



## The Perpetual Flame • Parshat Tzav

Since childhood, I have been mesmerized by the *Ner Tamid*, the permanently lit ritual lamp in every synagogue that hangs in front of the Aron, or Holy Ark. One of my favorite times of the week then and now is right after Friday night services when everyone congregates in the social hall before dispersing for the night. I often slip back into the sanctuary and sit in the front row for a few minutes by myself. The room is always very dark except for that light. When the synagogue is well-lit, it's hard to see that small lamp and the difference it really makes. To this day, I find it among the most meditative of spaces. It's a place where I go to reflect on the week past. I find in that quiet sanctuary, empty of people, a place of clarity.

In this week's sedra, *Tzav*, we have the foundational image that is captured in the *Ner Tamid* of every synagogue: "The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out: every morning the priest shall feed wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it, and turn into smoke the fat parts of the offerings of well-being. A perpetual fire (*aish tamid*) shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out" (Lev. 6:5-6). Rashi comments that one who extinguishes its flame transgresses not one but two commandments – that the fire of the altar remain lit and that it also never be extinguished. R. Abraham Ibn Ezra explains the repetition differently. The prohibition is repeated "to add that it shall not go out during the day." Even when you cannot see it, you must know that a flame is always burning.

The Hizkuni, a medieval French exegete, adds that even when the Israelites were journeying through the wilderness, the flame never went out. If you've ever tried walking with a candle, you know how hard it is to travel while holding a flame. One midrash the Hizkuni cites suggests that a metal cover was used to prevent the flame from going out. If you want to maintain the flame, you have to protect it. According to the Talmud, the eternal flame on the altar was used to light the menorah (BT Yoma 45b). One light brings more light.

Maimonides, in his philosophical opus, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, writes about the symbol of a small light as a metaphor for wisdom and the power of parables: "A person let a pearl drop in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there, but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession since he can get no benefit from it until...he lights a lamp." We often find ourselves in the dark – I can only speak personally – but we know a solution lies somewhere in the opacity, and one small light in that darkness makes all the difference.

That light that burns perpetually on the altar and in the synagogue reminds us of the flame that burned but did not consume the burning bush where Moses received his calling. It prompts us to remember the way that Mount Sinai was aflame with God's presence and also brings to mind the Chanukah menorah as a symbol of optimism amidst oppression that became the logo of the

State of Israel. These holy fires are unlike larger, uncontrolled conflagrations that we associate with darker periods of Jewish history, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in his column in *The Times*, “Somehow faith outlives every attempt to destroy it. Its symbol is not the fierce fire that burns synagogues and sacred scrolls and murdered lives. It is the fragile flame we, together with our children and grandchildren, light in our homes, singing God’s story, sustained by our hope” (“The Flame of Faith that has Survived all Tyranny,” *The Times*, December 19, 2008).

When we think of those fires that tried to destroy us, we can take comfort in an obscure detail of Jewish law. When wine libations were offered on the altar, one scholar of the Talmud was concerned that the liquid might put out the flame and cites our verse: “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, it shall not go out” (Lev. 6:6). The novel conclusion is itself telling: “Extinguishing in a partial manner is not called extinguishing” (BT *Zevachim* 91b). A sprinkle or trickle of wine is unlikely to put out the fire, even if the flames are temporarily diminished. They will soon come back to their full size and provide the same light and heat they did before. This, too, is a pearl of leadership wisdom to treasure. Our light may become temporarily dimmed by circumstance, but we must maintain the still, small flame – watched over and protected – so that it will never go out.

Is that not the ultimate function of the Ner Tamid, to let us know as a small people that we must bring light, be the light, and seek out light? That leaders must take a role in stewarding and protecting this light? Is this not what Isaiah meant when he called upon us to be a light to the nations? He was not posturing with spiritual confidence but making a statement of collective obligation: “I the Lord in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations— opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from

confinement, from the dungeon of those who sit in darkness (Is. 42:6-7). God holds our hands and points us in the direction of darkness, as if to say, “You are my partner. Now go spread your light.”

Go to where there is darkness, says the prophet, because one small light can make all the difference. The same was said of Moses as a leader: he was like a candle that provided the flame for other candles (*Midrash Rabba*, Num. 11:17). The world can be a dark, dark place. What darkness needs your light?