

Parsha: Tetsave

Tetzave (Shemot/Exodus) 27:20-30:10

This week's parsha, Tetzaveh, begins with the following direction given by God to Moshe:

וְאֵתָהּ תִצְוֶה | אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָרָה כְּתִיב לְמַאֲוֹר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד:

You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling a ner tamid , an eternal light (also translated as “for kindling lamps regularly”).

It builds on last week's parsha's description of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, or where God will dwell. Note the same root of the word Mishkan “משכן” with the name given for Divine presence – Shekhinah “שכינה”, both from the root to dwell or reside “ש-כ-נ”.

This verse, along with the verse that follows it, tells us that the Israelites are to ensure that there is sufficient good oil to maintain a ner tamid, an eternal light (lit throughout the day and night) that the priests, the kohanim, are to set up within the heart of the Mishkan, the Ohel Moed (the Tent of Meeting). The Israelites are to keep this light burning throughout the generations, for all time, חֲקַת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵם.

This week is also a special Shabbat called Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance (one of four special shabbatot that come in the lead up to Passover, the holiday of redemption). And for the maftir we read a particular passage of Torah – Deuteronomy 25: 17-19:

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְּלִיק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצִאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey after you left Mitzrayim. How he surprised you on the march, and cut down all the weak ones who were behind. When you were famished and weary and were not God fearing. Therefore, when Adonai your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you; in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion. You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the Heavens. Do not forget! (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)

Tradition teaches us that Haman is descended from Amalek, and that before we celebrate Purim, we must remember that God will not be at ease until Amalek – represented as a symbol of cruelty to the weak, or the different, or the marginalized – is blotted out.

A teaching from the Hasidic source Iturei Torah (on parsha Zakhor) highlights what happens when we fail to care for each other, in interpreting why we must both blot out and remember Amalek:

Had the children of Israel not forgotten about the slower ones in back but instead, brought them closer under the protecting wings of God's Presence, binding the slower to all of Israel, the Amalekites would not have succeeded in their attack. But because you allowed the slower ones to be aharekha (meaning both "behind you" and "other"), that you separated them off from you and made them "other", and you forgot about your brothers and sisters, Amalek could viciously attack them. Therefore, the Torah tells us to remember Amalek, so that we never forget to bring our brothers and sisters who need special attention into our midst.

In this piece of Torah we are commanded to work for the end of oppression to all those who may be left behind. Today that work is ever more important.

And this passage connects meaningfully to the ner tamid, the eternal light, set out in Exodus 27:20. The Book of Proverbs teaches, "A mitzvah is a candle, and the Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23) and "A candle of God is the soul of man" (Proverbs 20:27). We have this light, this spark within each of us – we may call it our God-spark, what makes us b'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image. When we care for each other, when we pursue

Torah and do mitzvot, when we work to heal our world, our sparks shine brightly, illuminating all around.

19th Hasidic master Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (known as the Sefat Emet for his main works), explained that doing a mitzvah is like lighting an internal candle and making a home, within us and around us, for God:

“Doing a mitzvah is like lighting a candle before God – it is preparing a place where God’s glorious presence can dwell. By means of this you enliven your soul, the candle... The more light a person brings about in the physical darkness, through doing the mitzvot, the more that one will enlighten one’s soul from the light above” (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, Sefat Emet, Parashat T’tzavveh).

This Shabbat Zachor, inspired by parsha Tetzaveh and the ner talmid, may we all strive to #BeALight and work so that no one is left behind