

Every Jewish house of worship has a *ner tamid*, an eternal light, a lamp usually placed above the *aron hakodesh*, the Torah ark. But this is not a Jewish innovation. For millennia, humans all over the world have created and tended eternal lights to commemorate people or events that hold religious, cultural, or political significance. Eternal flames mark war memorials and tombs of unknown soldiers as well as monuments dedicated to peace and goodwill. They represent our deepest sorrows and our most fervent hopes. Indeed, it is its intrinsic duality that makes fire such a powerful symbol. Fire is both constructive and destructive. As much as it warms, purifies, and protects, it also chars, sullies, and devastates. It is associated with birth and resurrection as well as with total annihilation, and with passionate love as well as horrendous torment. And it is as ephemeral as it is eternal. No wonder it features so prominently in religious rituals all over the world! The first verse of our parashah “And you shall command the children of Israel, and they shall take to you pure olive oil, crushed for lighting, to kindle the lamps eternally. (27:20) There is a lot to unpack in this little verse. The Hebrew word זָךְ (*zach*) means pure, refined, immaculate, pristine, with connotations of being acquitted, righteous, or immune. This is the finest olive oil. In a long discussion about using the various grades of olive oil, Talmud Tractate Menachot 86a concludes: “... the olives should be so ripe that the oil drips from them while they are still hanging on their olive tree, without them needing to be pressed. From here the Sages said that for the first olive harvest, one allows all the olives to ripen, picks the entire crop and brings it into the olive press, and he grinds it with a millstone and places it in wicker baskets, and this oil that would flow from it would be the first grade of oil.” The second grade was then produced by pressing the olives with a wooden beam, and the third grade by grinding the crushed olives and pressing them to extract the remaining oil. The first grade was used for kindling the *menorah* and the rest were deemed fit for use in meal offerings. Of course there is more discussion, but the principal message is that for lighting the lamps, only the finest oil is to be used. Now, let’s examine the word translated as kindle: לָהֲדִיקָהּ – to raise up. When we light our Shabbat or Yom Tov candles, we use the word לְהַדְלִיק (l’hadlik), which actually means to kindle, ignite. In a discussion on wicks and oil used for lighting the Shabbat lights, Tractate Shabbat 21a cites verse 27:20 and explains: “The requirement to light the candelabrum so that the flame ascends of itself when kindled, and not that it ascends by means of something else, i.e., adjusting the wick after it was lit.” The root עלה forms words meaning ascend, advance, increase, develop, surpass. For example, the word *aliyah* (עֲלִיָּה) means both being called to Torah and immigration to Israel. The word *olah* (עֹלָה) means burnt offering, i.e. an offering that goes up in smoke. In other words, this light serves a higher purpose than mere illumination. Midrash Tanchuma Tetzaveh discusses the purpose of this light at length, offering a variety of illustrations with the overarching message that HaShem does not need the light, but we humans do. “The master of the house told his servant, ‘light some lamps for us in the courtyard.’ ‘But the house is fully lighted. Why do you bid me to light lamps in the courtyard?’ He answered, ‘Do it so that the servants will have light.’ ... You find that when a man constructs windows, he builds them wide on the inside and narrow on the outside. Why? So that the light may spread throughout the house. The windows in the Temple, however, were constructed wide on the outside and narrow within so that the light of the Temple might spread forth to illumine the world. ... The Holy One of Blessing said, ‘they should bring it [the oil] to you, Moses, not because I need a light, but in order that you may see how to enter and how to leave.’” The second verse of our parashah introduces the concept of the *ner tamid*: “In the Tent of Meeting, outside the dividing curtain in front of the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall set it up before the Lord from evening to morning: [it shall be] an everlasting statute (*chukat olam*) for their generations, from the children of Israel.” (27:21) The Hebrew word עוֹלָם (*olam*) means world/universe as well as eternal, into the future. The root עלם means to conceal, hide, obscure, with connotations of evading. But it also forms words meaning to mature, such as *elem* (young man), *almah* (young woman). The word עַל or עוֹל (*ohl*) means yoke, burden, forced activity, injustice, misuse. The word עַל (*al*) has a plethora of meanings, including above, on top of, on behalf of, in addition to, with. The dichotomy in the meaning of all these words related to kindling and everlasting parallels the dichotomous nature of fire. But the dichotomy is only superficial. When we proclaim *shema Yisrael* we pledge to uphold our covenant by accepting the “yoke of the kingdom of heaven” (*ohl malchut shamayim*). But painful experience continues to teach us that in the wrong hands, this yoke can be interpreted and used maliciously. Our prayers begin with *Melech ha-olam*, sovereign of the world. And we also declare *Adonai yimloch le-olam va-ed*, HaShem will reign forever. And although HaShem’s presence is concealed in our earthly home we call *olam ha-zeh*, the *olam ha-ba*, the world to come, opens a limitless spiritual realm where we may contemplate HaShem in ways that we often cannot put into words. Finally, all of the concepts contained in these two verses are united in the *ner tamid*, ignited and tended by the priests and fueled with the finest oil the people could bring. Our metaphors today are vastly different, but *am Yisrael*, our wonderfully diverse community of Jews, fueled and sustained by our combined efforts, endures.

Shabbat shalom!