

Ann Berliner

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Tetzaveh

Shabbat Shalom!

If you are anything like me, you find it difficult to be a human. And being an aging human brings its own tender challenges. Those of us who experience being a human as hard work are not alone. Walk into any bookstore — if you can still find one — or browse online, and you will find an exhaustive number of self-help books, of advice, on how to be a better human. There is even one titled: *Death: The End to Self-Improvement*.

As Jews, we turn to Torah— for guidance in how to “do human” in a sacred way.

This week’s parsha, **Tetzaveh**, opens with a **command** about light: The *ner tamid*, the eternal flame, must not go out. God, in a continuation of a dialogue with Moses, even though Moses is not named, commands “... *bring clear olive oil, for kindling lamps continually*” and place it in front of the ark.

Whether the flame burns steadily or needs to be rekindled again and again, its presence needs to be constant.

Our sages teach that light is not only something we see — it is part of our being. Even science echoes this truth. As we have seen, the universe itself is suffused with light: ancient light from the first moments of creation still moves through space, and the ongoing radiance of distant stars

travels across what looks like emptiness. Darkness, it turns out, is never absolute. Light is always present.

According to the First-Century historian Josephus, Alexander the Great had planned to sack Jerusalem after conquering Tyre, but, when at a distance he saw the Kohanim shining brightly in their sacraments of gold and jewels, instead of destroying the city, Alexander got off his horse and, reportedly, bowed before the High Priests, having previously dreamt of their radiant vestments.

Also, within this week's parsha, we encounter the intricate and deeply physical ritual of priestly consecration. Blood is placed on the right ear, the right thumb, and the right big toe — consecrating listening, action, and the direction of one's path. Holiness, the Torah teaches, is not abstract. It is embodied. It lives in how we listen to one another, in what we choose to do, and in the direction, we choose to move.

Rav Kook, in an essay titled the *Pangs of Cleansing*, writes about this inner illumination with piercing clarity: (*quote*)

“All confusion among human beings, and all inner conflict within each individual, arises from a clouded perception of the Divine...one must constantly refine the mind, removing deceptive fantasies, groundless fears, and harmful habits...(then) the soul shines with supernal light...”(Rav Kook, *Orot*, “Pangs of Cleansing”) (*end of quote*)

Here the Rav is describing a mind that becomes clear enough to shine —polished until it reflects Divine light.

But what is meant by Divine light or supernal light?

Just as Maimonides drew from Aristotle to clarify Jewish thought, I would like to borrow from another wisdom tradition, one I am familiar with, Advaita Vedanta, based on the classical philosophical tradition of India. In Vedanta, the most immediate expression of the Divine is the **miracle** of consciousness itself. The simple, astonishing fact that we are self-aware — that we can notice our thoughts, witness our emotions, observe our own inner drama as though watching a play.

Consciousness is like a steady stage light. It illuminates whatever appears — comedy or tragedy, joy or loss — without itself being diminished. The scenes change, but the light remains.

This steady light of consciousness allows us to grow, to choose, to turn, or to return. It is the most intimate expression of the Divine within us. It is the steady light of consciousness that makes us human--- the very essence of being a human.

The **ner tamid** burns not only above the *Mishkan*, but within each of us. In moments when the world feels overwhelming, we are not asked to fix everything or even understand anything. We are asked to tend the flame.

To listen a little more deeply.

To act a little more intentionally.

To take the next right step on the path before us.

At the close of this week's parsha, God promises: "*I will meet you there,*" at the entrance of the *Mishkan*, before the curtain, by the glowing lamp.

God does not promise to meet us with certainty, or with perfection, or complete understanding.

God promises to meet us **there**.

There, in the light that bears witness to it all.

There, in the light of consciousness.

Shabbat Shalom.