



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Tetzaveh 5774

By Jordan Soffer  
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Now that the Exodus narrative is over, the gripping accounts of our ancestors that pervaded the first two books of the Torah fade into distant memory and we begin reading the detailed guidelines for the construction and use of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. While initially many of these details seem extraneous or irrelevant, they contain within them deep wisdom and insight into our lives and moral obligations as Jews.

The *korban tamid*, the continual offering, described in *Parashat Tetzaveh*, is a compelling example of the deep symbolic meaning that can be found in the details of ritual. Before the episode of the Golden Calf, God gives the commandment to offer the *tamid*: “Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar—two yearling lambs each day, regularly. [...] It shall be a continual burnt-offering throughout your generations at the door of the tent of meeting before God, where I will meet with you, to speak there to you.”<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, it appears that the *korban tamid* was a simple, perfunctory sacrifice, offered twice daily. Several commentators, however, suggest that the ritual contains important spiritual lessons. The Abarbanel, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese Torah scholar, explains that we offer the *tamid* twice daily to correspond to the dual physical and spiritual freedoms which God provided<sup>2</sup> by freeing us from slavery in Egypt, and engaging us in an eternal covenant at the revelation at Sinai.

The Maharal, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, a prominent 16<sup>th</sup>-century mystic and Torah scholar, brings a remarkable anecdote in the introduction to his ethical work, the *Netivot Olam*, which looks at the *tamid* from another perspective:

Shimon ben Pazzai comes and says there is a verse that is even more significant and more meaningful and more inclusive than either of these two verses [referring to the Shma, and the commandment to love your neighbor]. What is the verse? “And the one lamb you shall make in the morning.”<sup>3</sup>

In this text, the Rabbis are debating which is the most fundamental sentence in the Torah. The first two suggestions—the Shma and the ‘love one’s neighbor’—are predictable and appropriate possibilities. The third option, “and the one lamb you shall make in the morning,” refers to the *korban tamid*. This seems strange. What is the allure of this *passuk* that it could be the most important sentence in the Torah?

The Maharal, in elaborating on this ostensibly bizarre choice, suggests that this quote speaks to the need for consistent commitment and constant engagement in Jewish life. The *korban tamid* is so important because, as a

<sup>1</sup> Shemot 29:39, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Abarbanel on Shemot 29:38.

<sup>3</sup> I originally heard this idea from Rabbi Ethan Tucker and read it again here: <http://www.torah.org/learning/ravfrand/5759/vayera.html?print=1>

sacrifice conducted every single day, it symbolizes our unwavering commitment to living a life replete with *Yiddishkeit*, without which other commandments become meaningless or irrelevant.

According to this perspective, a living Judaism cannot be limited to *sporadic* rites or cultural practice; it must be something that infuses our daily lives. Though not everyone's Judaism needs to be identical (indeed, one of the glories of Judaism is the divergence of our expressions), any expression of Judaism should be perpetual. We need our *tamid*—an involvement that, in its own way, is shown daily.

While this message is personally relevant to me in the realm of traditional ritual observance, I believe that it issues a call in the realm of ethical *mitzvot*, as well. The Torah commands us to help people in need, to protect the widow and the defenseless and to empower the most marginalized. The *tamid* reminds us that these actions cannot be intermittent initiatives, but must instead be persistent features of our Jewish lives and identity. Every day we must strive to perfect this world, in the kingdom of Shadai [God].<sup>4</sup>

Just over a year ago I travelled with AJWS and a group of rabbinical students to El Salvador. As I reflect on that experience, I recall the countless commitments I made as the trip concluded. While I did a fine job honoring those particular commitments, the urge to renew, or perhaps deepen, my commitments quickly dissipated. The challenge is to find the constant inspiration and motivation to foster perpetual involvement.

In the absence of the daily *korban tamid*, what can remind and encourage us to achieve a constant and consistent commitment to the ethical obligations of Judaism? *Parashat Tetzaveh* begins with another "*tamid*" (constant) which can serve in this role. The *ner tamid*,<sup>5</sup> the eternal light, which still shines above the Holy Ark in our synagogues today, is a reliable reminder of our Ultimate responsibilities. In particular, this visual symbol can help us remember our responsibilities to respond to injustices in the developing world, which are sadly so often "out of sight, out of mind." As we read the holy words of this *parashah*, it is our task to find our *tamid*—the eternal reminder of our Eternal calling.



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<sup>4</sup> As we say in the daily Aleinu prayer, "To repair the world in the image of Shadai (God)."

<sup>5</sup> Shemot 27:20.

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