

DIVINE REFLECTIONS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

One of the most challenging issues confronting a Jew at all stages of growth is the need to find a healthy balance between developing and expressing one's identity and conforming to the Torah's norms.

The drive for self-assertion is a lifelong force, emerging in early infancy. It manifests in children in their resistance to parental authority and the tendency to be overprotective of toys and turf.

The tantrums and irritability that mark the teenage years reflect this same innate need for self-definition. An adolescent's fragile, maturing sense of self remains under assault as he or she reacts to relentless peer pressure.

Adults, too, must grapple with this push for independence and the corresponding yearning for self-definition. As life progresses, the issue tends to fade somewhat into the background. The pressing challenges of livelihood and children occupy our minds and energies, while also anchoring our social standing and self-image.

In subtle guises, however, the quest for self-promotion persists as we move along the road of life, mirrored in one's desire for status, power and other ego-props.

Strangely, the accomplishments that we were certain would cement our identity never fully do so. Who are we at our core? We know how we wish to be perceived-but is that a reflection of our true self, or merely a carefully crafted image designed to impress others? As well as we know ourselves, part of that inner self remains a stranger.

Some of our greatest Torah thinkers have attempted to unravel this mystery of the ever-elusive self. They have taught us that who we truly are, in the most fundamental sense, is determined by our deepest innermost aspirations.

Forgetting about public opinion for a moment, what do you really want deep down? Who is that person you want to be?

The answer to that question puts one on the path to true self-definition. What your deepest ideals are-who you really want to be-is the best way of describing who you actually are.

Though we may constantly veer off course from the path leading to our ultimate self-realization, our identity can still rightfully be defined by who we ideally yearn to be.

This important thought about what makes up the core of a Jew's deepest self may be alluded to in the opening lines of this week's Torah portion: "Now you shall command the Jewish people that they should take pure pressed olive oil for illumination, to kindle the ner tamid."

Our sages tell us that this continuously burning light, the Western lamp of the menorah, was never extinguished. Its cup was replenished daily with the purest oil attainable. With great devotion and in exacting detail, only a few drops of select oil were extracted from each olive tree and carefully primed to illuminate the ner tamid.

The questions bounce at us from the text: Why are all the Jewish people commanded to participate in this mitzvah, when only one person-Aaron, the High Priest-was permitted to ignite this light? Why the emphasis on only pure olive oil? Wouldn't any high quality oil produce the same flame? And why the need altogether for an eternal light to be constantly aflame and aglow in the tabernacle?

The commentaries explain that the ner tomid is a reflection of Hashem's presence that constantly animates and gives light to the universe. This Divine energy remains invisible to the naked eye, hidden under the guise of "mother nature," yet its presence is clearly visible for those who wish to see the Creator in creation.

The commentaries further explain that this ner tamid is apparent in each of us. Every human being is an olam kotton, a miniature world. Each of us has a ner tomid, an ever-burning flame of Hashem's presence, embedded in our soul. It is what we call the "pintele neshama."

This pintele neshama emits pangs of conscience when our actions betray our beliefs, and when our bodies fail to act in consonance with our soul's Divine moorings. The soul reflects our innermost aspirations to fulfill our life mission and to remain connected to our Source.

Even when we are consumed with stirrings of jealousy and lust; even when we are struggling to secure our livelihood in the degenerate atmosphere of the marketplace, the vibrations of our pintele neshama are always audible.

That ner tomid emits a constant glow that is pure and untainted. Even when the mitzvos we perform are tarnished with self-interest, our true and constant sublime yearning to fulfill His will in the purest way possible is what defines us.

When we constantly reaffirm the stirrings of our ner tomid and ensure that they determine our life's direction, we will then succeed in shedding the unsavory thoughts and actions that are but a façade around our intrinsic core. Keeping a pure ner tomid aflame at all times is a mitzva that is instructed to each and every Jew for all future generations. Only when we are suffused with its spiritual glow will our bodies ceaseless striving for self-definition and self-realization reach fruition, allowing our everlasting flame to be locked for eternity with its eternal Maker.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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