

Once again, I'm thrilled and in awe of the richness and the multi-layeredness of every single verse of a Torah passage. This Shabbat's parashah opens with the verse: "You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you pure oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps continually." (Ex 27:20). I'm not exaggerating, but this verse raises so many questions, provides so many thought-provoking impulses, leads to so many theological reflections that I could by no means cover more than a fraction of those in my thoughts today. If I were to reflect the same passage on Shabbat Tezaveh next year, I would be happy to again elaborate on this single verse. And it would be a completely new and different derasha. Our sages note something obvious, which is not obvious to today's readers, the conspicuous absence of the name Moshe in this parashah. It is actually the only parashah in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, where Moshe is not mentioned by name. And naturally our sages ask "why?" Is it because of Moshe's plead for divine forgiveness after the people of Israel had made themselves a molten calf, when Moshe says to HaShem: Now if You forgive their sin well and good; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written." (Ex 32:32) Is it a notion of punishment? No, other sages conclude, it is not. On the contrary. The Lubavitscher Rebbe emphasizes that this intercession was one Moshe's most glorious moments, risking his own life and future. It is proof of Moshe's devotedness. Other commentators reflect on the strange order of words in the beginning of the verse, *ve'ata tetzaveh*, "and you command." This wording differs significantly from the wording, we are used to reading, *vayomer Adonai el Moshe*, and Adonai spoke to Moshe. Our sages offer a host of different and sometimes contradicting explanations for this strange anomaly, which occurs three times in the first verses of our parashah. While other commandments given by HaShem to Moshe could be performed generally by the people of Israel, Moshe personally must perform these commandments given here, as the Ramban (Nachmanides) observes. This *ve'ata "and you"* indicates that Moshe is commanded to personally supervise the bringing of pure olive oil for the lamps to give Moshe light when he enters the sanctuary. Light is one of the keywords in this verse, *shemen le ma'or*, oil for lighting. When God created heaven and earth, the first of God's gifts was light. "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.'" (Gen 1:3) And now, while the sanctuary is not yet completed, Moshe is commanded to oversee that there will be light in the sanctuary. Does God need light? ask the sages. "No, he does not" is the answer. 'And God said, Let there be light.' Said the Holy One Blessed be He. 'I have even created light in the midst of darkness. Do I need your light?' Said R. Akha: 'It pleased the Lord for His righteousness' sake, to magnify the Torah and make it honourable.'" (Vayikra Rabbah, 31:7). Light is the first gift to facilitate any life, as we know it, in God's creation. Light is the gift to enlighten the people of Israel when God hits the Egyptians with the plague of darkness. "People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about; but all the Israelites had light in their dwellings." (Ex 10:23). By the means of light, God guided the people of Israel through the desert. "Adonai went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night." (Ex 13,21). By the means of the cloud God deprives the pursuing Egyptians of the light (Ex 14:20). The lamps should burn continually, for all time, *tamid*. "Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over [the Ark of] the Covenant, [to burn] from evening to morning before Adonai. It shall be an everlasting statute for their generations, from the children of Israel." (Ex 27:21). The light is shining on the tabernacle, the Ark with the tablets of the Covenant (Ex 22:16) within them. The Torah is the gift of enlightenment. "See how words of Torah give light to man when he is occupied with them. But whoever is not occupied and is ignorant, he stumbles. It may be compared to someone who stands in the dark." (Shemot Rabbah 36:3) Studying the Torah prevents us from stumbling, preventing us from obstacles and falling. But the sages regard the lamp in a second way too. The lamp is not only a symbol of the Torah studied, but of the commandment performed. "What is the meaning of the text: 'For the commandment is a lamp'? But whoever performs a commandment has kindled, as it were, a lamp before the Holy One Blessed be He and revives his soul, as it is stated (Prov. 20:27): 'The soul of man is the lamp of the Lord.'" (Shemot Rabbah 36:3) To me the message of our parashah is obvious and clear. Studying the Torah is enlightening in the literal sense of the word. It is an abundant source of delight but you cannot live alone on that joy. "Moshe took the *sefer ha b'rith*, the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said: All that Adonai has spoken, we do, we hear it." (Exodus 24:7). We are obliged to do (*na'asseh*) and not only to hear (*nishma*) in order to kindle our lamps in the world. We need to be visible as Jews. As we need guidance to our life our societies, our countries, mankind needs guidance in our times of war and hunger, oppression and persecution. *Na'asseh ve nishma*, let us do it AND listen.

And as a small reminder that not all the commandments regarding the construction of the sanctuary became obsolete with the destruction of the temple, the commandment to kindle the lights in the sanctuary continually is observed until today and will be observed for ever, the ner tamid in our shuls and synagogues.

