

Parashat Tetzaveh 2011

When I was eleven years old my sister Debbie got married. Thus it was that her bedroom, down in the basement of my parent's home was suddenly free and available for one of us younger children to claim as our own. Although I was happy in my own room, I thought I would try and see if I preferred the basement. So it was that one evening, rather than sleep in my own room, I went down to Debbie's old room in the basement and went to sleep, carefully making sure the nightlight was on, since the only window offered very little light even during the day, and virtually no light at all during the night. I fell asleep soundly but awoke in the middle of the night only to discover that the nightlight had gone out and I was in the pitch black of the basement. Using my hands to guide me along the wall, I went to where the door and light should have been. Try as I might though, I couldn't find the door or the light switch. After a few minutes of trying, I began to call for help, thinking my parents would hear me upstairs. They did not. Seeing as I had a tremendous fear of the dark, it wasn't long before I was crying hysterically. I don't know how long I cried, but in the morning I woke up to the dim light from the one window, only to discover that I was lying literally right next to the door, directly under the light switch. It turned out that the glorious source of light was there, waiting for me, but I had been unable to find it and make it shine for me.

I think of this idea, that the light was just waiting for me, every time I read the beginning of this morning's Torah portion Tetzaveh. In our Etz Hayim Humash we read (Ex. 27:20-21): You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. 21 Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over [the Ark of] the Pact, [to burn] from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages.

It should be noted though, that the words "for kindling lamps regularly" which come from the words *l'ha'a lot ner tamid*, can also be translated literally as: "to cause the light to go up continually." The rabbis of the Talmud explained this to mean that the priest had to kindle the light until the flame rose by itself. In other words it wasn't simply good enough for the kohen, the priest, to light the menorah. Even after he lit the menorah he had to stay on guard, sheltering and protecting the light, until the flame could maintain itself.

In Leviticus Rabbah the rabbis of old explained what this means for each of us personally and spiritually. They pointed out that people light lamps from fire that is already kindled. But God creates light out of darkness. They ask the question: If, out of darkness God created light, why does God command us to kindle light? They answer by saying that by kindling the lights, to a certain extent we become the light, which means by kindling the lights, we become God's partner in the quest to banish darkness from the world.

Rabbi Young, a contemporary Reform Rabbi once wrote of a different midrash in Exodus Rabbah that reminds us that when we light a flame from another flame, the light in the first is not diminished. Both fires burn equally, and the light is doubled. The same is true of our deeds. When we give money or objects, we no longer have that money or object. But when we give of ourselves, we give of our light. We can bring wick after wick after wick to our flame, and keep lighting them infinitely. That light is not lost—it is increased, just like when we light one flame from

another it doubles the light.

According to Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, this idea can help us with our personal relationships. He said that the kind of tender loving care that the kohen lavished on the *Ner Tamid* is exactly the kind of care we must take in our relationships with those around us, especially the care we take with our children, spouses, parents, siblings, and friends.

He wrote that “The light of the *Ner Tamid* shines into the recesses of human relationships, mandating that we care in such a way that the recipient of our love is strengthened by our involvement, is better able to cope with life on their own. The kohen cares, as it were, for the dignity of the *Ner Tamid*, providing it with the ability to shine on its own. We, too, must care for each other so that our mutual dignity is fortified, so that resilience, independence, and wellbeing are all enhanced by our love and our care.”

Of course, there is one significant difference between living things and the *Ner Tamid*. While the *Ner Tamid* can absolutely reach a point where it can burn on its own, no human being is ever fully independent, ever a finished product. Thus, the instruction to cultivate the divine spark of light in our relationships is really a commandment to be constantly involved, to open ourselves to life-long commitments to those we love: our spouses, our parents, our siblings, our children, our friends, our fellow congregants.

Another lesson about our relationships can also be gleaned from the portion. In fact, many of you have the lesson in your hands, found in the words of Rabbi David Hoffman in this week’s Shabbat Bulletin. Rabbi Hoffman spends a great deal of time discussing the fact that Moses’ name does not appear in this week’s Torah portion, while the name of Aaron, Moses’ brother appears an unbelievable 30 times.

In terms of our relationships, he explains this phenomenon as an example of Moses’ acting not only as brother, in a fraternal and loving relationship with Aaron, but as the leader of the Jewish people. He says:

“Moshe has courageously led the Children of Israel. He served as God’s voice to Pharaoh, encouraged the Israelites at the splitting of the sea, led them in war against Amalek, and then went up the mountain to get them the law. Moshe has been at the center of the community during an important stage and now God, as it were, asks Moshe to withdraw. The absence of his name from our Torah reading can be understood as a gentle request from God that it is time for Moses to make room in his leadership for others. Stepping back into the shadows, Moses actively enables a new model of leadership to emerge.”

He continues beautifully by saying: “Such is the case with great leadership and all covenantal relationships. One of our tasks is to manage our own egos. We need to be mindful of when it is time to engage in *tzimtzum*, that is, a contraction of self. Unlike other moments in the Torah, Moses does not resist. He does not complain or protest. He knows this is right. Moses responds to God’s request and he anoints Aaron, his brother, empowering him to serve God and the community. The message is clear: it is only by means of the contraction of the self that room will be created for the indispensable work of others that will ultimately allow for the Presence of God to abide in our midst.”

Yesterday, the world witnessed another act of personal *tzimtzum*. That act of personal self-contraction came as Hosni Mubarak, the long-time strongman of Egypt, finally acceded to the demands of his people and stepped down from his 30 year position as President of Egypt and fled from Cairo with his family. No one, anywhere in the world, knows exactly what will happen next in Egypt. Because of this everyone is projecting their own thoughts, hopes, and fears onto the event. Some people are rejoicing, some are terrified, and some don't know what to feel. Personally I feel simultaneously all three terrified, stunned, and hopeful. I pray for peace in Egypt, but I know that the road the Egyptian people must travel now is long and fraught with many pitfalls and many dangers. And yet, I cling to the lesson I learned in my parents' basement when I was eleven. A point came during that evening where I was too scared to keep searching for the light, even when I knew it had to be there. In the same vein, there is a light waiting for the Egyptians. It is the light that can come to them for the first time in their 5,000 year history if only they would reach for it. It is a light that they can kindle if they work to build a democratic society based on the rule of law, respect for minorities, and equality for all. The light is there waiting for them, if only they truly reach out for it and embrace it, and don't let their fear goad them into giving up the quest for true light. We can help encourage them as they feed the flames, not flames of anger, but flames of burning love for their nation and for their fellow citizens. May they find the light and let it shine brightly for us all.