

Quest For Fire (March 2009)

Most of us have grown up thinking of the ner tamid as an object, a light fixture conveniently placed at the front of the sanctuary. The temple I grew up in had a beautiful one, a brass fixture with a large, deep red globe; it was my point-of-focus during so many of the rabbi's sermons. Over the years I have heard many different explanations for its symbolism, "God's eternal presence" garnering the most votes. And this makes sense. The correlation of "light" and "divinity" has deep roots within Judaism as in so many other spiritual traditions. The problem is that the phrase ner tamid appears in the Torah not as an object but as an action.

The opening phrase of Parashat Tetzaveh commands: "You shall instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting—l'ha'alot ner tamid—to make the light ascend perpetually. The word "tamid", which we normatively translate as an adjective ("eternal"), is in context an adverb ("eternally" or "continually" or "perpetually"). In other words, the light isn't magical. It doesn't represent something that is beyond us, something we only look to. Lehavdil. On the contrary. The light is dependent upon us. It is our responsibility.

When I first moved out here to the East Coast there was a highly anticipated film entitled "Quest For Fire." It was, I confess, one of the more bizarre movies I have ever seen. It takes place in prehistoric times and the dialogue was composed mostly of grunts. Save the appearance of Rae Dawn Chong (daughter of Tommy Chong), the movie was—at least for me—forgettable. Except for one thing. What I remember most—which is important since it was the film's main plot line—was some caveman running across the plain with a torch in his hand. "Quest For Fire" was based on primitive man's need to capture and maintain fire, how they would do anything to keep the flame alive. Fire was, for them, a gift from above. If they lost it, there was no telling if they would ever get it back again.

Of course making light is no big deal for us. We've mastered the art. But if the light of the ner tamid is symbolic of something that is other, if it represents what we aspire to, then the command to keep it burning is more than just a physical act. To be a Jew is not something that just happens to us. There's more to it than just calling oneself a Jew; you have to live Jewishly. Like the ner tamid, being a Jew is not a noun but a verb. It's not a thing, it's a way of being.

On Friday, March 13 Temple Ner Tamid will dedicate a new ner tamid. A gift from the women of Sisterhood, this magnificent object was uniquely crafted for us by Claude Riedel of Minneapolis. Please come and help us thank the Sisterhood for this work of art that will illumine our sifrei

Torah as it captures our focus. Even more, in the spirit of what the word tamid really means, I invite you to come and celebrate Shabbat with us that evening. That's the whole point of the light fixture. It's a beacon, forever calling us to gather in sacred space. All it asks is that we show up. By so doing we keep the flame alive.