

The eternal light

In this week's Torah portion, *Tzav*, God speaks to Moses about the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, and says:

And the fire upon the altar shall be burning... It shall not be put out. [*Lo tikhbeh*]
... [Lev. 6:5]

And immediately, in the next verse, God clarifies:

The fire upon the altar shall ALWAYS be burning [*esh TAMID*]. It shall not be put out. [*Lo tikhbeh.*] [Lev. 6:6]

So it's not just that the fire shall be burning: It shall ALWAYS be burning. It's not just that it won't be PUT out: It won't ever GO out. You must maintain it.

Rashi says that since "it shall not be put out" is stated twice in a row, if you extinguish the fire you transgress **two** negative commandments, not just one. So this commandment must be particularly important.

The Rambam also lists them as two separate commandments, although he makes one positive (to keep the fire burning) and the other negative (not to extinguish it).

The Midrash says that the fire on the altar of the Tabernacle burned continuously for 116 years, including 39 years in the wilderness, without affecting its wood or its copper. [Lev. R. 7:5] This reminds us of the burning bush, which burned but was not consumed.

This eternal fire -- you guessed it -- morphed into the "ner tamid", found in every synagogue, above the Aron Kodesh, the Holy Ark containing the Torah scrolls. Whether powered by oil, as in days of old, or gas, or electricity, it is kept burning night and day.

Why is that light so important? Because it symbolizes the presence of God among us. Today, we just take a long-life light bulb, plug it into an electric outlet, and forget it. But in biblical days, the kohanim had to keep the flame

alive by continuously adding firewood to it. The ancient historian Josephus tells us that, in the days of the Second Temple, the people brought firewood one day a year to make sure the flame never goes out.

Nachmanides writes:

God commanded that [the kohanim] be diligent in this matter and place a great amount of wood and fuel, so that the fire burns continuously all day and all night.
[Ramban on Lev. 6:6]

Indeed, light is central in our tradition. Every week, Shabbat is ushered in by the light of two candles and leaves by the light of the Havdalah candle. Every Yom Tov is also ushered in with candles. One of the most celebrated Jewish festivals is Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, when we light candles every night for eight days, 44 in all, for each hanukiah. We remember departed loved ones by lighting a *yahrzeit* candle every year, and keep it burning for a whole day. Some communities accompany the bride and groom to the wedding *chuppah* with candles.

In the Torah, light is created at the very beginning:

Yehi or! -- Let there be light! [Gen. 1:3].

During the Exodus from Egypt, the Torah says that God went before the Israelites by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light. [Ex. 14:21]

After the happy conclusion of the story of Purim, the Bible tells us:

La-y'hudim hayta ora, ve-simcha, ve-sasson, vikar

The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honor. [Esther 8:16]

Light comes first!

Our services are suffused with references to light. On Shabbat morning, the Shacharit service proper begins with:

Baruch atta HaShem Elokenu melech ha-olam, yotser or...

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who forms light...

We quickly follow up with *Kel Adon*, the Song of Creation, where the emphasis is clearly on light. It mentions sources of light no less than twelve times in a few short lines. It mentions the *Merkavah*, or fiery chariot; the *me'orot*, or luminaries; it mentions *ziv* twice, meaning radiance; *nogah*, meaning brightness; *tsetam b'vo'am*, their rising and their setting; *shemesh*, the sun; *halevanah*, the moon; *vayizrach*, and shined; *or*, light; and finally *kol tseva marom*, all the heavenly hosts, or stars. A little later, we say:

Or hadash al Tziyyon tair, venizkeh kullanu mehera l'oro.

May You shine a new light on Zion, and may we all merit to benefit from it speedily.

And then:

Baruch atta HaShem, yotser hame'orot.

Blessed are You, O Lord, who fashions the lights.

Rabbi Jacob Emdem, from 18th-century Germany, tells us that this “new” light will be the original light of creation, which no mortal has yet seen, and that God will bring it back when the Messiah arrives.

When God charged us with our mission, He told us to become “a light unto the nations”. [Isaiah 49:6]

Now, you will notice that the light burns low, in the background, symbolizing God's presence in the sanctuary. It is hardly visible when the room is lit, or in the daytime. But nowhere does it say that the light has to be low. Yet it always is. Unwittingly, this also reflects Jewish history. Indeed, in every generation, only a minority among the Jews has kept Judaism alive, has kept the light burning. The majority did not care, or did not care enough. If we have survived against all odds, it's no thanks to most of us.

-The Midrash tells us that only 20% of the Israelites followed Moses in the Exodus from Egypt. The remaining 80%, had gotten used to slavery, assimilated and perished. [Mechilta, Tanchuma, Beshallach 1]

-And even that small minority complained nonstop and started worshipping a Golden Calf as soon as Moses was out of sight.

-Tales of Torah rejection abound in the Bible. The Book of Judges tells us that for three centuries “every man did what was right in his own eyes.”

[Judges 17:6]

-Ten out of twelve Tribes of Israel assimilated and disappeared into history.

-When the captive Jews in Babylon were allowed to return home, most chose to stay in Babylon, where they had built comfortable lives. No more than 20% went back.

-When the Greeks came, they won the hearts of millions of Jews with their philosophy and culture. One million Alexandrian Greek Jews assimilated and vanished into history.

-When the Romans drowned two large Jewish revolts in blood, destroyed the Second Temple, and forbade the practice of Judaism, Judaism hung by a thread. That thread was octogenarian rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who reorganized Judaism around prayer, study, the rabbis, and the Oral Law, and the adventure continued against all odds.

-Every century brought its own siren song, drawing large numbers of Jews away: Gnosticism, Christianity, Islam, Karaism, Sabbateanism, Frankism, etc.

-When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, only one third left, among them my own ancestors. Another third converted, and the last third had already converted. The majority crumbled under pressure.

-When the Emancipation came in the 19th century, a tidal wave of conversion and assimilation swept European Jewry. Conversion was the ticket to acceptance in the larger society, and huge numbers of Jews willingly paid that price.

-When communism came, it took millions of Jews with it, blinded by the promise of a utopian society.

-When the State of Israel was born in 1948, only five percent of POST-Holocaust Jewry was there to start the state: 600,000 Jews out of 12 million worldwide.

-The last few decades have seen lax observance, assimilation and loss of identity progressing rapidly. Tens of thousands of Jews are eager and willing to explore every "ism" under the sun, except Judaism. The many cults that have sprung up in the 60s and 70s were 30% Jewish. 30% from a group that is only 2.5% of the population!

-More than half of American-born Buddhists are Jews.

-Jews for Jesus are actively proselytizing.

-Many Holocaust survivors have covered their Jewish tracks and raised non-Jewish families.

-Many Jews, having reached positions of prominence, bend over backwards to prove they are not partial to Jews or Judaism, frequently hurting Jews in the process.

-The phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred rears its ugly head, manifesting itself in relentless criticism of the State of Israel, coupled with hostile activism, unbalanced by any praise or approval, let alone expression of love or, yes, gratitude.

Yes, in every generation, only a tiny minority of Jews has quietly ensured the survival of Judaism. The miracle is that this tiny minority is always there to fuel the light. If it skips even one generation, the light goes out.

Yes, the *ner tamid* burns low indeed, very low. BUT it keeps burning. God called it "*tamid*" in the Torah: continuous, never-ending, eternal. God also told us that all commandments are feasible, that none is too hard for us,

that we CAN do them all. So we CAN keep the light burning, and with it Judaism itself. It's up to us.

As the poet said:

Don't let the light go out
It's lasted for so many years
Don't let the light go out
Let it shine through our love and our tears.

Shabbat shalom.