



Minyan Ma'or Dvar Torah Parshat Tetzaveh - March 4, 2023

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Shabbat Shalom. My name is Morry Safer and this week's Torah portion - Parashat Tetzaveh - follows last week's instructions for construction of the Mishkan with additional descriptions of the structures, objects, and vestments used in its service.

I imagine, if we asked the children of Minyan Maor to draw their vision of a Jewish prayer space, we'd quickly see some common themes. Most would have an *aron kodesh*. Depending on if the *aron* is open or not, we'd likely see a torah somewhere in the drawing. A reading table. A shdender. Lots of chairs. Maybe it would include some people in key places - leading, sitting up front, sitting with families - perhaps a witty and good-looking *darshan*. And I would expect many would remember to include a *ner tamid*. In my experience, children of a certain age are commonly obsessed with the *ner tamid*.

The phrase "*ner tamid*" is introduced in the first verse of this week's parasha:

וְאֵתָהּ תִצְנֶנָּה | אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ כִּתִּית לַמָּאֹר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד:

You shall instruct the Israelites to bring you clear, pure, beaten olive oil for lighting, for raising up the *ner tamid*. (27:20)

"*Ner Tamid*" appears exactly one other time in the Torah, in the 24th chapter of

the book of Leviticus which we read as Parashat Emor, repeating nearly identical phrasing about the required purity of olive oil.

From these two verses we derive the *ner tamid* as a precious symbol of Jewish continuity. Often used in names and logos of synagogues, schools, yeshivot, and other communities which value torah study, the idea of the eternal light of the torah is a powerful and enduring image. The ever-present light in our prayer spaces, connects us to parents, grandparents, and generations unknown. And for those who have joined our Jewish peoplehood more recently, the *ner tamid* may serve as a solemn reminder of the rich history and heritage acquired in embracing a tradition spanning the ages. On this Shabbat Zachor, when we are reminded in advance of Purim of all the times our Amalekite enemies have risen up against us, and following exactly one week after the high-alert of the anti-semitic “Day of Hate” this past shabbat, the timing of the textual introduction of the *ner tamid* imbues additional power as the continued glow over our prayer community proudly proclaims *am Yisrael chai*.

In my experience, there is a unique sensation of arriving in a darkened synagogue or chapel, illuminated by only the glow of the *ner tamid* and perhaps the yahrzeit memorial lights. Of course, the more time spent in such spaces, the more likely you are to run into a “burnt out” *ner tamid*. Growing up in the age of incandescent light bulbs, the *ner tamid* would regularly need replacing. I can imagine in earlier ages of candles and oil lamps, these burn-outs would be much more frequent. As an elementary student, I remember the shock of realizing our chapel *ner tamid* was wired on a light switch, as if turning it off would ever be necessary. And in our Minyan Ma’or prayer space here in Reisman, our *ner tamid* is plugged and unplugged as the room is reset every week.

So, given the core association with the eternality of the *ner tamid* and given the real-world requirements that it should occasionally need to be re-lit, what is the *halachah* regarding the rekindling of an extinguished *ner tamid*?

As every Olympic flame can trace its origins to a solar-ignition ceremony at the Greek Temple of Hera, it is easy to imagine a parallel midrash involving a special

fleet of El Al planes distributing flames around the world from some origin in Jerusalem. The reality, of course, is much more mundane. Candles and light bulbs are replaced. Oil lamps are refilled. Plugs are plugged in and switches are switched on. If you are looking for ceremony or special prayers or specific instruction on order or timing or process, you'll come away disappointed. Despite exhaustive discussions about the oil itself, the Mishnah is silent on what one should do should the *ner tamid* ever burn out. As is the Talmud. Rashi, too, has nothing to say (for once). And Rambam's Mishnei Torah, detailing so many aspects of Jewish practice, doesn't even consider the issues of a burnt-out *ner tamid*.

The truth is that the *ner tamid* as we know it today is a pretty modern invention. The earliest mention of a synagogue having a specific light known as a "*ner tamid*" doesn't appear in rabbinic literature until the 17th century. One origin story hypothesizes that the first *ner tamid* was copied from the aesthetic of the local church – and then quickly reproduced as newly constructed synagogues borrowed from the styles of those before. In one early reference, the Rabbi of Ferrara, Italy writes: "There is no requirement to have a Ner Tamid in the synagogue except during the time of prayer." thus further debunking the mythology of the Ner Tamid as an eternal, inextinguishable flame.

Revisiting the verse in the Torah, it is increasingly difficult to parse a "*ner tamid*" as an "eternal flame". While the words do appear consecutively, their assigned trope is disjunctive rather than conjunctive. Instead of reading, as one might expect, *la'alot — ner tamid*, commonly translated as raising up an eternal flame, the verse is actually parsed as: *la'alot ner — tamid*, to raise up the flame eternally. *Tamid* is not an adjective on the eternality of the flame, but rather an adverb describing the eternally repeating action of raising up or rekindling the flame. This is consistent with the more famous Mishkan-related use of the word *Tamid* to describe the regular sacrifice which was brought daily. The only thing that is *Tamid* – that is eternal – about our modern-day Ner Tamid is its expected presence in our synagogues. Otherwise, the process of lighting and extinguishing seems built in even from its origins in the parasha.

The mishnah, not surprisingly in the tractate entitled Tamid, describes a lottery as part of the daily sacrificial activities, where one Levite would be assigned to clean the ashes of the previous day from the *menorat maor* - the candelabra, and add oil necessary, *leha'alot*, to relight it, lifting up the flames to begin the day anew. As part of their service, the Levites would commonly sing *shir hama'alot* - Songs of Ascension. The daily sacrifices, intended to ascend to the Heavens were accompanied by individual songs and actions symbolically elevating the status of the entire community.

So for the kids and adults alike who find so much grandeur and deep meaning in the symbolism of the ner tamid as an eternal flame, what is left after such a debunking? Instead of a passive inheritance as we commonly consider it, the *ner tamid* more accurately represents a call to action passed through the generations. In this model, an extinguished ner tamid is not a crisis but an opportunity. In a literal sense, to re-light the ner tamid in advance of any prayer service is a permanent *toranut* assignment for whoever arrives first. But in the abstract, this concept of ner tamid requires a relighting and recommitment to our Jewishness on a daily basis. It is in that regular and daily action, be it prayer, study, tzedakah, social action, or family commitments that we symbolically and eternally raise up the flame originated in the Mishkan. And in reenacting the rekindling of the *ma'or* - the candelabra - of the Mishkan, may we grow strength every day for ourselves and for our larger Minyan Ma'or community.

Shabbat shalom.