Tetzaveh 5783 - Finding Our *Ner Tamid*
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There are three Hebrew phrases often used to describe a synagogue: a *beit k'nesset*, a *beit t'fillah*, and a *beit midrash*. A *beit k'nesset*, a house of gathering; a *beit t'fillah*, a house of prayer*;* and a *beit midrash*, a house of study. All pretty obvious if you think about the different roles a synagogue plays. But there's a fourth name, not often used to describe our modern synagogues: a *beit mikdash*, a house of holiness. In part, this is because the *Beit HaMikdash* generally exists in the Jewish psyche as THE Temple, as in the Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed in the year 70 of the common era by the Romans. With the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*, Judaism as Jews understood it at the time - a system based primarily on the offering of sacrifices - basically came to an end. To say it was a major, existential crisis, is likely an understatement. The world as Jews of the first century, and generations and generations prior, knew it, was completely upended. Their cities were destroyed, their holy places were defiled, and they were forced into exile.

But it was also out of this period of incredible pain and destruction and deep spiritual uncertainty that my early predecessors - the rabbis of the first century - seized an opportunity to bring their previously marginal ideas for a re-imagined form of Judaism, a Judaism not based around physical sacrifices in the Temple, but replacing those physical sacrifices with prayer, which they called *Avodah She-ba-lev*, sacrifices or offerings of the heart. Similar to the Prophets after the destruction of the first Temple 500 years earlier, the rabbis focused on the importance of living ethical, moral lives, reminding their communities that the ways in which they treated each other and the most vulnerable in their midst were as valuable as the ritual elements of Jewish practice.

In these early days of rabbinic Judaism, the rabbis also needed a through-line; some points of familiarity and connection to the ancient sites, sounds, smells, and symbols of the Temple. But they were wary of re-creating the Temple, because that was the House of God, and it had been destroyed. What they needed was something new, but with echoes of what was familiar and holy.

Though the rabbis imagined themselves as the new leaders of their communities, they did not see themselves as fulfilling the role of priests. After all, rabbi just means "my teacher," and they saw themselves as scholars who were deeply versed in the laws and statutes of Jewish text. They interpreted and debated the meanings and practical applications of biblical texts. But whereas the priests were understood in the Torah as essentially intermediaries - the representatives of God to the Israelites, and the representatives of the Israelites before God - the rabbis saw their authority more in the realm of developing legal guidelines for managing their communities' day-to-day lives through the lens of Jewish law.

In our Torah portion this week, Tetzaveh, we read about the intricate details concerning the uniform of the priests. But instead of dressing themselves as priests, the rabbis moved these

symbols into the synagogue, specifically, the Torah scrolls. Just as the priests wore finely crafted robes adorned with bells and breastplates, symbols of their holiness, the Torah scrolls were wrapped in finely crafted covers adorned with bells, breastplates, and crowns. The Torah, the symbol of the Jewish story and Jewish history, became the focal point. And, they were placed in their own sort of holy-of-holies: the *Aron HaKodesh*, the holy Ark.

At the beginning of the portion, though, before going into all this detail about the clothing of the priests, there are instructions for the lighting of the lamps that would stand outside the *mishkan*, the mobile sanctuary the Israelites carried through the desert (and which would later become the basis for the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem). We read: "You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, *leha'alot ner tamid,* for kindling lamps regularly (Ex. 27:20)." There's some debate among various commentators around this phrase, *ner tamid* - does it mean a lamp that burns continually, or one that is just lit regularly, over and over again? Rashi suggests the latter - that the lamps outside the *mishkan* were lit again every night (and later commentators suggest that it might only burn at night, not during the day). But Ibn Ezra suggests that these lamps should *always* be burning. Others reference the idea of the "*ner ma'aravi*," the "western light," which was the center light of the seven-branched menorah, that *was* always kept burning.

Regardless of the interpretation of the mechanics of the *ner tamid*, imagine the momentous work that must have been involved in keeping this light burning - or having to relight it day in and day out. It doesn't take just any oil, it has to be fueled by a special clear oil of beaten olives. This is like extra extra extra virgin olive oil. Only the best and finest oil of each press. *This* was why the Maccabees had such a hard time finding oil to light the menorah in the Chanukah story - you couldn't just pour in whatever bottle of olive oil you had lying around, this was the really really good stuff. This combination of extra-fine fuel and long hours of continuous burning also meant a great burden of human-power as well. To keep the light burning meant constant tending: it took time, commitment, energy, effort, constant attention, and a seemingly unending list of tasks to make sure there was always enough special fuel (not to mention dealing with other elements like wind or rain).

In later Jewish tradition, the *ner tamid* becomes the light that hangs just above the Ark containing the Torah scrolls, which many of us now know as the "eternal light." In its earliest form, it was also a lamp that needed constant tending and refueling to remain lit, which took various forms in various synagogues. This was one of the main tasks of the beadle in Eastern European shtetl's - not only was the beadle responsible for setting up and cleaning the synagogue, but he was also tasked with making sure the light was kept burning. Even our electric *ner tamid* in the Outdoor Chapel recently required some extensive electrical work this past summer to get it functioning properly again.

In Jewish tradition, the *ner tamid* became a symbol of the Jewish people's unwavering faith in God, or of the light of Torah, or the light of the Jewish people. And, as we look at the *ner tamid* hanging above our ark tonight, perhaps it is also a reminder of the light within each of us. Or the light that is created when we come together as a synagogue community. Perhaps it reminds us

of the work that is involved in maintaining and tending to that light: like the *ner tamid*, our synagogue community, in order to draw closer to a *beit mikdash*, a house of holiness, requires constant tending. How do we bring our very best selves and best intentions into this space? What are the different ways in which we offer our time, commitment, energy and effort into making Beth Am a place of bright light and warmth? Our synagogue community has experienced some dark days this year, but with time, attention, and loving care - for this place and for each other - we again *leha'alot ner tamid* - we will kindle a bright light that burns within us, and shines brightly in this place, continually.