

This week's parashah, Tetzaveh, is a continuation of the commandments begun in last week's parasha, Terumah, about how to create a *mishkan*, a sacred space for human divine interaction. Moshe receives these commandments while meditating alone at the top of Mt. Sinai, and while they are given here in the command form – *tetzaveh* means, "command" as in, "command the Israelites to do this," – they will be repeated as the narrative of how the Israelites actually fulfill the commandments beginning in two weeks, with Parashaht Vayakhel. This repetition can have eye-glazing-over consequences, but if we read closely, there is a lot of interesting content.

Tetzaveh, for example, focuses mostly on the priests - the garments that they will wear, the blood sacrifices they will perform, and the process for ordaining them. Tomorrow, Eitan will be examining what I like to call the "ick factor" of the parashah – the liberal use of animal blood as a technology for holiness. So tonight, I want to focus on the first two verses of the parashah.

The parashah opens at Exodus, Chapter 27, verses 20 and 21, with God instructing Moshe: "You shall command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over [the Ark of] the Pact, [to burn] from evening to morning before Hashem. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages."

The phrase in the first verse, "for kindling lamps regularly" is a translation of the Hebrew, "l'ha'alot ner tamid." This is one of the proof texts for *ner tamid*, the eternally shining light above the ark, here and in every synagogue around the world.

Many of us are familiar with the *ner tamid*, but that doesn't mean we've necessarily thought about why we have it or what it's for. I want to share some of the teachings from the commentators and what I make of them, but first I'd like to invite your reflections, though if you were at my lunch and learn yesterday, I'd ask that you hold back.

Anyone want to share your thoughts about the purpose or meaning of the *ner tamid*?

Many commentators take a more symbolic view of the light, comparing it variously to the Torah, the holy Temple, the human soul, and the mystical, eternal divine light that predated the creation of the universe.

One of my favorite midrashim on the *ner tamid*, from 11<sup>th</sup> century midrash Shmot Rabbah, teaches:

“Said the Blessed Holy One: You watch over My lamp, and I will watch over yours.

“What is the lamp of the Blessed Holy One? It is the Torah, as is written: “For the mitzvah is a lamp, the Torah is a light” (Proverbs 6:23). What is ‘For the mitzvah is a lamp? When one performs a mitzvah it is as though she lights a lamp before the Blessed Holy One, and revives her soul, which is called ‘lamp’ as is written in Proverbs 20:27, “The lamp of God is the lifebreath/neshamah of a person” (Proverbs 20:27). . . . See what is written, “For the mitzvah is a lamp’ . Just as a lamp, when lit, even a million candles made of wax or fat can be lit from it, so whoever gives for a mitzvah does not lessen his possessions.”

In other words, according to this midrash, the eternal light serves to remind us that each of us is called to steward the divine light which is our very souls. And we steward this through mitzvot that spread the light. Just like a candle, we spread light without diminishing our own.

So for the individual, too for the Jewish people. We are living, one might say, in a zero-sum culture, where the trend is to try take down others in order to lift ourselves up. But any claim that our humanity or well-being must be pursued at the expense of the humanity or well-being of others is a claim against Torah, against the teaching of the *ner tamid*, which shines behind me to remind us all that our souls are bright enough to allow for the illumination of others.

This is easy to forget right now. We are in a historical moment of not only rising antisemitism, but rising toxic discourse about antisemitism. In the wake of Rep. Ilhan Omar's tweets last week, and the Senate Bill 1 which aims to criminalize the Boycott Divestment and Sanction movement, many politicians are accusing each other of antisemitism, and few of those accusations stem from actual concern for Jewish welfare. Many politicians have unapologetically used antisemitic dog whistles or played into anti-Jewish stereotypes. When these same politicians call for the resignation of a colleague who happens to be a Muslim woman of color who has apologized for doing the same thing, we should be justly suspicious of their motives. When these same politicians claim that they want to criminalize BDS because the movement is antisemitic (and I agree that it is), we should be justly suspicious of their motives. We should refuse to serve as pawns in a partisan discourse, or to allow politicians to play the Jewish people and the Jewish state against other historically marginalized communities.

We should know better. As Jinna Green, a Jewish woman of color and the chief strategy officer of Jewish social justice organization Bend the Arc wrote in Newsweek today, “As a Jewish woman of color, I know both racism and anti-Semitism—and how these forces are used to pit us against each other—when I see it. I won’t fall for it; none of us should. We cannot allow anti-Semitism and the American Jewish community to be used as props to distract from our work to stop the . . . white nationalist agenda.”

The *ner tamid* reminds us that all light grows stronger when we help light up others. But it’s unfortunately difficult to remember that our light does not and cannot depend on diminishing the light of others.

In our Lunch and Learn yesterday, Lisa Ponder pointed out the importance of lighting the *ner tamid* as a constant, daily practice. In the model of the mishkan, the *ner tamid* was not a light that constantly shined in the background. It required the Israelites to keep bringing oil, and to proactively light it each evening. Perhaps the problem with the *ner tamid* that shines behind me and in most synagogues is that, unlike the *tamid*, regularly burning flame that Torah describes, lit every evening in the mishkan, our *ner tamid* shines constantly without any of us needing to make an effort to bring the light.

Solidarity requires the consciousness of the *ner tamid* of the mishkan. The project of lighting up our souls, our people and the world is one that requires constant, daily effort. Just as all of the Israelites were commanded to bring the oil for the mishkan, all of our collective efforts are needed to create a brighter world.

May we each be part of the light.