

THE ETERNAL LIGHT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One of the artifacts of any synagogue is its ner tamid - the eternal light placed near the Holy Ark that contains the scrolls of the Torah. The origin of the ner tamid is found in this week's parsha of Tzav. Here the Jewish people are commanded by God to have an eternal flame constantly burning on the altar of the Mishkan and later in the temple in Jerusalem. The Midrash teaches us that the flame on the altar resembles a crouching lion and was miraculous in the fact that even when the altar was covered with its protective cloth, while being transported in the desert, the flame was not extinguished nor did it burn the cloth.

This miraculous permanent flame is a further symbol of God's eternal presence amongst Israel. But the flame symbolizes more than that. It is the symbol of the light of the Torah and the warmth that traditional Jewish life always represents. It teaches the lesson of eternity - of the long view of life and events, and of the unquenchable love between God and His people and of the Jewish people and their Torah. King Solomon in Shir Hashirim describes it: "[Even] the great waters cannot quench [the fire of] love" that exists between God and Israel and Israel and the Torah. That fire is a crouching lion always ready to burst forth and pounce on the opportunity to show its love and tenacity regarding God and His Torah. It is truly the fire of eternity that has preserved Israel till this very day.

The kohanim -the priests, the descendants of Aharon - were responsible for the maintenance of the eternal fire. Today, we are all responsible for the preservation of that eternal flame within our families, communities and the Jewish people as a whole. There is no doubt that we are aided in this task by the Divine Will that has always fueled that eternal flame. But Heaven's aid in no way diminishes our responsibility towards the preservation of that flame. The rabbis of the Talmud long ago warned us that ein somchin al haness - it is forbidden to rely upon miracles to save and preserve us. It is our tenacity to tradition and Torah that creates the miracles, so to speak, which guarantee our continued survival, creativity and vitality.

The eternal flame marches with us through all of our history. It has the great quality of warming and comforting us and yet does not burn or singe us. The Torah emphatically warns us lo tichbeh - do not allow that fire to be extinguished. Study, Torah education, observance, moral behavior, and an optimistic view are all the means to preserve this fire and not allow it to be extinguished. In a world that contains vast patches of darkness and despair, the crouching lion flame of Jewish tradition lights our way towards a better future and a more meaningful present. Our success in preserving this flame and passing it on to future generations is the true challenge and test of our generation. We

cannot in any way fail this test.

Shabat shalom. Chag sameach.

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