attempting to account for the particular rhetorical effectiveness of these words-in-flames, fire inscriptions are considered here as a form of ephemeral art, a category of aesthetic objects found cross-culturally in a variety of ritual contexts. In Ravicz's explication of the notion of ephemeral art, "'ephemeral' includes visual phenomena created or assembled with the conscious knowledge that they will be destroyed, dismantled, or permitted to decompose within hours, days, or, at the most, several months. 'Art' designates visual phenomena created so that they incorporate structural, decorative, or other stimulatory characteristics perceived as aesthetically rewarding to the members of the culture concerned."¹

The frequent and integral part played by repetitively used ephemeral forms in ritual communication can be accounted for in terms of their role in bridging the two fundamental, formal aspects of the ritual experience, an experience described as encompassing "carefully orchestrated packages of (1) highly stereotypic activities including familiar roles and ideas; and (2) what Turner has called mandatory improvisations, or the liminal aspects, replete with change, ambiguities and surprise."² In Rappaport's formulation, these two aspects of ritual involve the transmission of two orders of information: (1) Canonical information, which involves messages not encoded by participants, but which are part of the "liturgy." These messages tend to be invariant, durable and are mainly conveyed through the symbolic dimension of the signs participating in ritual communication; and (2) Indexical information, which concerns (or points to) participants' own current physical, psychic or social states, especially as they relate to the manner and degree of their engagement in the ritual action.³ Ephemeral art forms are designed in such a way as to combine these two types of messages: Whereas the aesthetic forms in which they are cast and the symbolic vehicles used are part of a canonical, often sanctified, symbolic idiom, they are clearly designed to affect participants' current states and dispositions through their arousal potential. Ephemeral art forms, as used in ritual communication, thus serve as a medium of a particular kind of ritual learning, in which the kinetic, cognitive and sensory systems of participants are engaged through specialized techniques and thereby "prepare the human organism to act appropri-

ately by structuring attention and learning, and by mobilizing motivations and resources.”⁴

This approach to ritual communication has its theoretical foundation in Peirce’s semiotics, specifically in his well-known trichotomy of signs, as comprising a symbolic, an indexical, and an iconic dimension.⁵ A number of anthropologists have explicitly drawn on Peirce’s approach to the study of signs in exploring cultural communication processes in recent years. A major contribution of these studies is to bring out the centrality of the indexical dimension of signs, and its role in the attainment of ritual efficacy.⁶

Clearly, fire is only one of the many materials used cross-culturally in the construction of “ephemeral art” forms. Other such forms include body-enhancing decorations of various sorts (for example, headdresses, body paintings, masks, costumes, and others), paintings on walls, structured objects, kites, and sky-writing. The analysis of fire inscriptions must, therefore, address the issue of the particular effectiveness of this specific visual metaphor in the context of the culture studied, as well as explore its shaping in verbal and emblematic signs.

SYMBOLIC ANTECEDENTS

Given the essentially pedagogical nature of ritual and ceremonial events, it is not surprising that youth movement ceremonials, with their explicit and implicit socializing agendas, should have proven such fertile ground for the intense shaping of ritual symbolism during the Israeli Nation Building Era.⁷ The centrality of the youth movement ethos in the development of modern Israeli culture is widely recognized, as is summarily acknowledged in a retrospective account by a well-known literary critic, who went as far as to say: “Anybody who wanted to belong to the new Israeli culture had to accept the rules of the game formulated within the youth movement culture.”⁸

The search for a language of word and symbolic gesture that would encapsulate the experience of a newly emerging culture in a publicly shared expressive idiom has been a persistent concern in Israel from the days of the early pioneers to this day.⁹ The youthful quest for new cultural symbols finds its vivid expression in both the documents and the literary writings of the early part of the century. Moreover, the forging of such symbols was a task explicitly entrusted to the young by members of the older generation of pioneers. For example, Berl Katzenelson, the influential leader of the Socialist-Zionist movement in pre-state Palestine, lamented his movement’s overemphasis on matters of ideological content and its neglect of form and style. In a speech delivered at the 1927 convention of *Hanoar Haoved* youth movement, he called upon the young to take the lead in generating a distinctive ceremonial idiom, noting that “people are educated not only by the contents but also by the forms of life.”¹⁰

Notably, despite the pioneers’ conscious effort to reject both European and traditional Jewish cultural ways, the task of symbolic reconstruction did not begin “from scratch,” as the revolutionary stance would have it: Traditional Jewish as well as European cultural contents and forms were selectively—though not always consciously—drawn upon in this culture-creation enterprise. The use of fire inscriptions as a ritual symbol in youth movement ceremonials provides an intriguing example of such a newly elaborated symbolic form, whose meanings and shaping can

be traced to general European traditions, specifically to the influential youth movement culture of the turn of the century, on the one hand, and to Jewish lore, on the other.

Fire has, of course, been used as a multivocal symbol in a great many cultures.¹¹ Psychoanalytically oriented scholars have adduced both mythological and clinical materials in exploring the symbolic role of fire in human experience, stressing its psychosexual underpinnings. Both Freud and Jung regard fire as a symbol of a life force (libido or energy), and Bachelard offers a phenomenological account of the human experience with fire along these lines.¹² Canetti is similarly oriented to universal aspects of fire symbolism, but transports the discussion from the realm of individual to that of social psychology, offering an intriguing interpretation of fire as a symbol of the crowd.¹³

Citing scores of fire-related practices associated with the fire festivals of Europe (and other lands), James Frazer is similarly oriented to that which cuts across cultural differences, identifying similarities in the underlying functions of fire symbols: "Whether applied in the form of bonfires blazing at fixed points, or of torches carried about from place to place, or of embers and ashes taken from the smouldering heap of fuel, the fire is believed to promote the growth of the crops and the welfare of man and beast, either positively by stimulating them, or negatively by averting the dangers and calamities which threaten them from such causes as thunder and lightning, conflagration, blight, mildew, vermin, sterility, disease, and not least of all witchcraft."¹⁴

The effect of fire was ascribed either to its function as a stimulant, ensuring a needful supply of sunshine (hence, the use sometimes made of disc- or wheel-shaped fire contraptions), or as a purifying element, a disinfectant designed to burn up and destroy all harmful influences. The fascination with fire and what were originally divinatory practices (for example, jumping over a bonfire) became part of the ceremonial idiom of European youth movements at the turn of the century, most notably in Germany.¹⁵ These practices were appropriated in one form or another by subsequent generations of youth groups, including the Jewish youth movements, whose ethos was so influential in the development of modern Israeli culture. The bonfire, and the circle of light and warmth it defines, has been a central symbol of youth movement solidarity since its very inception. The Germany poet Stefan George (1868-1933), who was an influential figure in the German youth revolution, articulated the force of the fire symbol, saying: "Who once has circled the flame/Always shall follow the flame!"¹⁶

The conceptions of fire as a stimulant and as a purifying element have both found their way into the Israeli youth movement ethos, although, of course, in a different ideational context: The cosmological beliefs of earlier times have been replaced by a highly compelling psychic metaphor. An entry in a collective diary compiled by a group of young pioneers and published in 1922 under the title of *Kehilatenu* (our community), accordingly, reads: "I believe in fire, in its enormous power, in its symbolic power. . . . Fire awakens the sleepy, it brings people closer."¹⁷

The centrality of fire symbolism in modern Israeli ceremonial idiom can only be partly attributed to the European youth movement heritage. Images of fire and light also echo deeper historical roots associated with the central role of fire in Jewish religious symbolism—from fire-related myths such as the story of Moses and the burning bush that was never consummated, which clearly brings out the role of fire

as a mediator between God and men, to central Jewish practices, such as the lighting of candles on various religious occasions, to collective memories of destruction by fire, notably the burning down of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. Furthermore, a tradition of using fire to relay messages and connect through a fire-borne act of communication, mainly in the form of fire kindled on the top of the hill, has a long history in ancient Israel. Despite the strong sense of a cultural revolution that permeated the Jewish youth movement, as it did the European youth culture in a more generalized way, a sense of continuity was nevertheless maintained through the use of symbolic media.

Fire inscriptions manifest a culturally distinctive shaping of the general theme of sacred fire: Unlike the ritual symbol of the bonfire, which is widespread in European and American youth movements, words-in-flame seem to be a uniquely inspired form of ephemeral art in the Israeli context. They echo an age-old tradition which associates fire with divine speech and in which the letters of the alphabet are the mystical instrument God placed in the hands of Man, thereby making him partner to the act of creation through the gift of speech.¹⁸ In the letter-centered Judaic tradition, the letters of the alphabet are a source of enlightenment both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, the Hebrew word for letter, *ot*, can also mean sign or symbol. This link between letters and light has found its expression in many legends associated with the bestowal of the Torah to the children of Israel: According to some legends the Torah was written as black letters of fire inscribed on white flames; other legends link the letters of the alphabet to the act of creation and the light of creation is said to inhere in them; and legends about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple describe the indestructible letters of the Hebrew alphabet flying out of the burning Torah scrolls.

In contemporary Israel, fire can be considered as a “key symbol.”¹⁹ As such, it serves to mediate between the disparate, originally mutually exclusive cultural orientations that ground modern Israeli culture, traditional Judaism on the one hand and the secular civil religions of Socialist Zionism and Statism on the other.²⁰ Thus, the fire inscriptions kindled in present-day youth movement ceremonials draw some of their force from the fire images of times past, and at the same time give renewed meaning and a new direction to the past by adding a link to this ancient fire-chain, a link shaped by the spirit of youth.²¹

FIRE CEREMONIALS IN CONTEMPORARY YOUTH MOVEMENTS

The use of fire inscriptions is the most salient aspect of the youth movement ceremonials in which they figure, and these events are often generically labeled as fire events in both formal and informal discourse (formerly they were referred to as *mifkad esh*, fire parade, and nowadays the most common designation is *tekes esh*, fire ritual/ceremonial). These ceremonials tend to be punctuated by a festive tone that stands in contrast to the gaiety associated with, for example, 4th of July fireworks displays in the USA, or the smaller scale fireworks displays in Israeli Independence Day celebrations, or the intimacy and playfulness of youth movement bonfires. The description given in this and the next section is based on material collected between the years 1982 and 1986 through participant observation (seven youth movement fire ceremonials were directly observed) and ethnographic interviewing of participants in such events.²² Additional information was drawn from discussions with Israelis of

various ages and personal backgrounds, relating to both present and past occasions of this kind, as well as a consultation of relevant youth movement documents.²³ The account offered here differs in its orientation from available sociological discussions of the Israeli youth movement, which tend to focus on ideological and social structural issues.²⁴ The focus here is on an interpretive account of enacted symbolic forms, along the lines of the "comparative symbology" approach developed by Victor Turner for the study of ritual symbolism.

Turner distinguishes among three different dimensions of meaning for the interpretation of dominant ritual symbols—the exegetical, the operational, and the positional dimensions.²⁵ In this and the next section, the first two dimensions, the exegetical and operational, will be specifically addressed. The positional dimension, which refers to the "intertextual" relations of the symbol with other dominant symbols in the culture, was mentioned in the earlier discussion of the symbolic antecedents of fire inscriptions, and will be taken up again in the concluding remarks.

The exegetical dimension consists of explanations which the actors themselves give the investigator. Discussions of fire inscriptions with participants in such ceremonies tended to lead in two directions: Comments of an historical flavor invoking the symbolic antecedents described in the previous section; and stories and descriptions relating to the art of pyrotechnics, interspersed with aesthetic evaluations of fire events that were often expressed in animated, hyperbolic terms.

Elements of such exegetical discussion, which gave the original impetus to the whole inquiry, are incorporated in the following account, but my main focus in this section will be the operational dimension of fire inscriptions as enacted symbols. In studying this dimension of symbolic meaning, "the investigator equates a symbol's meaning with its use—he observes what actors do with it and how they relate to one another in this process."²⁶ This particular focus requires a detailed consideration of the contextual features and organization of the activities involved in these fire events. Their significance will be assessed by considering them as situated enactments, whose meanings derive from the complex interplay of the words conveyed, the medium of fire in which this is done, the organization of the activities (sequential ordering, participation roles) and aspects of the physical setting. In this section I address relevant features of the situational context in which youth movement fire ceremonies typically take place, and in the section which follows I focus more specifically on the act of reading fire inscriptions.

Fire inscriptions are typically used as part of several celebratory events during the year. The most spectacular one is usually associated with the celebration of the youth movement itself—for example, *yom hashevet* (Troop Day) in the Boy Scouts or *hag hama'alot* (Holiday of Ascendance) which marks the beginning of the activity year in *Hanoar Haoved* Socialist youth movement. Other occasions, such as national holidays celebrated by the youth group, or summer camp celebrations, may also be concluded with a fire display of greater or lesser elaborateness, whose function is to elevate the tone of the occasion, endowing it with a festive mood and public standing. These ceremonies are literally framed by fire: They start out with intimations of fire in the form of candles placed in sand-filled paper sacks, which form a path leading to the as yet darkened area that participants are to occupy. The actual lighting of fire inscriptions is the climactic closing of the event. All other ceremonial acts, such as

speech making, music, and poetry reciting, are used as a means of leading up to the fire spectacle in a movement of ascending suspense.

The ideal location for such a ceremony is a relatively remote spot of natural elevation, preferably on the top or slope of a hill. When such a location is chosen, an ornamental effect is added through the scenery, as the hillslope becomes the page on which the words and images of fire are momentarily inscribed, before they turn into smoke, and disappear into nature again.²⁷ Some of the events observed in the course of this study came close to this ideal, while others used different types of locations, such as a hilltop with a monument of historical value, which the children reached after a day-long hike, or the open-air village stadium, where most important communal events take place. In all cases, an open space, bespeaking nonrestrictiveness and a closeness to nature, was chosen, and a basically ground-level orientation was maintained so that the event could embrace, or attempt to resurrect, the small scale community in a way that the use of fireworks, an essentially mass phenomenon, could not do.

Ceremonials of the type discussed usually involve two orders of participants: Members of the youth group whose celebration it is, and guests (parents, siblings and sometimes other community members). The two groups arrive independently and stand separately. The youngsters come first and stand closer to the ceremonial center, which punctuates their role as major participants and hosts of the occasion. Parental presence and community involvement is a relatively new development: The parents of today emphatically note that they do not remember such involvement in the equivalent occasions of their youthful days. Contemporary youth movements have renounced the symbolic stance of youthful separateness of times past, that was, paradoxically, accompanied by a wholehearted embrace of adult-sponsored ideologies. Nowadays, parental participation in such high-profile ceremonials is both expected and solicited through written invitations (whose program may explicitly mention the prospect of fire inscriptions). At times the guests' presence is explicitly acknowledged in a fire inscription that reads *bruhim haba'im* (welcome).

Contemporary fire ceremonials are partly a breath-taking show and partly a ritual-like shared experience, encompassing both parents-as-a-group and youngsters-as-a-group. The parents participate mainly in an audience capacity, and their representative may greet the assembled in their name. The youngsters alternate between the role of audience and of performers. Some perform in readings or music pieces (as representatives again; on none of the occasions I observed was the identity of the performers made much of). More significantly, however, they all perform as a group in call-and-response chants that occur at various points in the ceremony and which are always initiated by adults (for example as a completion marker, crowning the end of a speech, or as a controlling device used to command the youngsters' attention when it seems to wane). This differentiation in participation roles is utterly obliterated when the climactic lighting of fire inscriptions is reached and all join in a moment of shared, silent appreciation, their eyes fixed on the images that take their shape in flames.

The preparation of fire contraptions is the youngsters' province and it is in this collective task that the real test of performance lies. The inscriptions are made of big wire letters padded with jute cloth that are soaked in oil just prior to being kindled.²⁸ As the detailed instruction manuals dealing with the art of pyrotechnics indicate, the

construction of these inscriptions is considered a serious matter requiring specialized skill and much care. In some youth troops, particular individuals are considered local "masters of fire," to borrow Mircea Eliade's term.²⁹ A successfully constructed fire inscription is one that burns itself out without falling apart. Even today, when many of the fire tricks mentioned in instructors' manuals are not usually practiced, this one performance test remains. Youngsters say it is a matter of pride to construct successful inscriptions, and the gift of skill is well received by parents and community members whose representatives sound an appreciative note in praise of "the wonderful youth of this town." A similarly appreciative note can be found in some of the lore surrounding the fire-events. Year after year, I heard tales of devotion as parents praised the commitment of the youngsters who worked hard to prepare the inscriptions, and then, fearful that they might be stolen or destroyed, stayed all night in the field to keep an eye on them.

The youngsters' own fire lore sounds a different note, indicating their concern with a high level of performance in pyrotechnic arts. An example would be the story about the stupid Scouts who fastened the jute cloth with a plastic band so that it melted the moment it was touched, causing the whole inscription to fall apart. A parent's comment in response to a similarly unfortunate occasion indicates that parents are attuned to the youngsters' interpretation of the fire event as primarily a test of performance with mildly sacrificial overtones. Commenting upon a recent fire event, a parent said: "My heart broke when these inscriptions suddenly began to fall apart."

Even though the fire inscriptions are put together by the youngsters, their contents are drawn from a rather small repertoire of conventionalized expressions, whose pathos and elevated style mark them as particularly removed from the youngsters' own expressive idiom. Indeed, my young informants, who were willing to go into the details of pyrotechnics practice with considerable zest, became singularly vague when asked about the choice of messages to be inscribed: These would generally be "one of those things we always use," or whatever the troop counselor found fit. The slogans used give expression to essentially adult-sponsored ideologies and values, and are rather obviously pedagogical in intent. Notably, there is no slot at any point in the whole ceremonial in which youngsters' spontaneous self-expression is invited, or their verbal cleverness exercised, as is the case, for example, in the Boy Scout Campfire Programs described by Mechling.³⁰ Rather, the youngsters recite; sing in unison; provide set responses to set calls, which allow for no individual variation; or call out formulaic yells of the "troop x is the greatest" variety, which are, again, a form of collective self-assertion. Moreover, throughout the ceremony, the youngsters are addressed as a group, never as individuals. The change in status celebrated in some of these ceremonials involves the whole group moving up one stage in the youth movement ladder to another. Even in more spontaneous address, as in disciplinary comments made by counselors in attempting to control unruly conduct, it is common to hear the whole group addressed by its group label, which signals their age-related position within the youth movement hierarchy, and is replaced with each change in the group's status.³¹

This quiescent and participatory attitude reaches its peak as all participants join in the ritualized act of discerning and admiring the fire inscriptions kindled at the close of the ceremony. The particular form of bonding thus achieved is most telling. Standing side by side, debarred by the dark from making eye contact, not touching,

immersed in hushed silence, participants' attention and gaze are galvanized towards the fire spectacle. It is in this shared orientation to a focal source of excitement and authority that they are joined, without, however, becoming interpersonally linked. Susan Sontag has pointed out the less savory aspects of the impersonal grouping of people around an all-powerful force, arguing that it is an aspect of what she calls "fascist aesthetics," which "flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain."³² The more sinister implications of fire displays, however, were rarely mentioned by my informants.³³

Somewhat paradoxically, this highly collectivist experience is primarily constructed by mobilizing the sense of sight, the most individuating of senses.³⁴ The specifics of the uniquely structured visual experience involved are discussed in the next section.

ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF READING FIRE INSCRIPTIONS

A youth movement instructor manual specifically devoted to the preparation of fire ceremonials recommends the use of fire inscriptions since "the fixed or moving fire has a strong experiential impact on the onlookers."³⁵ Whether they take a verbal or an emblematic form, the signs used in contemporary youth movement ceremonials fall into two broad categories, which serve to anchor the ritual occasion in terms of two complementary levels of context that are operative in any communicative situation: The "encounter" level, the social situation in which the ceremonial action takes place, and the "form of life" level, the broader cultural context in which it is embedded.³⁶

The encounter level is indexed by signs that provide a definition of the situation in terms of the identity of the group celebrated (the youth movement and local troop names and emblems), and the particular occasion thus marked in the youth movement calendar. Some of the messages inscribed have a similar indexical function: *heje naxon* (be prepared) was observed in a Scouts' ceremonial; *gar'in* (youth settlement group) was observed in the Holiday of Ascendance, which celebrates members' ascendance up the youth movement ladder, until they reach the ultimate official goal of settling the land; *nizkor tamid* (we shall always remember) was observed in commemoration ceremonies in both youth movement and other contexts.

The "form of life" level of context, the cultural meanings more broadly shared by the culture at large, is invoked by signs that are good for all seasons. These may depict both traditional and newly adapted emblems such as the Star of David, the Menora (candelabra) that symbolizes the State of Israel, the image of the pillar of fire that led the way of the Children of Israel to the Promised Land (and served as the title of a popular historical TV series aired in the early 1980s), or the image of the map of the State of Israel. Alongside these emblems are found formulaic expressions selected from a more or less set repertoire of slogans and clichés: *Shalom* (peace), *hazak* (strong, a formulaic phrase traditionally used in completing the round of weekly readings of the Torah, which has assumed a general celebratory role in modern contexts). Although analytically distinguishable, these two levels of context may blend into each other. Notably, ideologically-colored slogans such as the rather outmoded *la'avoda veleama* (to work and labor), which was observed in a Socialist

youth movement celebration, are often more an index of affiliation to a particular social group than a statement of wider ideological commitment. Fire inscriptions frequently take the form of injunctions or vows—they draw their substance and force from the past as a source of shared communal values and patterns of sentiment, and yet are explicitly oriented to future action, conjuring a moment of renewed awareness and commitment.

My own and my informants' observations and memories, as well as the documentary material consulted, indicate interesting changes that have occurred within one generation with respect to the content, style, and number of fire inscriptions used in youth movement ceremonial occasions. Contemporary inscriptions tend to be less ideologically oriented, more cryptic and less elevated in style; at the same time, the overall number used in any given event has increased dramatically. Thus, an inscription photographed in 1943 in a youth movement ceremonial which read *batelem, batelem, neleh ad hasof* (we shall always take the appropriate path; literally, "in the furrow, in the furrow shall we go till the end") would be unthinkable today; not only is the message of total conformity and obedience no longer palatable to contemporary youth, but also, the language of this inscription is overly dramatic, too pathos-filled. Similarly, the photograph of a fire inscription which reads *nitka jated ledorot* (we shall fasten our hold—literally, "we shall stick a peg in the ground for generations to come") that was used in a ceremonial inaugurating a swimming pool in a young southern kibbutz in 1954, had made many of my informants smile. At the same time, photographs of a whole stadium sprinkled



YOUTH MOVEMENT FIRE CEREMONIAL, OCTOBER 1985

Photograph by Guy Katriel and Shimon Kogan

with over a dozen fire inscriptions, such as the one shown here, which are common fare today, were very surprising to older informants who have been out of touch with youth movement ceremonials since their own youth.

It appears, then, that contemporary youth movement fire ceremonials rely more heavily on the dramatization provided by the visual impact of fire than on the ritual invocation of shared values and ideological commitments. The frequent use made of group labels in a sheer assertion of existence seems to me to suggest that—given the present de-emphasis of ideology—group membership remains the most clearly shared common base beyond which no exhortation or vow can be meaningfully inscribed. Contemporary fire ceremonials are characterized by what Babcock calls a “surplus of signifiers,” “expressed primarily as a sensory overload, a surfeit of signification” which, by disrupting the complementarity of signifier and signified, calls the meaning of everything into question and playfully “creates a realm of pure possibility.”³⁷ Babcock’s comments on the semiotics of fire in firework displays seem to come in some respects close to describing the effect of the more flamboyant fire displays of contemporary youth movement ceremonials: “As pure pattern and pure possibility fireworks are the epitome of a superabundance of signifiers. They are everything and nothing or, to be more precise, a lot of sound and light (*son et lumière*) signifying nothing. And, like fireworks, a surplus of signifiers is potentially dangerous as well as entertaining and enlightening. A symbol of revolution, it is itself a revolution in, a suspension of serious and normal modes of signification.”³⁸

The underlying visual metaphor of the spectacle, however, is not the free play of fire but rather its domestication—the channeling of the ravenous tongues of flame, incessantly struggling to find their own willful shape, into the form of letters, the paradigmatic embodiment of human culture. The constant movement of the flames is an ever-present reminder of the potential danger of fire getting out of hand, and the ritual action is one of constraining it. The tension thus induced is keenly felt and often commented upon by participants. The natural, open setting in which the events take place serves to further accentuate the play of contrasts: Nature vs. culture, the chaotic vs. the orderly, the random and whimsical vs. the expected. This play of opposites, and with opposites, is carried into the structuring of the visual experience involved in the very act of reading fire inscriptions. A closer look at this act reveals some of the ways in which (as distinct from the grounds on which) fire inscriptions construct their rhetorical appeal.

The most immediately obvious contrast is, of course, the play of *light and dark*. The ceremonial center, the circle of light in which speeches are made and greetings extended, initially stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding darkness. As a result of the gradual manner in which the inscriptions are kindled, participants are faced with a crescendo of fire that then again becomes diminished in a gradual movement. The darkness/light binary contrast becomes transformed into an analogical dimension. The particular effect thus achieved is that of time stretched out, time for a moment become timeless, as in the experience of watching the sun rise or set.

Another effect has to do with the intricate play of *movement and fixity*: in reading fire inscriptions there is a reversal of the usual relationship holding between “the arrested image and the moving eye”—to use a phrase coined by the art critic E.H. Gombrich.³⁹ Rather than the eye moving along the fixed letters, the letters are moved along by the spreading fire. Once they have come into existence, the flaming letters keep waving in the wind, thus blurring their contours and further diminishing the

sense of fixity they carry. At the same time, observers make an effort to fix their gaze so as to be able to identify the imperfectly shaping and jumping letters in front of them: This is truly a case of reversal in which the image moves and the eye is arrested. As a consequence, participants become highly involved in the visual construction of the image. Moreover, a high level of outwardly directed attentiveness is maintained, which prevents them from falling into a reverie—that contemplative, inwardly directed look that is so often induced by gazing at a fire.⁴⁰ The hypnotic effect of the fire is balanced out by the alertness required by the deciphering effort.

The movement of the fire itself involves a momentary, highly evocative clash of directional orientations: The initial emphasis on the *vertical* dimension, associated with the positioning of the signs, the use of a hillslope as a preferred site, and the upward movement of the smoke is punctuated by the *horizontal* movement of flames as they run their course in giving shape to the letters.

Fire has a transformative effect when used in fire inscriptions both in terms of their material substance and in terms of their linguistic status. Indeed, as both Bachelard and Canetti have pointed out, one of the outstanding qualities of fire as a medium is that it produces quick changes in the form and substance of everything it touches, and also typically joins the things affected by it as they become welded together.⁴¹ In dramatizing the vitality of movement and change, fire inscriptions serve as a visual metaphor for a directed, rhetorically oriented, spiritual force that can bring people together in joint action as well as mediate disparate realms of experience, the realms of *inner-feeling* and of *public action*.

As forms of ephemeral art, fire inscriptions involve an extraordinary joining of *the fleeting* and *the timeless*: In what may be referred to as a dislocation of medium and message, the inscriptions give expression to what are taken to be (or strategically presented as) eternal communal values or truths, while the ritual action itself consists of their being literally consummated within minutes in a burst of flames. The contrast between the act of inscribing and the use of fire as a medium for so doing is punctuated by the gross, thing-like character of the inscriptions compared with their short, spiritualized, speech-like ephemeral life. Paradoxically, in their most grossly material state the inscriptions stand as a mere *language-potential*, as a skeletal language form waiting to be turned into *utterance*. It is only by going up in self-consuming flames that this language potential is actualized in an act of *speech*.

Thus, it seems that, ultimately, fire inscriptions provide a reflexive statement on the process of signification itself. Various aspects of this process are de-constructed and re-combined in unusual ways: The surplus of signifiers disturbs the complementarity of signifier and signified; the fleetingness of the spoken word is combined with the materiality and fixedness of the inscribed letter; the conceptions of language as form, as event and as product are juxtaposed and contrasted in the course of the ceremonial action; the nature of the act of reading as a play of eye and image, and as a variously textured activity of recognition and decipherment is probed. It is by providing an unusual, complexly structured visual experience that fire inscriptions exert their “strong experiential impact on the onlookers.”

CONCLUSION

The widespread use of fire symbolism, in the form of fire inscriptions or otherwise, as a persistent element in the rhetoric of identification that characterizes present-day

Israeli communal conversation, points to a consolidation of a public idiom of symbolic expression. In recent years, fire inscriptions have been observed (either by me or by my informants) in a variety of contexts in which their use was rather unexpected and indicated the extent to which this symbolism had become diffused: In a school-based ceremonial occasion, in a demonstration by orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, in Bar-Mitzva parties held in private suburban gardens, and—in Arabic letters—in ceremonials held by agricultural clubs whose membership consists of Israeli Arab youth. On all of these occasions, the use of fire inscriptions is clearly metaphorical and builds on the cultural definitions generally given to fire ceremonials. Paradigmatic fire ceremonials are occasions that are public rather than private or familial; they involve voluntary commitment rather than required participation; they involve messages that are consensually oriented and self-addressed rather than provocative and addressed to outsiders, and they are broadly associated with the Zionist ethos. The use of fire inscriptions on other occasions is designed to sanctify the messages conveyed, endowing them with the legitimization of an authoritative communal voice.⁴²

There has, however, been a gradual movement of desemanticization of fire inscriptions. The fire inscriptions of yesteryear would carry little validity in contemporary youth movement ceremonials, which tend to replace even worn-down slogans by explicitly indexical signs. Whereas the lure and effectiveness of the fire displays is widely recognized, the problematic standing of the kind of asemantic, ideological discourse they embody is not. As Goldschlager argues, such discourse is marked by a particularly shaky relationship to reality.⁴³ This is brought out by the little attention that is generally paid by the participants in these ceremonials to what the inscriptions say, as well as by the humorous attitude often disclosed towards those inscriptions they manage to recall. Participation in such events seems to involve a specialized interpretive norm that allows participants to discount the contents of the inscriptions. In the usual course of events, this norm is sufficient to allow participants to be duly impressed by the fire display without being disturbed by the remoteness of the quasi-canonical messages conveyed. At times, however, this gap becomes disturbingly conspicuous, as for example, in the use of the slogan “It is good to die for our country,” which was reportedly uttered by the early defender Yosef Trumpeldor on his deathbed (1920) and has since become part of Israeli official heroic lore.⁴⁴ Although by now it has become the butt of many jokes, it appeared as a fire inscription during a youth movement ceremonial held in commemoration of Trumpeldor in the middle of the Lebanon War (1983), when the whole country was torn with disputes over both its justifiability and its cost in human lives. The use of such an inscription at this particular moment in history therefore points to the degree of its semantic vacuity.

Another example, from a different angle, demonstrates the voiding impact that fire inscriptions themselves can have. Following a decree by the Ministry of Education which stipulated that during the 1985/86 school year, the educational system should make the concept of “Democracy” its focal educational theme, “democracy” appeared in one of the slogans inscribed in fire in a Socialist youth movement ceremonial in late 1985. The word replaced the third member of the tripartite formula: “Zionism, Socialism and the Brotherhood of Nations.” This substitution of “democracy” for “the brotherhood of nations” passed largely unnoticed by the participants in this ceremonial, who were highly appreciative of the impressive fire

display. To the critical observer, however, there was something eerie about the use of "democracy" in this context. The image of "democracy" exorcised into a verbal flame has little in common with the idea of democracy as grounded in a laborious, uncertain quest for reasoned discourse and considered assent. Fire inscriptions, indeed, invite participants to succumb to the all-too-human desire "to short-circuit the process of rational apprenticeship,"⁴⁵ letting the hidden flames in their hearts light up with the uplifting promise of unity and bonding. Having once gone up in flames, "democracy" can now be safely deposited into the communal bag of truths, to be periodically resurrected in an image of wire and jute cloth by some teenage "master of fire," for whom "democracy" will have become another one of "those fire inscription words."⁴⁶ Fire inscriptions are, therefore, not only shaped by the ideational contexts in which they are used, but, in turn, becoming a shaping force in them. They both embody and dramatize the gap between youth movement ideological discourse and the ideational and social worlds in which it is currently deployed. In a way, perhaps, they help to bridge it by framing this discourse as a playful curiosity, or by eroding its ideational content.

In tracing the "semiotic career" of fire inscriptions as a cultural form in Israeli youth movement ceremonials, I have emphasized their essential context-embeddedness in both cultural-historical and situational terms. Because I have regarded the use of fire inscriptions as a rhetorical act, which is part of a particular idiom of public expression, the kinds of issues I have addressed are, naturally, very different from those raised in the psychoanalytically or ethnologically oriented discussions of fire symbolism mentioned in the introduction. Whether we regard fire as a universal symbol of transformative energy, or as a universal symbol of the crowd, the fact still remains that in different cultural contexts, it is symbolically shaped in different ways, and is used in various forms and degrees on different occasions. Even the use of fire inscriptions in other cultural contexts would require a detailed analysis of their deployment as situated cultural forms to be fully appreciated and meaningfully compared with the discussion presented here.

A cultural-semiotic reading of the use of fire as an ephemeral art form thus requires that we go beyond noting the fact of its use, and pay attention to the shape it is given and the manner in which it is deployed on given occasions. Such inquiry would address both the indexical and the canonical (symbolic) dimensions of the flaming signs involved. The changes that have been noted in the enactment of fire ceremonials in Israeli youth movement contexts, with respect to the type and number of inscriptions used, the nature and structure of participation, the shift in the function of fire from a primarily sanctifying force to one that has a semantically voiding impact, all further reinforce the need for a context-sensitive approach in the study of symbols, whether they appear to be culture-specific or traceable to universal aspects of human experience. This extended case study hopefully has demonstrated the fruitfulness of such an approach for the understanding of rhetorical forms in their cultural contexts, and for assessing their critical implications.

NOTES

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¹Marilyn E. Ravicz, "Ephemeral Art: A Case for the Functions of Aesthetic Stimuli," *Semiotica* 30 (1980): 115.

²Ravicz, "Ephemeral Art," 124.

³Roy Rappaport, "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual," in *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979), 173–221.

⁴Ravicz, "Ephemeral Art," 124.

⁵Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Edited by J. Buchler (N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1955).

⁶For example, Michael Silverstein, "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, edited by K.H. Basso and Henry B. Selby (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), 11–55; David Murray, "Ritual Communication: Some Considerations Regarding Meaning in Navajo Ceremonials," in *Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings*, edited by Janet L. Dolgin, David S. Kemnitzer, and David M. Schneider (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1977), 195–220; Roy Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*; E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁷The pedagogical function of ritual has been stressed in the work of Victor Turner. See, for example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (N.Y.: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

⁸Gershon Shaked, *No Other Place: On Literature and Society* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1983), 21; in Hebrew.

⁹See, Yael Zerubavel. *The Last Stand: The Transformation of Symbols in Modern Israel* (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1980); Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Emergence of a Native-Hebrew Culture in Palestine: 1882–1948," *Studies in Zionism* 4 (1981): 167–84; Elliott Oring, *Israeli Humor: The Content and Structure of the Chizbat of the Palmah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981); Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Tamar Katriel, *Talking Straight: "Dugri" Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁰Beri Katzenelson, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: Israel Labor Party Publishing House), 189; in Hebrew.

¹¹The role of fire symbolism in various cultures is discussed in a great many scholarly and more popular sources. The main ones consulted in the course of this study are: Juan E. Cirlot *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); Ad deVries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974); G.A. Gaskell, *Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths* (N.Y.: Avenel Books, 1981); John C. Cooper, ed. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978); Richard Cavendish, ed. *Man, Myth & Magic*, Vol. 7. (N.Y.: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1970); Maurice H. Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (N.Y.: Ktav Publishing House, 1970); Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1956); *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 9, 14th ed. s. v. "fire"; *The Encyclopedia Americana*, v.11. s.v. "fire"; *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Hastings, J., ed. (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), s.v. "fire."

¹²Sigmund Freud, "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," in *The Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964); Carl G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1956); Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

¹³Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (N.Y.: Viking Press, 1966).

¹⁴James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. 3, *Balder the Beautiful* (N.Y.: The MacMillan Co., 1935), 329.

¹⁵See, Walter Laqueur, *Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); Chaim Schatzker, *The Jewish Youth Movement in Germany Between the Years 1900–33* (Ph.D. Diss., Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1969); in Hebrew; Peter Stachura, *The German Youth Movement 1900–1945* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

¹⁶Stefan George, *Poems* (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1943), 211. I am grateful to Prof. Chaim Schatzker for a helpful conversation concerning the German youth movement, and in particular for drawing my attention to George's work.

¹⁷A. Kibbutz, *Kehilliatenu*, 2nd edition (Emek Izrael: Kibbutz Beit Alpha, 1968 [1922]); in Hebrew.

¹⁸Reuven Kahana, *The Letters and Their Secrets* (Jerusalem: "Shem" Publications, 1985); in Hebrew.

¹⁹Sherry Ortner "On Key Symbols." *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973): 1338–1346.

²⁰Liebman & Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel*.

²¹The following comment by Jung, which appears in *Symbols of Transformation*, p. 165, is interesting in this connection: "It is probably no accident that the two most important discoveries which distinguish men from all other living beings, namely speech and the use of fire, should have a common psychic background. Both are products of psychic energy, of libido or mana." Jung goes on to cite a Sanskrit term (*tejas*) whose meanings include (1) fire (2) energy, vital force (3) passion (4) sharpness, cutting edge (5) spiritual power, and others. Thus, it may be no etymological accident that the Hebrew words for flame (*lehava*), for enthusiasm (*hittlahavut*), and for the cutting edge of a knife (*lahav*) come from the same root-stem. Whether the semantic link Jung discusses is universal or not, it certainly has been amply elaborated in Jewish tradition. As Jung mentions, the language of the Old Testament repeatedly links the mouth, fire and (divine) speech. For example, Psalm 29:7 says: "The voice of the Lord scattereth flames of fire," and Jeremiah 23:29 asks: "Is not my word like a fire?" The link between fire and passionate commitment specifically appears in Israeli youth movement parlance in the colloquial expression "*lihjot saruf al hatnua*" (literally, "to be burned on the movement").

²²James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979); James Spradley, *Participant Observation* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980).

²³Uri Tal, *Fire Parades* (Internal Publication of Hanoar Haoved Youth Movement, 1963); in Hebrew; Ilan Zilka, *Fire in Ritual, Ceremony and Parade* (Jerusalem: Youth Department of the Ministry of Education and Culture, 1970); in Hebrew.

²⁴Chaim Adler *The Youth Movement in Israeli Society* (Jerusalem: Sald Institute, 1963); in Hebrew; S.N. Eisenstadt, *Israeli Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967); Joseph W. Eaton and Michael Chen, *Influencing the Youth Culture: A Study of Youth Organizations in Israel* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1970); Rina Shapira and Rachel Peleg, "From Blue Shirt to White Collar," *Youth and Society* 16 (1984): 195-216.

²⁵Victor Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual." In *Symbolic Anthropology*, edited by J. Dolgin et al., 1977, 183-194.

²⁶Victor Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual," 190.

²⁷Some interesting points related to pyrotechnic arts are given in S.B. Sutton, "The Fine Art of Fire," *Harvard Magazine*, July-Aug. 1977, 19-27. According to this article, in 16th-century Italy there evolved a tradition of pyrotechnic theatrics that did not involve the presence of actors on stage. When this tradition moved up north, Teutonic productions came to reflect "the architectural preferences of northern Europe and were often skillfully deployed against dramatic backdrops, thus utilizing the entire landscape as a stage set for pyrotechnics" (p. 25). A somewhat similar spatial predilection can be seen in Israeli pyrotechnic art, which we may, perhaps, attribute to the influence of the German youth culture.

²⁸The size of the letters varies with the number of participants and the layout of the inscriptions, which generally determine the distance from which they are to be viewed. I believe that two meters by two meters would be the approximate size of a letter. The important point here is that fire inscriptions involve a magnifying effect as compared to regular writing, thus invoking a sense of the gigantic. As Susan Stewart points out in her discussion of the gigantic and the miniature, these spatial manipulations have come to be associated with the public domain and with an enclosed personal domain, respectively. Thus, the size of the fire inscriptions bespeaks publicness in a way that, for example, the lighting of many candles does not do (a ceremonial gesture I have observed in a Fourth of July celebration in a University stadium in the United States in 1979). See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

²⁹Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*.

³⁰Jay Mechling, "The Magic of the Boy Scout Campfire," *Journal of American Folklore* 93 (1980): 35-56.

³¹The call-response pattern does not always involve fixed pair-parts. For example, a highly flexible call-response pattern is reported for Black American communication in Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman, "How I Got Over: Communication Dynamics in the Black Community," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 26-39, and a partly improvisational call-response pattern was found in the Boy Scout Campfire Program described in Jay Mechling, "The Magic of the Boy Scout Campfire." The ideological and collectivist orientation of Israeli youth movement fire ceremonials stands out even more sharply when juxtaposed to Mechling's account. That this account is relevant to the larger American scene is brought out by a reading of official Boy Scouts of America literature published in Irving, Texas. For example, *The Official Scoutmaster Handbook* (7th edition), 1985; *The Official Patrol Leader Handbook* (3rd edition), 1980; *Fieldbook* (3rd edition), 1984. The stress on group cohesion is also an aspect of Israeli school culture, see Tamar Katriel and Pearla Neshet, "'Gibush': The Rhetoric of Cohesion in Israeli School Culture," *Comparative Education Review* 30 (1986): 216-31. In addition to these differences in ceremonial idiom, it should be noted that in American Boy Scout official lore not only the warmth of the circle of fire, but also the dangerous aspects of fire as a destructive force tend to be stressed (cf. *Firemanship*. Irving, Texas: Boy Scouts of America, 1985), whereas in the Israeli context fire is generally presented with a greater stress on its benign aspects, as the Helper of Mankind, see Y. Naor, ed. *The Fire* (Merhavia: Hashomer Hatzair Education Department, 1949); in Hebrew.

³²Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), 91.

³³The Nazis' fascination with fire is well-documented. For example, see Albert Speer, *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1976). In Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (Jerusalem: Keter Publications, 1985); in Hebrew, the use of fire is mentioned as an aspect of the official aesthetics of Nazism. The use of fire-crosses by the Ku-Klux-Klan naturally comes to mind in this connection. These various uses of fire stand out in their celebration of control, whereas in the celebratory use of fireworks the movement is one of release. It is interesting to note in this connection that the Olympic Torch was first introduced into the ceremonial idiom of the Olympic Games in modern times during the 1936 games held in Nazi Berlin. See Conrado Durantez "The Torch: The Great Olympic Symbol," *Olympic Review* 216 (1985): 620-27.

³⁴Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982).

³⁵Uri Tal, *Fire Parades*, 2.

³⁶Thomas Frenzt and Thomas Farrell, "Language-Action: A Paradigm for Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 333-49.

³⁷Barbara Babcock, "Too Many, Too Few: Ritual Modes of Signification," *Semiotica* 23 (1978): 294.

³⁸Babcock, "Too Many, Too Few," 296.

³⁹E.H. Gombrich, *The Image and The Eye* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1982).

⁴⁰Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*.

⁴¹Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire; Canetti, Crowds and Power*.

⁴²One example of fire inscriptions used in the context of demonstration can be found in the milieu of protest. In that case, the inscriptions retain their full semantic load. An example of this, also associated with the Lebanon war, was the use of the archaic phrase *halanetsah tohal herev?* ("Shall the sword forever devour?") in a kibbutz Independence Day ceremonial where public sentiment, which amounted to a rejection of official policies, was expressed in a fire inscription. Whereas this inscription was surely a direct statement about the war, I do not think the same could be convincingly said about the use of the slogan "It's good to die for our country."

⁴³Alain Goldschlager, "On Ideological Discourse," *Semiotica* 54 (1985): 165–76.

⁴⁴Zerubavel, *The Last Stand*.

⁴⁵Goldschlager, "On Ideological Discourse," 175.

⁴⁶Notably, in the fall of 1986, when this paper was already completed, the same youth troop again put the word "democracy" up in flames. As predicted, the term had become part of their fire-inscription repertoire.