

# Weekly Teaching

## February 15, 2019

In every traditional synagogue there is a *Ner Tamid*, an “Eternal” Light.

The origin for this custom comes from the Torah where we learn that the *Ner Tamid* was the light that burned inside the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary that was constructed while we wandered in the Wilderness after our Exodus from Egypt.

There is a rabbinic dispute as to the meaning of *Tamid*.

The Hebrew word can mean either “always” or “regularly”.

The medieval French rabbinic commentator, Rashi, held that Moses’ brother, Aaron, who served as High Priest, was commanded to light the lamp every evening so that it would burn until morning.

This was to be a commandment that was to be observed “always”.

The biblical proof text for Rashi was the verse that noted:

*“Aaron and his sons shall set [the Lamp] up in the Tent of Meeting, outside of the curtain, which is over the Ark, to burn from evening to morning before the Lord.”*

Seemingly the *Ner Tamid* was to be lit and burned each and every night, but didn’t burn during the day.

But the Talmud asks and answers:

- *Does God require this light? Surely, during the entire forty years that the Israelites traveled in the wilderness, they traveled only by God’s light. But this light is a testimony to humanity that the Divine Presence rests in Israel.*

According to this Talmudic teaching, the “light” is a symbol of God’s eternal presence.

And, if this is the case, then the “light” must constantly be lit 24 hours a day continually.

Rabbinic dogma came to assert that just as God is always with us, so too, God’s light must always be with us.

Thus the *Ner Tamid* of our synagogues came to become the burning light that must never go out; this explains why we have a *Ner Tamid* in our sanctuary and in all the synagogues around the world.

We wish to possess within our Houses of Worship the ritual object that reminds us that there is never a time when God’s light doesn’t shine upon us.

It could be asked how might we reconcile Rashi’s commentary with that of the teaching of the Talmud?

Perhaps we can conflate the two interpretations.

The Jewish People have the obligation each and every day to re-ignite God’s light within the world and within ourselves so that we stand ready to serve God as holy servants, while also maintaining the constant symbol of light within our holy spaces.

The light of God is eternally present, but, only our daily renewal of holy dedication helps make that light more apparent within our world. For the *Ner Tamid* is ignited both “always” and “regularly”.

In essence, we take from the *Ner Tamid* the light that we carry out as human torches each and every day, and become the Holy Nation that is to be a “Light upon the Nations”.

As the Psalmist sang:

*“Praised God who continues to create great lights, and whose kindness is ever present.”*

*Ohr Hadash al tzion ta-ir, V'nizkeh hulanu m'heyra l'oro*—May a new light shine upon Zion, and may we be worthy to delight in its splendor.

Shabbat Shalom,

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