

Parshat Tetzaveh: The Eternal Light – February 23, 2013

It's curious that out of all the symbols that can exist in a synagogue, there is one in particular, very important and always present, about which we probably know nothing.

If we study the laws stipulated by our tradition for the construction of a Synagogue, we will realize that, in truth, there are not so many, and there is great flexibility concerning how a Jewish house of prayer should be built. And that is why, if you have taken the opportunity to do “Jewish tourism” during your travels, visiting other synagogues, you have probably been surprised by the few similarities that exist among them: there are big synagogues and small synagogues; some have windows, others don't. And although most of them face Jerusalem, some don't; perhaps they were places adapted later on as houses of prayer.

But along with this great legal flexibility concerning how a Beit haKnesset should be, tradition teaches us that there are two symbols that are indispensable: the first one is the Torah, our holy book, symbol of the sanctity of our tradition and history. And in second place, the Ner Tamid, the eternal light that hangs over the Aron haKodesh and can never be extinguished. As we were saying at the beginning, despite its being an ever-present symbol in our synagogues, we don't often know its meaning.

The origin of the Ner Tamid tradition is found in the Torah, specifically in Parashat Tetzaveh: God orders Moses to instruct the people to collect olive oil and light an everlasting lamp, placing it outside the main tent of the tabernacle, wherein lay the ark with the Tablets of the Law. And from that moment on, our people devoted themselves to the

preservation of that custom, from generation to generation: first at the tabernacle, then at the Beit haMikdash, the Great Temple of Jerusalem, and last, after the Great Temple's destruction, at each one of our synagogues, as of that day and until today.

The Torah does not explain the meaning of this eternal light, however, the sages ascribed it with different explanations. To some, the everlasting light represents God's constant presence in our lives. Other scholars, based on a well-known verse found on the Psalms, relate this light with the importance granted by God to the soul of people. And finally, there are others who consider it a reminder of our dead brothers and sisters, permanently remembered at the synagogue.

Based on these traditional explanations, I would like to share with you my personal interpretation. If we pay attention to what the Torah says, we may discover an interesting detail that allows us to find an additional message concerning this beautiful custom of the Ner Tamid: the oil required for its kindling had to be supplied by the entire people of Israel. God says to Moses: "And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually" (Ex. 27:20).

When it came down to getting the oil for the Ner Tamid, perhaps it would have been easier to delegate that responsibility upon just a couple of persons, maybe among the richer people. But the Torah is clear as to that responsibility: the oil had to be supplied by the entire people.

To me, the lesson is clear: the light may be kindled only when all of us participate in the kindling, thus succeeding in its lasting eternally. If the oil is supplied by some instead of by all, the lamp cannot be kindled.

The Ner Tamid becomes, then, a symbol of community participation around common purposes. If it is alight, it is proof that we all contribute to the preservation of our synagogues and Jewish continuity. It is a reminder that, although people contribute according to their capabilities and personal upbringing, everyone is obliged by the responsibility to contribute, and no one can delegate that responsibility to others.

Our attitude is often the opposite: we rely on other people and think that the others are the ones who should participate, work and contribute money to the preservation of our institutions. But the Torah's message, and especially that of the Ner Tamid, the eternal light that is supposed to be always alight in our synagogues, is that Jewish tradition is preserved only when we assume that although there may be different ways to participate and contribute, all of them are equally valid and necessary, and that we should never stop taking part and making our contribution.

The Ner Tamid summons us to be main characters and builders of Jewish continuity. It reminds us that, by carrying on our customs and traditions at our homes and actively participating in community life, we are able to keep ablaze the light of our beautiful tradition, passing it on to the coming generations.

Shabbat Shalom!