

Parasha Tetzaveh – 5777 – Lamps and Souls
(Drosh to be shared at Congregation Netivot Shalom on Shabbat Zakhor)

For several years now, I have become fascinated with verses and teachings about candles - lamps - and souls, and the concept of tamid, continual.... inspired both by the Sfat Emet and by the Zohar. This has led me on a journey through the Hebrew bible/Tanakh, Rabbinic Midrashim, Hasidut and Qabala... *(For those of you interested in more depth, I published a sourcesheet on Se-faria called Lamps and Souls if you want to go into more depth.)*

Let's begin with the first verse of our parasha - incidentally very similar to a section of Parasha Emor, Vayikra Ch. 24. and in dialogue with other verses about the sacrificial offerings, the menorah, and the incense.

וְאַתָּה תְּצַוֶּה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ כְּתִיב לְמָאוֹר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד: כֹּא בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד מִחוּץ לַפְּרֹכֶת אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַעֲדוּת יַעֲרֹךְ אֹתוֹ אַהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו מֵעֶרֶב עַד־בֹּקֶר לִפְנֵי יְיָ חֲקֹת עוֹלָם לְדוֹרָתָם מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Exodus 27: 20. And you shall command the people of Israel, that they bring you pure pressed oil olive for the light-source, to kindle (lit. raise up) a lamp continually/regularly.

21. In the Tent of Meeting outside the veil, which is before the [ark of the] testimony, Aaron and his sons shall arrange it from evening to morning before YHVH; it shall be an eternal decree for their generations, from the Children of Israel.

Important words we will explore: tetzaveh – commanded-ness/mitzvot-holy deeds/ways of connecting with the Divine and each other; shemen/pure pressed olive oil., or/light. becoming a ma-or/a light source, l'halot/raising up, ner/lamp/candle, tamid/ongoing/continually/regularly [the concept of tamid requires it's own exploration beyond the scope of this drosh].

The rabbis have been fascinated, too, with this verse over the millenia. Let us begin our mid-rashic/story-telling/explanatory journey with Mishlei/Proverbs (although there are also shimmering verses in Psalms and Job):

נֵר מִצְוָה וְתוֹרָה אֹר וְדָרֶךְ חַיִּים תּוֹכְחוֹת מוֹסֵר:

The lamp/the light source is the mitzvah, the light itself is Torah that enables a way of life that involves shining this light onto aspects of our lives that require examination.

נֵר יְיָ נְשַׁמֵּת אָדָם חִפְשׁ כָּל־חֲדָרַי־בָּטָן:

God's lamp/light source is the neshama/the human breath-soul allowing access into the hidden recesses of our kishkes/our insides/our bellies.

And so our ner, the candle-lamp is the mitzvah, the Divine injunction, with which we illumine the world, and God's lamp/ner is our soul. Soul-candle-mitzvah - a whole. And, fascinating that both of these verses exhort us to a deep examination of the way we live our lives.

The rabbis took these verses into several midrashim:

It is not that God needs our light for God's own self, but rather desires that we should light up the world for God. If I conceive of God as a vibrating Conscious field of which I am part, then I become the sensory channel through which God, as it were –*kivyiakhol*, “sees” into our world and “knows” what is in our hearts and minds. We both bring God's light to the world and we shine a light into our inner recesses so that God, may see inside. O, God imagines, that we will be seen as a people that illuminates for the One who illuminates all! There is a cosmic payback happening in this midrash - just as Hashem illuminated our way in the Wilderness, we, in gratitude are God's agents to bring more light - love and truth - into the world.

And, an even more radical notion: we are actually adding to light to the world and, in this, we are raised up, referring back to our source verse – “I'ha'a lot ner tamid – to raise up the lamp continually”.

Another midrash, Jeremiah compared Israel to a fresh and beautiful olive tree. Going back to our verse - our soul essence is the “pure pressed oil” - we refine ourselves in order to become the light source. Like one who holds a lamp in the dark, so our lives of holy deeds allows the light of Torah to illuminate the way. As Proverbs teaches, the mitzvah is the ner/candle and Torah is the light.

And the Rabbis get even deeper. God says: Let your lamp be in My hand and My lamp in yours. Not only, as we perform acts of holiness, do we hold God's ner/lamp, allowing the light of Torah to illuminate the world, but also, in the act of mitzvah/commanded holy deed, we bring life to our soul, which is God's lamp.

A little mystical aside: The Zohar [13th century core text of Qabala] asks us to imagine how the candle might teach us about the soul. When we gaze at a flame we notice the inner dark/blue/sometimes-reddish light that is connected to the wick - and, of course, it is the wick that which the physical fuel to the flame - and resting on the dark flame is a white flame, and beyond that a shimmering, concealed radiance that extends outward from the flame itself. The first level of soul, nefesh, being closest to the body is the darker light surrounding the wick, the second level more numinous white light is ruah, and the third level, melting the Infinity is neshama. The lamp connects fuel with light just as our soul - our Divine essence - connects body with Spirit.

So, in review, **נֵר** / **נְשָׁמַת אָדָם** / the human soul is God's candle and **נֵר מְצִוָּה וְתוֹרָה אֹר** / the candle is the mitzvah and Torah is the light. Soul = lamp = mitzvah.

Finally, we arrive at the Sfat Emet, the rebbe of Ger, writing in the 1830's, and take our journey into Hasidut:

There is in every being, every *davar*/matter/every word, every action an shining point of vitality (*nekuda hayut meira*) that is connected to its root in heaven. It is like the “pure pressed olive

oil”, the illuminating refined fuel, free of besmirch-ment, free of negativity or false ego. Referring to our source verse in the parasha, when we “**raise up** the ner continually/repeatedly/daily-tamid”, we are helping this point of vitality shine. We are increasing light and goodness and love in the world **Our sacred duty is to recognize and amplify this ner/shining point - in ourselves and in others.**

When connected to the essence and not the ego, we are (in my Rebbe, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s words) transparent to God’s will and we will know what has been decreed for us to fulfill in this world.

In our source verse – “אָתָּה תְּצַוֶּה/ ata Tetzaveh” - by being commanded, we are asked to take our very self, our soul into the mitzvah, to become a “מְאֹר/ light source”, to raise us up. We make of ourselves a mitzvah, a connector, a blessing - after all Avraham was told v’heyey brakha - be a blessing - לְהַעֲלֵת נֵר תָּמִיד /to raise up a ner tamid. Our daily practice to be the lamp, the **shining mitzvah connecting Infinite and finite, illuminating all the dark and hidden places** - the recesses of the belly, the places in our lives that need tokhehah, reproving reminders to get back on the derek ha-hayim - the path of true living.

The illumination of our souls, is the path for the Mystery to supervise us/bestow Providence/hashgacha. Know before Whom we stand. In the deepest non-dual we sense our calling to be raised up to higher behaviors, higher emotions, higher thoughts, and consistent daily practice (please excuse the vertical metaphor!).

This is about all the candles we light - Shabbat, hagim, we connect with being the mitzvah, with being metzaveh, being commanded, being asked/required to live a life that is examined and intentional. We say “asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav “. And we ask, in a prayer found in traditional siddurim after lighting candles Erev Shabbat, that our light never fade ועד שלא יכבה נרנו לעולם ... she lo yikhbeh neireinu l’olam va’ed. If, as Proverbs teaches us, our soul is the candle, is the mitzvah itself, then every time we light the lamp, we set an intention about our own inner lives.

And, so, as Purim approaches, we pray from Megilat Esther:

יְהוּדִים הָיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן וְיִקָּר - laYehudim hayta orah, v’simha, v’sasson, v’ikar - let us have light, joy, fulfillment, and value.

Let this illumination be the fulfillment of our verses from Proverbs to shine light into the recesses of the belly where we have internalized Amalek - doubt/negativity/insensitivity/inaction - places where we need reproof and reminding that our essence is Divine, reminding us that we are called to raise ourselves to live lives of intention. Allow us to embody meaning and to shine the light of Awareness wherever we walk on life’s path.