

PARASHAT TETZAVEH

Exodus 27:20–30:10

Parashat Tetzaveh continues the description of the *mikdash*, begun in the previous Torah portion. It includes commandments to create a *ner tamid*, “a constantly burning light,” above the sanctuary ark and to appoint Aaron and his sons as priests to manage the sacrifices offered in the sanctuary. Also included are detailed instructions about clothing for Aaron. He is to wear an *ephod*, a breastpiece, a robe, a fringed tunic, a headdress, and a sash. Aaron’s ceremony of ordination as priest is described, along with instructions for the slaughtering of the offerings. The portion concludes with directions for building an altar for burning incense before the ark.

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

The Israelites are commanded by God to bring clear oil of beaten olives to the sanctuary and to use it for the *ner tamid*, or “continually burning light.” Aaron and his sons are to keep the light over the ark burning continually from evening to morning.

• 2 •

Aaron and his sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, are appointed priests with the responsibility for managing all the sacrifices and offerings of the community at the *mikdash*. Aaron is to wear eight specially decorated garments

crafted by skilled artists: (1) the *ephod*, an apron of gold, of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns, and fine linen, with a belt around the middle and two shoulder straps, each containing a lazuli stone inscribed with six names of the twelve sons of Jacob; (2) the breastplate of judgment, a square-shaped container decorated on the front with four rows of precious stones, each framed and mounted in gold, and each bearing a name of the twelve sons of Jacob. The breastplate is attached by gold chains to the shoulder straps of the *ephod*; (3) the Urim and Thummim, a small box through which it was believed God spoke; it was worn by the priest inside the breastplate of judgment; (4) the blue robe embroidered with a hem of pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns with bells of



gold; (5) the gold plate engraved with the words "Holy to the Lord" and attached to Aaron's headdress so that it hung on his forehead; (6) a fringed linen tunic; (7) a linen headdress; and (8) an embroidered sash.

Aaron's sons are to wear tunics, pants, sashes, and turbans for dignity and beauty.

• 3 •

The ceremony of consecrating Aaron as priest includes leading him to the *mikdash*, bathing him and dressing him in his special garments, and pouring anointing oil over his head. His sons are also brought forward and dressed in their priestly garments.

A bull is brought forward for slaughtering. Aaron and his sons lay their hands upon its head. After it is slaughtered, some of its blood is painted on the horns of the altar; the rest is poured at the base. The fat of its entrails, the lobe above the

liver, and the two kidneys are burnt on the altar; the rest of its flesh is put into a fire outside the borders of the camp. Following the sacrifice of the bull, rams are slaughtered; Aaron and his sons are sprinkled with anointing oil and the blood of a ram. At one point in the ceremony, Aaron and his sons hold pieces of the sacrificed ram in one hand, and flat loaves of bread, cakes of oil bread, and wafers in the other hand. They wave them before God as an offering. The ram's flesh is then boiled and eaten by Aaron and his sons.

The ceremony of ordination lasts seven days. On each day the sacrifices are repeated in order to purify the priests and the altar. At the end of Aaron's life, his priestly garments and duties are to pass on to his sons.

The priests and sacrifices in the *mikdash* remind the people that God is in their midst and that God brought them out of the land of Egypt to abide among them as their God.

• 4 •

An acacia altar, overlaid with gold, decorated with horns, and carried by acacia wood poles also overlaid with gold, is to be placed in front of the curtain before the ark. Aaron is commanded to burn in-

cense on this altar every morning and evening at the time he extinguishes and kindles the lights. Once a year, he is to consecrate the altar by painting the horns with the blood of a sin offering.

THEMES

Parashat Tetzaveh contains two important themes:

1. The meaning of the *ner tamid*, or “continually burning light.”
2. The significance of the priestly dress of Aaron and his sons.

PEREK ALEF: *What Is the Ner Tamid?*

For centuries, the light hanging just above the ark where the Torahs are kept on the eastern wall of a synagogue has been called the *ner tamid*, or “eternal light.” It is part of the architecture and religious symbolism of every Jewish sanctuary. Sometimes it is an electric light; at other times it may be a flame fueled with oil. Often it is artfully crafted out of precious metal or glass.

Many commentators believe that the origin of the *ner tamid* is found in the opening lines of our Torah portion, Exodus 27:20–21. There is disagreement, however, over how the original Hebrew of those lines is to be translated and understood. Compare the following versions.

- *From The Torah, Jewish Publication Society of America:*
You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly.
- *From The Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday and Company:*
You are to order the sons of Israel to bring you pure olive oil for the light and to keep a flame burning there perpetually.
- *From The Living Torah, Aryeh Kaplan, translator:*
You [Moses] must command the Israelites to bring you clear illuminating oil, made from hand-crushed olives, to keep the lamp constantly burning.

It is clear from these three different translations that there is disagreement as to whether one light or many lights are to be kept burning. In one version, the words *ner tamid* are translated “lamps regularly.” In the other two versions, the translation refers to one “flame,” or one “lamp.” So which is the correct translation of *ner tamid*? Is it one light or many lights? Did it always burn or was there a specially designated time when it was kindled?

If one reads the original Hebrew sentence in context with the sentence that follows it, the meaning of the *ner tamid* becomes clear. We are told: “You shall command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling the *ner tamid* [continually burning lamp]. Aaron and his sons shall set *them* up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over the Pact [ark], [to burn] from evening to morning before the Lord.”

In context, it becomes clear that the *ner tamid* of the *mikdash* was a lamp with several flames. How else can we explain the word “*them*” appearing in the sentence after the command? The lamp with its multiple flames stood in front of the ark curtain and was lit every evening at sundown and kept burning through the night until dawn. In the only other reference within the Torah to the *ner tamid*, we are informed that this lamp with many flames had its own seven-branched lampstand (*menorah*). (Leviticus 24:2–4)

Later, during the time of the Jerusalem Temple, the *ner tamid* was also called *ner ma'aravi*, or “western light,” because it lit up the Holy of Holies (containing the Ark of the Covenant), which

was on the western end of the Temple. It became the custom to light six wicks of the *menorah* from sunset to sunrise and to keep one of its wicks burning *tamid*, "continually," twenty-four hours a day. When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, they carried the *menorah* off as booty to Rome. Perhaps as a reminder of the Temple's *ner tamid*, a light was kept burning in each synagogue. At times it was placed near the western wall facing the ark, which was on the eastern wall; sometimes it was placed in a container on the eastern wall near the ark. Eventually it became the custom to hang it just above the ark.

For the early rabbinic commentators, the *ner tamid* and its fuel, "the clear oil of beaten olives," were powerful symbols representing the Jewish people. For example, they point out that the prophet Jeremiah (11:16) says that God calls the Jewish people a "verdant olive tree, fair, with choice fruit." What, the rabbis ask, does Israel have in common with an olive tree, or with the clear oil of beaten olives?

The answer is not a happy comparison. The life of the olive, the rabbis explain, is a hard one. It dries and shrivels while still on the tree. Then it is cut down, crushed, ground, and pressed until it yields oil.

So it is, the rabbis claim, with the history of the people of Israel. They have been beaten, chained, imprisoned, and surrounded by those threatening to crush them. Enemies constantly endanger them. Yet they have survived because they were loyal to God, asked God's forgiveness for their errors, and repented their wrongdoings. In this interpretation, the *ner tamid* with its beaten olive oil symbolizes the cruel oppression Jews have endured and their constant faith in God. Like the *ner tamid* that burns forever, the Jewish people will survive forever despite their persecutors.

Does suffering make Jews better?

The people of Israel is likened to an olive, which yields up its oil only when it is crushed, for the people of Israel reveals its true virtues only when it is made to suffer. (Ya'akov Shmuel Khaquiz, 1672-1761)

Israel's suffering—a barometer

And just because it was always a minority, Judaism has become a standard of measurement of the level of morality. How the Jewish community was treated by the nations among which it lived has always been a measure of the extent to which right and justice prevailed; for the measure of justice is always its application to the few. (Leo Beack, The Essence of Judaism, pp. 273-274)

Pride in Jewish suffering?

The story of the Jews since the Dispersion is one of the epics of European history. Driven from their natural home . . . scattered by flight . . . persecuted and decimated . . . shut up within congested ghettos . . . mobbed by the people and robbed by the kings . . . outcast and excommunicated, insulted and injured . . . this wonderful people has maintained itself in body and soul, has preserved its racial and cultural integrity, has guarded with jealous love its oldest rituals and traditions . . . has emerged . . . renown in every field for the contributions of its geniuses, and triumphantly restored, after two thousand years of wandering, to its ancient and unforgotten home. What drama could rival the grandeur of these sufferings, the variety of these scenes, and the glory and justice of this fulfillment? (Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy, Simon and Schuster, New York, revised edition, 1961)

In another interpretation, some early rabbis suggest that the people of Israel and the olive oil of the *ner tamid* react in similar ways when mixed with foreign matter. When other liquids are mixed together, they form one substance. Not so with olive oil. When mixed with another liquid, it remains separate; it always floats to the top, above all the other substances.

So it is, say these rabbis, with the people of Israel. Their survival depends on their remaining separate, on Jews marrying Jews and creating Jewish homes in which children experience the celebration of Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Jewish survival also requires that Jews know their lan-

guage, Hebrew; appreciate their history; visit or live in the Land of Israel; and support the educational, religious, charitable, and social institutions of the Jewish community. Those maintaining this point of view argue that, when Jews demonstrate such loyalty, they are like pure olive oil, which separates above all other liquids. In other words, they rise above all other peoples of the world. Their talents grow into greatness, and they guarantee their own survival. (*Genesis Rabbah* 36:1)

“Light to the nations”

*The Jews regarded themselves as the chosen people, not because of their racial qualities, but because of having been selected to be the servants of God to carry His moral law to the world. They looked upon themselves as a covenanted people, a kingdom, not of supermen but of priests. . . . Admission into this covenant was open to all people of all races at all times, also as a matter of choice. . . . The mission was not conquest or racial mastery or territorial Lebensraum, but to be a “light unto the nations.” . . . Israel’s sole prerogative lay in carrying on an arduous and self-sacrificing moral and religious leadership. (Abba Hillel Silver, *The World Crisis and Jewish Survival*, Richard R. Smith, Inc., New York, 1931)*

Other rabbis see the comparison of the olive oil and *ner tamid* to the people of Israel differently. God, they argue, needs Israel as a source of light in the world. It is like two people walking together at night along a rocky path. One is blind; the other can see. Without a light they will stumble and injure themselves. So the one who can see says to the one who is blind, “Hold this light that I may see the path.”

So it is with God, explain some of the rabbis. God commands the people of Israel to keep the *ner tamid* burning. Its brightness and pure olive oil are to remind the people that they are responsible for God’s light in the world. Just as they need God to show them the way, God needs them to bring the light of justice and the hope for peace into the world. That is the unique purpose of the

Jewish people. God has chosen Israel, as the prophet Isaiah said, to be “a light to all the nations.” (*Genesis Rabbah* 36:2)

Still other early rabbis argue that the *ner tamid* is not a symbol for the people of Israel but for the Torah, which provides the light of wisdom and faith to all who study it. These teachers make the comparison to those who foolishly try to walk in a dark place without the help of light. Such people take the chance of falling against stones or injuring their heads against the ground. So it is with those who try to live without the knowledge of Torah.

On the other hand, those who study Torah accumulate wisdom and learn to discipline their desires by its ethical teachings. They are constantly enriched by the cultural and spiritual views accumulated through thousands of years of human experience. Such individuals provide light for themselves and for others. The *ner tamid* in the sanctuary reminds the Jew of that important lesson.

Not so, say other interpreters. The *ner tamid* is really a symbol meant to remind the Jew of all the mitzvot, all the ethical and ritual commandments one should observe in order to brighten the world. Basing their argument on Proverbs 6:23, which says that “the mitzvah is a lamp; the teaching is a light,” they point out that every good deed “brightens” the world. Each mitzvah is an opportunity to serve God, to make the world a more just and kind place for all human beings. When, for example, a person gives to charity, supports a friend in time of trouble, visits the sick, cares for the homeless, or feeds the hungry, the world is brightened with God’s light. The *ner tamid* symbolizes all the love, kindness, and generosity brought into the world by those who carry out the commandments and teachings of Torah. (*Genesis Rabbah* 36:3)

From the time the ancient Israelites installed the “continually burning lights” in their sanctuary to the creation of the *ner tamid*, or “eternal light,” of the synagogue, interpreters have found in the flickering flames a variety of messages. Symbols often evoke different meanings. They reflect the sad and joyous moments of human life, and they function like signals calling people to take on new

challenges. Throughout Jewish history, the *ner tamid* has represented a variety of meanings for the people of Israel. Today those meanings continue to challenge the faith and ethical commitment of Jews everywhere.

PEREK BET: *Priestly Clothing: Fashionable Style or Significant Symbol?*

According to the Torah, Aaron and his sons were not only appointed as priests to carry out all of the special animal sacrifices and rituals inside the *mikdash*, but he as the High Priest and his sons as assistants were to dress in uniquely designed and decorated clothing—or costumes. Aaron is commanded to wear eight different garments: the *ephod*, breastplate of judgment, Urim and Thummim, blue robe, fringed tunic, embroidered sash, linen headdress, and gold plate worn over the headdress. Each garment is to be made by artists out of the finest materials.

Many commentators questioned all this attention to the dress of the priests. Why is the Torah so concerned with costume and style?



Sarna

One answer may have to do with the role of priests in early Jewish society. Nahum Sarna suggests that “the priests are set apart from the rest of the people by dedication to the service of God, by their consecration to a distinctive way of life that gives expression to this intimate involvement with the Divine through special duties and restrictions, and by the obligation to serve the people.” (*Exploring Exodus*, p. 131)

Because they are set apart from the rest of the people by special duties, it seems logical that their priestly clothing should also call attention to their unique work and role in their society. Throughout human history, uniforms have been used to signify status, membership in a group, special skills, or privileges. Uniforms are symbols of identity. Whether they are the colorful jerseys of a football team, the blue shirts of the police, or the black robes of a judge, special attire signals not only

what those who wear it do but also whom they represent. Costumes are often badges of identity.

The garments worn by Aaron, however, appear to have a function beyond identifying him as the High Priest. Modern commentator Umberto Cassuto suggests that Aaron’s special costume was “a symbol of his consecration” to God. It was a reminder to him that he played a unique role as God’s servant. Wearing the *ephod*, the Urim and Thummim, his blue robe, and the gold plate over his linen headdress made him conscious of his sacred responsibilities. (*A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 371)



Hertz

Rabbi J.H. Hertz agrees with Cassuto. He comments that “these garments distinguished the priest from the lay Israelite and reminded him that even more than the layman he must make the ideal of holiness the constant guide of his life.” In other words, the heavy weight of all his priestly garments were a constant signal to Aaron that his duties, and how he carried them out, were a matter of great importance to God and to the people. (*The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p. 339)

Most interpreters agree that Aaron’s priestly garb distinguishes him from others and reminds him of his sacred duties. However, some suggest that each of the garments may have had special symbolic meaning. These meanings, they maintain, are rich with significant lessons.



Peli

Writing about the *ephod* and breastplate of judgment, Pinchas Peli points out that the Torah not only describes the *ephod* with its two precious stones on which are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, but it also tells us that Aaron is to wear them over his heart when entering the sanctuary for prayer. (See Exodus 28:29.)

Peli argues that much more than style and dec-

oration are intended in the Torah's description. "It seems that the design of the *ephod* and the breastplate is meant to teach us an important lesson about responsible leadership. There are many leaders who, after they are elected or chosen for high office, swiftly forget the people whom they are supposed to represent. The names of the twelve tribes of Israel were to be carried on the 'shoulders' of Aaron, so that he should never forget the burden of their needs." Furthermore, Peli explains that the symbols were to be "carried on *his* shoulders," so that he would remember "to be a loyal spokesman for them . . ." filling "his heart with love and compassion for each and every one of his people." (*Torah Today*, p. 88)



Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz sees the symbolism of the breastplate with its twelve gemstones, each engraved with the name of a tribe of Israel, not as a reminder to Aaron of his responsibilities, but as a sign of the people's holiness. Aaron, wearing his linen headdress and gold plate with "Holy to the Lord" inscribed upon it, represented the entire people when he stood before God in prayer. He and his garments, writes Leibowitz, "were not an end in themselves, but both he and the task undertaken by him in the sacred vestments constituted a means of stimulating the awareness and consciousness that Israel is holy to the Lord."

For Leibowitz, the priestly costume is meant to encourage the people to be holy—distinct in their moral standards and performance, as well as loyal to their ritual traditions. The challenge to Aaron was to fulfill all the responsibilities of the High Priest, and the challenge to the people was to be known as "priests of God." Aaron's colorful garments symbolized their mutual mission. (Comment on *Tetzaveh*; also Isaiah 60:6)

Several commentators notice that the Torah calls for Aaron to wear a blue robe underneath the *ephod*. It is to be embroidered with a decorative hem of alternating golden bells and pomegranates. As U. Cassuto points out, the pomegranate was

a "common ornamental device" among ancient Middle Eastern peoples. The bells, however, are given a special significance within the Torah's description of them. We are told that "Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out—that he may not die." (Exodus 28:35)

Were the bells really meant to save Aaron's life? What was the danger of entering the sanctuary that made it necessary for a "noise maker" to protect Aaron?

Cassuto suggests that the ancients saw the sanctuary as the royal palace of God. Just as one would never enter the king's place without a proper announcement, so one is not allowed to enter God's "palace-sanctuary" without ringing the bell. Cassuto puts it this way: "It is unseemly to enter the royal palace suddenly; propriety demands that the entry should be preceded by an announcement, and the priest should be careful not to go into the sanctuary irreverently." Among Hindus and Buddhists, bells are often used to announce the presence of worshipers in the sanctuary and the beginning of sections of prayer. The bells on the Torah crowns are also meant to signal honor for the Torah and the joy of its study. Chimes in a church often announce the beginning or conclusion of prayer. The use of sound in religious ritual is universal.



Meklenburg

Jacob Zvi Meklenburg believes that the bells on Aaron's robe represented more than an announcement of his coming and going into the sanctuary. He writes that, unlike the rest of the Israelites, the High Priest had many additional responsibilities relating to the rituals and sacrifices of the people. The bells, Meklenburg explains, functioned as symbols, warning Aaron with each step that he must discharge his sacred duties with care and diligence. They were auditory reminders. With each ring, the High Priest knew that he was an instrument of God, serving not himself but his people. (Comment on Exodus 28:35)

Was all of this attention to the beauty of the priestly garments or the expenditure of community resources for the creation of a magnificent sanctuary necessary? It is clear that the builders of the first *mikdash*, and of the Jerusalem Temples after it, used the finest materials and employed the most skilled artisans. Their standard was one of excellence. They demanded of themselves that their sanctuaries and services be beautiful.

Their motive, however, seems to have been more than the outward appearance of beauty. Perhaps they demanded that their *mikdash* symbolize the kind of world they believed they were commanded to create—one of beauty, harmony, and riches shared by all. They may have insisted also on what later Jewish tradition called *hiddur mitzvah*, a standard that calls upon every Jew to enhance each mitzvah with special enthusiasm, additional effort, and, where appropriate, the highest quality of product affordable. For example, one performs *hiddur mitzvah* when one gives charity, not only generously but in a way that protects the feelings of the recipient. The use of a beautiful silver cup rather than an ordinary goblet for Shabbat *Kiddush* is another example of *hiddur mitzvah*. For the ancients, beautifying the sanctuary was a means of uplifting it to a place of honor.

Additionally, all the attention given to the quality of the material from which the priestly gar-

ments were made, including every detail of their decoration, carries the message that valuable creations—whether a sanctuary, a worship service, a sacred garment, or a holy object—are all the result of careful, patient, disciplined hours of artistic skill and work. They do not arise magically; they do not result from indifference, laziness, or neglect. Achieving excellence and beauty requires discipline, time, devotion, and much effort.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Which of the various interpretations of the *ner tamid* is most appealing to you? How would you apply the interpretation today?
2. Would you agree that suffering improves human beings or has made Jews more sensitive to the pain of others?
3. Do you believe that “mixing” with other peoples has weakened or strengthened Jewish survival? Why?
4. The priestly garments with their colors and sounds added beauty to the sanctuary. What can we do today to add “beauty” to the ethical and ritual mitzvot we perform?
5. Which interpretation of the dress and symbols worn by Aaron and his sons has the greatest appeal to you?