

This Week in Torah *Tetzaveh*

Let's go on the record here—a *Mitzvah* is not a good deed; it is a divine imperative. A good deed is a nice thing to do; perhaps a conscious action that was rooted in concern for another. But a *mitzvah* has an Outside Catalyst—God who is the *Mitzaveh* [the One who commands]. That cognitive realization that our actions are not just nice and/or kind but essential separates a good deed from its spiritual cousin called a *mitzvah*. In the open verse of this week's *parasha*, it is clear as the oil needed for burning in the *ner tamid*: “You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly.” [Exodus 27:20]

This seems to be a simple verse—bring oil for the light that is to be burned constantly in the Temple/*Mishkan*. But the word “*zach*” [translated as clear or pure] changes the context. The one bringing the oil has to be certain of its clarity; consciously and mindfully attuned to what is being brought for this sacred purpose. The Medieval sage RaSHI believed that no lees or *schmutz* can be found in it so that it burns clean. If it doesn't, it would smoke and draw attention away from its intended purpose—that God is constantly present. RaSHI also adds that the farmer needs to be cognitive of where the olives come from on the tree to make oil without sediment. The youngest olives that usually grow at the top of the tree are more apt to not have any lees in it.

Nachmonides [known as the RaMBaN] commented that the structure of this verse places Moses in the role as a secondary or chief inspector of the oil. He noted that the verse does not include the word “speak” [*daber..*] but rather command [*Tetzaveh*] which he believed created the illusion that the imperative was from Moses and not God to show a partnership to intensify the significance of the need for clear/pure oil. Moses' role is to trust but still verify the people's actions. The 18th century Moroccan rabbi Chaim ibn Attar [better known by his pen name, *Or Chaim*] added that this was almost a plea from Moses to make sure that there was real and honest intent with a keen eye for detail. The human hand needs to have a critical human eye making sure that it is acceptable as it illuminates the reminder of God's presence.

Ok then—why does all this matter for us? Go back to the top of the column—it is the

emotional difference between a “good deed” and a “*mitzvah*” – consciously aware on the holiness of our actions. Rabbi Arthur Green of Boston’s Hebrew College phrased it this way: “The God I know is a divinity that cannot act or be realized in the human world at all except through human actions.” That’s right—a *mitzvah* is the intersection of human actions with Divine presence! To know that is the secret for righteous living!

“You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly.” [Exodus 27:20]—Be attuned to the details. Be aware of God’s imperative. Be mindful to make an ordinary act a sacred one. That is a *mitzvah*!