



Parashat Tsav
'It must not go out'

by Amy Soule on Saturday March 19, 2011
13 Adar II 5711
Leviticus 6:1 - 8:36

The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out...The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out. (Leviticus 6:12-13)

In ancient times, these verses referred to the sacrifices people were making as an act of worship. Having a perpetual flame on the altar symbolized that God was being continually worshipped by our ancestors. Today we worship very differently, without making any animal sacrifices. Why do these verses remain relevant to our modern lives at all, let alone as liberal GLBT Jews?

Today we have an extremely modified version of a fire that is always lit. It manifests itself through the ner tamid (eternal light), a visible symbol in every synagogue. Some may treat this as ironic, since it helps represent God's presence rather than any actions of our own that demonstrate God is perpetually worshipped, and others may call the eternal light "a symbol of a symbol" (Torah Queeries: Commentaries on the Torah), though it has great potential to be much more symbolic than any fire our ancestors kindled in ancient times.

We live in a world where it can prove easy to doubt God's presence. Looking at the eternal light as we enter our places of worship can serve as a reminder that God will always be there to help us through everything we encounter during life's tumultuous journey.

Something else that intrigues me about the mention of the eternal light in our parashah is that the terms translated into English as "on the altar" can also be read as "in him" according to the original Hebrew.

Looking at this alternative translation communicates a message that all of humankind should remember. We all have a light shining within that God has entrusted to us to nurture during our lifetime. Furthermore, no one should be led to feel they have to extinguish their light; God alone should be responsible for anyone being called home.



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Some may look at the word eternal and be intimidated by it but making sure our lights go on doesn't have to be a daunting mission. Tamid means always in Modern Hebrew but its meaning in biblical Hebrew is much more expansive.

According to biblical Hebrew, tamid can be translated as "performed regularly" or "necessitating regular maintenance". Looking at it through this different lens can mean that we have to make time to nurture our souls every day. It can be hard to set aside any time to accomplish this but it's necessary if we want to avoid "burning out" (whether that means depleting our energy reserves or actually thinking about, let alone attempting, and possibly succeeding at, suicide).

Others may fear that "eternal" means "unchanging" but it doesn't have to. We can evolve while maintaining our inner light. Also, our light will be different according to the circumstances we're in.

Sometimes our souls will be shining at maximum strength because we have achieved something significant or something has happened to lift us higher than we ever dreamed was possible.

Other times our light may seem like a flickering ember due to difficult contexts we are in. It is at these times that we have to strive toward matching our lights to the ones shining in our places of worship and ask God's presence to come into our lives and help us through everything we are facing.

Looking at the verses about the eternal light in their whole context can indicate something else interesting. They seem to be connected to the sacrifices of gratitude and well-being that our ancestors offered many millennia ago.

According to this, maybe the light we're not supposed to extinguish is the one of our gratitude. No matter our emotions, chances are we have something to be grateful for (perhaps our physical well-being, in keeping with the context of our Torah portion?). If we can concentrate on that, maybe our internal light can slowly rekindle itself and grow strong once more.

Something else we can learn through analyzing the context the verses about the eternal light appear in is that they involve repetition. Our scripture is known for being sparse in its words; it doesn't make any unnecessary repetitions. So why do we hear about the eternal light two times, let alone in consecutive verses?

One of our most revered sages (rambam) states that the initial reference is directed toward the priest (making sure our leaders always have the right attitude toward their sacred profession)



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and the second one is directed toward the lay people (as a reminder to ensure the clergy don't "burn out" through lack of enthusiasm for their jobs).

It's easy for me to interpret this as saying that we are all responsible to help each other through negative experiences and making sure people never get to the level where they feel desperate. Having a strong, glowing light shouldn't be a privilege reserved for some elite group of people; all of humankind deserves to live according to their maximum potential and anyone can help anyone else, no matter why they may be different.

As GLBT people, we are all affected by suicide. Many of us, and our peers, have seriously considered suicide due to depression instigated by experiences we've had because of our difference(s) and many more have been impacted by it since it has taken the life of people we care very strongly about. According to that, due to the message of our parashah, we are called to help through any means possible.

Doing this doesn't have to be hard; sometimes, doing a random act of kindness can help people way more than they may expect. I'm not sure how many stories I've heard about a random hug or other similar action saving somebody from suicide or self-injury.

At the very beginning of the Torah, God said "Let there be light". It then goes on to state that visible light (the sun, moon and stars) were created later. Perhaps our Torah portion helps explain this discrepancy.

Maybe the light God created right off the top was the light that shines within each human being. It may be invisible but that doesn't mean it's not supposed to be as strong as possible. God wants everyone to let their light shine as best it can. Make time for yourself, get inspiration wherever possible and help others, since it's not always easy to go it alone.



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