

The *Ner Tamid* – What is this light? *Tetzaveh*

And you shall command the Israelites and they shall bring to you oil of beaten olives for lighting, for raising up the eternal light (Exodus 27:20)

1) The first act of service which our forefathers were commanded to perform in the Mishkan, was to light the eternal lamp, the *ner tamid*. This is analogous to the creation of the world, the beginning of which is “*And YHVH said, Let there be light! And there was light*” (Bereishit 1:3, according to Y. Leibowitz, *Seven Years of Discussion on the Weekly Parasha*). The *ner tamid* corresponds to the first light. . . that light whose source is infinite and whose power is thousandfold greater than the power of our sun. . . the light which was hidden away to serve the righteous in the future to come:

“And God called the light Day” – Are not light and day synonymous?! Learn as follows: The light which was created during the six days of Creation – to shine at day would serve no purpose, because of the great brightness of the sun; it cannot shine at night, because it was created only for day. Where is this light? It was hidden and set aside for the *tzaddikim* in the world to come, as is written (Isaiah 30:26): “*And the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold brighter than the light of the seven days.*” (Ber. Rabbah 3:6)

A bit of this light, which was hidden away for the *tzadikkim* in the world to come, flickered constantly in the sanctuary. . . . the light of Bereishit, whose source is the garment of The Blessed Holy One, the description of which hints at the wondrous connection between supernatural energies and those of earthly reality. [Chayim Rubenstein, *Oz v’Shalom*, 5763]

2) 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, “*The lamp of God is the lifebreath/neshamah of a person*” (Proverbs 20:27). And what is ‘*the Torah is a light*’? Often a person’s heart would like to perform a *mitzvah* but his evil inclination says to him: ‘Why should you perform a *mitzvah* and reduce your wealth? Instead of giving [your wealth] to others, give it to your own child!’ The good inclination tells him: ‘Give for the *mitzvah*. 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. Therefore it says, “*For the mitzvah is a lamp, the teaching is a light*’. [Shemot Rabbah 36:3]

3) This terminology for the lighting of the lamp appears in the Bible only in reference to the service of the *menorah*. The language is precise, for the *mitzvah* is to light the wick “until the fire burns on its own” (Talmud, Shabbat 21), meaning: The task of the Torah teacher is to make himself superfluous! The priest should not place the laity in a status of perpetual dependency upon him. From this we hear a warning to teachers and student to practice mutual patience and forbearance. [Samson Raphael Hirsch]

4) In the midrash on the verse, *And you shall command the Israelites and they shall bring to you oil of beaten olives for lighting, for raising up the eternal light* (Exodus 27:20) – It brings this verse, *YHVH called your name a leafy olive tree, fair with goodly fruit* (Jeremiah 11:16). There is a hidden point within the souls of Israel, of which Scripture says: *If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for treasures...* (Proverbs 2:4).¹ This inwardness reveals itself as a result of great effort, a struggle of the soul and the body, to purify the physical. Thus we are like the verdant olive tree: what an effort it is to bring forth that oil!

Now Scripture also says, *For the mitzvah is a lamp, the Torah is a light, and the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines [tochechot mussar]* (Proverbs 6:23). The souls of Israel are the wicks that draw the oil after the light. Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him, the root of Torah, is the light. Thus we read, *And they shall bring to you oil of beaten olives*—drawn toward the wick. The mitzvot are lamps, vessels in which oil and wick are joined to the light. All these elements exist within every person, just as they exist within Israel as a whole. God made humans upright, bearing within themselves the perfect wholeness of all creatures, from the deepest depths to the greatest heights. Aaron the priest was chosen to serve God; this was for the sake of Israel, for after the sin they contained a mixture of good and evil. The Blessed Holy One's counsel was to choose one person in each generation to represent purity, through whom purity would flow to all of Israel. You too can do the same. Set aside one quality, or one special mitzvah, about which you take fabulous care. Through this you will be able to draw light and effect repair for all your qualities. [Sefat Emet, transl. Arthur Green]

5) *TEZTAVEH* OFFERS US the spiritual challenge of consecration to the priesthood. We are called to be a "nation of priests," and a "light unto the nations," and are given the opportunity to take that priesthood upon ourselves consciously and dedicate our lives to serving the One, the Whole, the Holy. Within that challenge, the first requirement is a daily practice of tending the *ner tamid*, the light of consciousness. This is the steady practice of awareness that underlies all other practice. Slowly, I begin to identify not with the self that is continually changing, but with the one who is paying attention to all these changes. When the flame of awareness is burning steadily within me, it illuminates the act of perception, rather than just the object being perceived. At this point, I can begin to discern the lenses through which my perception becomes distorted; I can realize when a passing mind-state has colored my reality.

THE CHALLENGE LIES IN GLIMPING the pure light of consciousness and seeing that light refracted into the ten thousand colors of our subjective experience. That experience of reality and its drama of mortality is so interesting, so compelling, so seductive that it blinds us to the light of the eternal shining through it all. It is only through the dailiness of practice - the repeated touch of the eternal, the persistent effort of the heart, the frequent affirmations of a wider expanse - that we can begin to free ourselves from the trance of our particular drama and enter into the holiness of conscious presence that crowns this world. [Rabbi Shefa Gold, *Torah Journeys*]

¹ The "it" referred to in the verse from Proverbs seems to refer to earlier references to wisdom, discernment, and understanding.