*Sermon by Rabbi Jim Prosnit, February 15, 2019/10 Adar I, 5779*

Keep it Burning Parashat T’tzaveh

Let me try something for moment. I’ll be right back*. (Lights are turned off in the sanctuary for a few moments.)*

I find it quite inspiring to enter the sanctuary on many an evening when it is darker than it was just now and sit in the presence of the eternal light. It is amazing how much light a single bulb appears to give off, when it is the only light in the room.

I mention this tonight because it is in this week’s section of the Torah that synagogues throughout the Jewish world will be reading tomorrow morning that we first encounter the *Ner Tamid* – the eternal light. *“You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly*. *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 Eternal. It shall be a requirement from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages." Exodus 27: 20 -21*

Now from evening to morning might imply that the lamp was just to be lit during the nighttime hours, but the evolving tradition would hold that it was to be an everlasting or eternal light – and the only commanded practice associated with the ancient tabernacle that is still in use today.

Most all contemporary synagogues have some light floating over the ark as a visual reminder of God’s Presence. Ours is now the triangle, behind the shin – the Hebrew letter representing one of God’s holy names. For those who remember back a few years, the fixture that hangs on the wall to my left was above the old ark curtain; and the menorah that is now on the wall of the chapel was over the ark when the synagogue was down Park Avenue at what is now the New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. It hung in front of the ten commandments, where the cross now sits. Whether represented by an eternal light or the cross – providing some focal point of God’s presence remains a central part of that sacred sanctuary.

Few symbols in our Jewish world are more prominent or important than the ner tamid. The commentary *Etz Hayim* wonders why that is. And the answer – “perhaps because light itself cannot be seen. We become aware of its presence when it enables us to see other things. Similarly we cannot see God, but we become aware of God’s presence when we see the beauty of the world, when we experience love and the goodness of our fellow human beings.” (Etz Hayim p.503)

Several years ago, I was giving a tour of the Temple to some students from a local parochial school. I remember very clearly one of the kids wondering how the eternal light was lit. I told her while some synagogues have candles or actual oil lamps; ours was an electric light bulb. She seemed a bit disappointed and I could see the wheels spinning in her mind as she asked a follow up question. “Well what happens if it burns out.” I said, “Well in that case we call Glenn, who was our custodian at the time, and ask him to replace it.” She seemed devastated.

But I tried to say, while it would be nice to think that the eternal light had mystical power and could never go out, the fact that it could, actually has some meaning. Even the eternal light requires attention and a dedicated custodian to replace it.

After all the text we just read suggests that it was Aaron and his sons who in Bible times were assigned with the task of keeping it burning. The ner tamid does not magically happen: it is a communal responsibility. The Israelites worked together to prepare the oil and ensure an ample supply. Thus the ner tamid is a symbol of the power of community, for it is through our connections to one another and our willingness to work together that we are able to bring the light of God's Presence into our midst.

Our text reminds us that we should participate in community not only with a sense of obligation, but also with enthusiasm and dedication. Even if the advent of solar-powered lights and CFLs have changed the mechanics of some ner tamid and made them less likely to burn out, the idea is still the same. When we look at the light of the ner tamid, we should be filled with a sense that we are responsible for spreading this light, for enthusiastically bringing holiness and blessing into our world.

At the end of a difficult week, where dysfunctional government reigns, when both racist and anti-Semitic tropes continue to rear that heads from elected officials who should know better, when we yesterday remembered the death of 17 students at a High School in Florida -- it is helpful for people of faith to find a simple spiritual power and reminder in that light that never goes out. It answers the question that hovers below the surface of all of our prayers: God, are you really there? The steady, constant glow of the ner tamid answers in the affirmative. And we hear echoes of the phrase Or goyim – a light to the nations – a reminder and a calling of a spirit that has been and remains our mission at all times.