



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Tetzaveh*

Exodus 27:20 – 30:10

March 7, 2009

11 Adar 5769

In this week's Torah portion, *Tetzaveh*, the Israelites are instructed to maintain a "*ner tamid*" in the sanctuary (Exodus 27:20-21). For many centuries, synagogue architecture has almost universally placed some form of *ner tamid* or "Eternal Light" above the ark that holds the Torah.

Typically, this light is always on, glowing in a steady and comforting way during prayer services, and even when the synagogue is empty and silent. In fact, many congregants and religious school students have wondered aloud what happens if the power goes out or the light bulb needs changing.

In contrast to our image of the Eternal Light, the sanctuary lamp (*menorah*) in ancient Israel did not shed its oil- and wick-fed light continuously. Rather, as the Talmud explains, the menorah was re-kindled each evening. Each day the lampstand would be re-filled with oil, cleaned of any ash, arranged with wicking, and provided with enough oil to burn through the following night. The Hebrew word "*tamid*", in this case, indicates a sense of continuing, regular, and (hopefully) perpetual activity (daily lighting) rather than a continuous and unbroken one (constant shining).

Both kinds of light can be meaningful to us, and each can provide a different kind of inspiration. These two different images or metaphors from the Jewish tradition spark a couple of questions to think about or perhaps to discuss with someone else:

What do we experience within us or in our world that is reliably and continually alight (whether or not we are paying attention).

What do we do to keep our own flame regularly re-kindled?

We have many opportunities to kindle ritual lights: weekly Sabbath candle-lighting; at the beginning of holidays such as Passover; and each night of Hanukah, and of course birthdays. We also have our own personal moments when it is customary to light a memorial candle, for instance on the anniversary of a loved one's death (*yahrzeit*); or when returning to a house of mourning (*shiva* house) after a funeral. Lighting a candle during a time of loss, darkness, uncertainty, or fear can be an especially poignant act.

There is some darkness and fear in the backdrop for this particular Sabbath, *Shabbat Zachor*. On this Shabbat immediately preceding Purim, the regular, weekly Torah portion is followed by additional passages recalling Israel's painful encounters with a mortal threat, Amalek (Deuteronomy 25:17-19 and I Samuel, chapter 15). Then comes Purim (beginning at sunset on March 9th) and its reminders in the *megillah* (the Book of Esther) of our historic vulnerability to Haman-like characters. Rabbinic commentators have noted that God is notably absent—or at least hidden—in this unfolding drama. Our tradition acknowledges the profound and common experience of existential dread, of apparent divine absence—precisely when we may be feeling most vulnerable.

Especially when facing illness or loss, a single candle flame or a shining candelabra can be a quietly gentle yet powerful focal point. They are reminders and symbols: of sacred spaces and moments in our shared history; of cherished rites and celebrations; of passions and values we hold dear; of loved ones no longer alive; and of the spiritual dimension of life, as noted in Proverbs: “The soul of a person is the light (*ner*) of God.”

As you reflect on the questions above, and on what these lights mean to you, may you be blessed with renewed inspiration and dedication, comfort and peace.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

