

Torah Table Talk

The Ner Tamid, Then and Now

Parshat Titzaveh
Exodus 27:20 – 30:10



Parshat Titzaveh begins with the commandment to prepare olive oil for the special lamp that was to stand in the Tabernacle. This oil would be used to kindle a “Ner Tamid,” a regular lamp. It continues with a description of the special garments that the Kohanim, the priests, were to wear when serving in the Tabernacle. They included a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a sash, a fringed tunic and a headdress, which conveyed a mood of “dignity and adornment,” for the priests. Finally, the Parshah describes the installation of Aaron and his sons into the priesthood.

What is most mysterious about Parshat Titzaveh is what it fails to say. It is the only portion from the beginning of Exodus until the end of the Torah that does not explicitly mention Moses by name. Why is Moses absent from this Parshah? Some sages suggest that when God threatened to destroy the Jewish people for worshipping the golden calf, Moses said, ‘if so erase me from your book.’ God doesn’t take lightly to words spoken rashly – God removed Moses from one Parshah! It seems especially appropriate that Moses’ Yurtzeit (7th of Adar) always occurs in the week when we read the only Parshah from which he is absent!

Exodus 27:20-21

You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly (“Ner Tamid”). Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over the Ark of the Pact (to burn) from evening until morning before the Lord. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout all the ages.

Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 53b

“The Lord called thy name a leafy olive tree” (Jeremiah. 11:16). R. Joshua ben Levi taught: Why is Israel said to be like the olive tree? To tell you that even as the leaves of an olive tree fall neither during the summer season nor during the rainy season, so Israel will never cease to be, neither in this world nor in the world-to-come.

Pesikta D’Rav Kahana 21:4

Rabbi Aha said, Israel is likened to an olive tree: “A leafy olive tree fair with goodly fruit” (Jeremiah. 11:16). And the Holy One is likened to a lamp: “The lamp of the Lord is the spirit of man” (Proverbs. 20:27). What use is made of olive oil? It is put into a lamp, and then the two together give light as though they were one. Hence the Holy One will say to Israel: My children, since My light is your light and your light is My light, let us go together--you and I--and give light to Zion: “Arise, give light, for thy light has come” (Isaiah. 60:1).

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov

“Beaten for light” When a person crushes his evil inclination he becomes a fitting receptacle for light; He holds within himself the pure light of the divine presence.

Pardes Yosef, Rabbi Joseph Patznovsky

Every Jew must light within his own heart a “Ner Tamid,” a lamp to the Lord. But this light does not need to stand only in the Tent of Meeting – in the synagogue and the house of study – but even

“Outside the curtain,” in the streets of the city, in the work place and anyplace where people are concerned about interpersonal relations.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does the Torah make a point of emphasizing the use of olive oil in kindling the Ner Tamid? When is this commandment supposed to be fulfilled?
2. Why do you think Parshat Titzaveh opens with this short passage? Parshat Terumah, the previous Torah portion, contains a description of the structure and the furnishings of the Tabernacle including the Menorah. Shouldn't the commandment to prepare oil for the Menorah have been included in the previous Torah portion?
3. We usually translate the Hebrew expression, “Ner Tamid,” as the eternal light. Why? How is this understanding of the expression different from the description in the Torah? When does the Torah say the “Ner Tamid” should be lit?
4. How do the sages interpret the significance of olive oil? What does it symbolize?
5. We often talk about the Jewish people becoming a light unto the nations of the world. What can we learn from the olive oil about this special role which we are supposed to fulfill?
6. The evil inclination is the predatory and greedy aspect of human nature. The sages tell us that while the evil inclination can cause havoc and destruction in the world it is a necessary part of human nature. What happens to the evil inclination when we “crush it?” What is the connection between human physical instincts and spirituality?
7. How can we light a “Ner Tamid” within ourselves?

Glossary

Rabbi Moshe Leib Sassov - 1745 - 1807, a Hassidic rebbe, was a student of Shmuel Shmelke Horowitz, Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhibezh, and Elimelekh of Lyzhansk. He was known for his love of all Jews, and for his great acts of charity.

Rabbi Joseph Patznovsky – A well known rabbinic scholar in the Polish city of Ludz just prior to World War II and the Holocaust.

Pesikta D’Rav Kahana – A fifth Century collection of homilies on scriptural portions associated with special Sabbath and Holidays.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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