

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Tetzaveh/ Shabbat Zachor
March 4, 2023 *** Adar 11, 2023

Tetzaveh in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1320/jewish/Tetzaveh-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Tetzaveh," means "Command" and it is found in Exodus 27:20.

G-d tells Moses to receive from the children of Israel pure olive oil to feed the "everlasting flame" of the menorah, which Aaron is to kindle each day, "from evening till morning."

The priestly garments, to be worn by the kohanim (priests) while serving in the Sanctuary, are described. All kohanim wore: 1) the ketonet—a full-length linen tunic; 2) michnasayim—linen breeches; 3) mitznefet or migba'at—a linen turban; 4) avnet—a long sash wound above the waist.

In addition, the kohen gadol (high priest) wore: 5) the efod—an apron-like garment made of blue-, purple- and red-dyed wool, linen and gold thread; 6) the choshen—a breastplate containing twelve precious stones inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel; 7) the me'il—a cloak of blue wool, with gold bells and decorative pomegranates on its hem; 8) the tzitz—a golden plate worn on the forehead, bearing the inscription "Holy to G-d."

Tetzaveh also includes G-d's detailed instructions for the seven-day initiation of Aaron and his four sons—Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar—into the priesthood, and for the making of the golden altar, on which the ketoret (incense) was burned.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: I Samuel 15: 2-34

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/647445/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's special *haftarah* discusses G-d's command to destroy the people of Amalek. This to avenge Amalek's unprovoked attack on the Israelites that is described in the *Zachor* Torah reading.

Samuel conveys to King Saul G-d's command to wage battle against the Amalekites, and to leave no survivors—neither human nor beast. Saul mobilizes the Israelite military and attacks Amalek. They kill the entire population with the exception of the king, Agag, and they also spare the best of the cattle and sheep. G-d reveals Himself to Samuel. "I regret that I have made Saul king," G-d says. "For he has turned back from following Me, and he has not fulfilled My words." The next morning Samuel travels to Saul and confronts him. Saul defends himself, saying that the cattle was spared to be used as sacrificial offerings for G-d. Samuel responds: "Does G-d have as great a delight in burnt offerings and

peace-offerings, as in obeying the voice of G-d? Behold, to obey is better than a peace-offering; to hearken, than the fat of rams. . . . Since you rejected the word of G-d, He has rejected you from being a king."

Saul admits his wrongdoing and invites the prophet to join him on his return home. Samuel refuses his offer. "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you, today; and has given it to your fellow who is better than you." Samuel then kills the Amalekite king.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Inspirations & Perspiration: Tetzaveh by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tetzaveh/inspiration-perspiration/>

Beethoven rose each morning at dawn and made himself coffee. He was fastidious about this: each cup had to be made with exactly sixty beans, which he counted out each time. He would then sit at his desk and compose until 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon. Subsequently he would go for a long walk, taking with him a pencil and some sheets of music paper to record any ideas that came to him on the way. Each night after supper he would have a beer, smoke a pipe, and go to bed early, 10:00 p.m. at the latest.

Anthony Trollope who as his day job worked for the Post Office, paid a groom to wake him every day at 5:00 a.m. By 5:30 a.m. he would be at his desk, and he then proceeded to write for exactly three hours, working against the clock to produce 250 words each quarter-hour. Through this method, he wrote forty-seven novels, many of them three volumes in length, as well as sixteen other books. If he finished a novel before the day's three hours were over, he would immediately take a fresh piece of paper and begin the next.

Immanuel Kant, the most brilliant philosopher of modern times, was famous for his routine. As Heinrich Heine put it, "Getting up, drinking coffee, writing, giving lectures, eating, taking a walk, everything had its set time, and the neighbours knew precisely that the time was 3:30 p.m. when Kant stepped outside his door with his grey coat and the Spanish stick in his hand."

These details, together with more than 150 other examples drawn from the great philosophers, artists, composers, and writers come from a book by Mason Currey entitled *Daily Rituals: How Great Minds Make Time, Find Inspiration, and Get to Work*.^[1] The book's point is simple. Most creative people have daily rituals. These form the soil in which the seeds of their invention grow.

In some cases they deliberately took on jobs they did not need to do, simply to establish structure and routine in their lives. A typical example was the poet Wallace Stevens, who took a position as an insurance lawyer at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company where he worked until his death. He said that having a job was one of the best things that could happen to him because "it

introduces discipline and regularity into one's life."

Note the paradox. These were all innovators, pioneers, ground-breakers, trail-blazers, who formulated new ideas, originated new forms of expression, did things no one had done before in quite that way. They broke the mould. They changed the landscape. They ventured into the unknown.

Yet their daily lives were the opposite: ritualised and routine. One could even call them boring. Why so? Because – the saying is famous, though we don't know who first said it – genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration. The paradigm-shifting scientific discovery, the path-breaking research, the wildly successful new product, the brilliant novel, the award-winning film. are almost always the result of many years of long hours and attention to detail. Being creative involves hard work.

The ancient Hebrew word for hard work is avodah. It is also the word that means "serving God." What applies in the arts, sciences, business, and industry, applies equally to the life of the spirit. Achieving any form of spiritual growth requires sustained effort and daily rituals.

Hence the remarkable aggadic passage in which various Sages put forward their idea of klal gadol baTorah, "the great principle of the Torah." Ben Azzai says it is the verse, "This is the book of the chronicles of man: On the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God" (Gen. 5:1). Ben Zoma says that there is a more embracing principle, "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). Ben Nannas says there is a yet more embracing principle: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Ben Pazzi says we find a more embracing principle still. He quotes a verse from this parsha: "One sheep shall be offered in the morning, and a second in the afternoon" (Ex. 29:39) – or, as we might say nowadays, Shacharit, Mincha, and Maariv. In a word: "routine." The passage concludes: The law follows Ben Pazzi.[2]

The meaning of Ben Pazzi's statement is clear: all the high ideals in the world – the human person as God's image, belief in God's unity, and the love of neighbour – count for little until they are turned into habits of action that become habits of the heart. We can all recall moments of insight when we had a great idea, a transformative thought, the glimpse of a project that could change our lives. A day, a week, or a year later the thought has been forgotten or become a distant memory, at best a might-have-been.

The people who change the world, whether in small or epic ways, are those who turn peak experiences into daily routines, who know that the details matter, and who have developed the discipline of hard work, sustained over time.

Judaism's greatness is that it takes high ideals and exalted visions – image of God, faith in God, love of neighbour – and turns them into patterns of behaviour. Halacha (Jewish law) involves a set of routines that – like those of the great

creative minds – reconfigures the brain, giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think, and act.

Much of Judaism must seem to outsiders, and sometimes to insiders also, boring, prosaic, mundane, repetitive, routine, obsessed with details, and bereft for the most part of drama or inspiration. Yet that is precisely what writing the novel, composing the symphony, directing the film, perfecting the killer app, or building a billion-dollar business is, most of the time. It is a matter of hard work, focused attention, and daily rituals. That is where all sustainable greatness comes from. We have developed in the West a strange view of religious experience: that it's what overwhelms you when something happens completely outside the run of normal experience. You climb a mountain and look down. You are miraculously saved from danger. You find yourself part of a vast and cheering crowd. It's how the German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) defined “the holy”: as a mystery (*mysterium*) both terrifying (*tremendum*) and fascinating (*fascinans*). You are awed by the presence of something vast. We have all had such experiences. But that is all they are: experiences. They linger in the memory, but they are not part of everyday life. They are not woven into the texture of our character. They do not affect what we do or achieve or become. Judaism is about changing us so that we become creative artists whose greatest creation is our own life.[3] And that needs daily rituals: Shacharit, Minchah, Ma'ariv, the food we eat, the way we behave at work or in the home, the choreography of holiness which is the special contribution of the priestly dimension of Judaism, set out in this week's parsha and throughout the book of Leviticus.

These rituals have an effect. We now know through PET and fMRI scans that repeated spiritual exercise reconfigures the brain. It gives us inner resilience. It makes us more grateful. It gives us a sense of basic trust in the source of our being. It shapes our identity, the way we act and talk and think. Ritual is to spiritual greatness what practice is to a tennis player, daily writing disciplines are to a novelist, and reading company accounts are to Warren Buffett. They are the precondition of high achievement. Serving God is *avodah*, which means hard work.

If you seek sudden inspiration, then work at it every day for a year or a lifetime. That is how it comes. As a famous golfer is said to have said when asked for the secret of his success: “I was just lucky. But the funny thing is that the harder I practise, the luckier I become.” The more you seek spiritual heights, the more you need the ritual and routine of *halacha*, the Jewish “way” to God.[1] Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals* (New York: Knopf, 2013). [2] The passage is cited in the introduction to the commentary *HaKotev on Ein Yaakov*, the collected aggadic passages of the Talmud. It is also quoted by Maharal in *Netivot Olam, Ahavat Re'a 1*. [3] A point made by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his book *Halakhic Man*.

Parshat Tetzaveh: All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter by Shimshon Stuart Siegel

<https://www.growtorah.org/shemot/2022/02/09-parshat-tetzaveh-all-that-is-gold-does-not-glitter>

All that is gold, truly does not glitter.[1] Parshat Tetzaveh continues the instructions for the building of the Mishkan, which began in last week's parsha. The Mishkan is the center of the Jewish people's camp, the locus of the Divine Presence on earth, and the precursor of the Beit Hamikdash in Yerushalayim. Appropriately, the instructions feature a long list of rare metals, fine skins and fabrics, precious gems and gold. A lot of gold.

In Terumah and Tetzaveh, gold is mentioned nearly 50 times, far more than any other material.[2] Gold covers most of the Mishkan and its furniture, including the Aron Hakodesh, which is topped with two solid gold keruvim. The Cohen Gadol, who leads the service of the Mishkan, is draped in gold: gold chains, gold bells, gold rings, gold settings for precious stones; there is even gold woven into the fabric of his garments.[3] The tzitz, a solid gold headplate, crowns the ensemble. Such a finely adorned sanctuary and spiritual leader would not be out of place in our own time. Our society has a passion for gold and jewelry. We mark significant life transitions with jewelry. We regard finery as a symbol of sophistication, love, and inherent worth.

However, behind every gold ring in today's modern world, lies an array of damaging effects to the earth. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), hard-rock mining, which includes the mining of gold, causes both environmental and human health hazards. The extent of these hazards are more far reaching than one might imagine.

Chemical contamination is an unavoidable consequence of artisanal mining. Mercury and cyanide are common and cheap chemicals used to extract gold from the earth and to help separate gold from other minerals in the soil. Excess mercury is often heated up to remove from the gold and evaporates into the air. From the air, it is then deposited into croplands and water sources, causing both environmental destruction and human health risks.[4] Cyanide use is effective and cheap, but accidents have happened, affecting wildlife and river systems in the vicinity of the mine.[5] In 2000, a mine reservoir in Romania broke its dam, causing a toxic waste spill that polluted a tributary of the Danube River. The spill contaminated drinking water for 2.5 million people, killed approximately 200 tons of fish, and killed many animals in the surrounding ecosystem. That accident, the second that year, was described as the worst environmental disaster since the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident in the Ukraine.[6]

Exposure to mercury by the indigenous populations who practice artisanal mining of gold is a major issue for communities in the Amazon Basin, Africa, Indonesia,

Philippines, Laos, and China. Estimates say there may be over 10 million people involved in artisanal gold mining, including up to 500,000 women and children directly mining gold and being exposed to mercury. There is little or no provision of health services to miners or their families. In 2010, 400 children died in a village in Zamfara State, Nigeria, and at least 3,000 were poisoned by lead contamination from a nearby artisanal mining site.[7] The Government of Nigeria, along with Medicine Sans Frontiers, provided health education, and environmental remediation is in progress, but several families have been left unremediated. Other populations near artisanal mining have never been tested for exposure and likely remain at risk. This is just one area of convergence of environmental responsibility and human rights.

Loss of biodiversity is an unintended, but serious side effect of gold mining. Land clearing for mine construction and expansion causes deforestation, which leads to loss of biodiversity and has ecological impacts no matter the scale. When plants are removed from soil, roots and stems can no longer soak up excess water and keep soil in place. This can result in erosion and landslides. Landslides block rivers and streams and can cause harm to the people working in the mines. [8]

Injustice, pollution, poison, and waste - this is the legacy of today's gold. And yet the Torah prescribes the clothing of the Cohanim as being "l'kavod ul'tifaret," "for honor and splendor." [9] The exquisite golden appointments of the Cohen Gadol and the Mishkan concentrated the power of gold on a singular aim, creating a space for Hashem's presence in the midst of humanity. It would be impossible for this sacred craftsmanship to be done with dirty gold. In fact, the Mishkan was made entirely of reused and recycled materials. As we see in Terumah and Ki Tissa, B'nei Yisra'el donate the materials for the Mishkan as part of a process of spiritually rectifying and elevating the wealth taken from Mitzrayim. [10]

The Cohen Gadol's pure gold headplate bore the engraved slogan "Holy to the L-rd." Gold that originates in injustice and destruction and is used to satisfy individual desires does not reflect this holy potential. Such adornments serve our vanity but do not promote our awareness of the Divine or the unity of our world. The time has come to follow the Torah's example by ensuring that our gold is obtained and used with a pure conscience.

As the truth about gold mining becomes too apparent to ignore, jewelry producers and retailers are taking steps to align themselves with ethical gold mining and acquisition. Tiffany and other major jewelry retailers have signed on to an ethical gold campaign, "No Dirty Gold." [11] The campaign suggests purchasing gold only from retailers who pledge to use ethical, environmentally safe gold. Of course, even ethical mining leaves a mark on the earth. Recycling and reusing old precious metals and gems is the most environmentally friendly way to attain

new, personalized jewelry. There is a growing grassroots movement of boutique jewelry artists who only use recycled materials. Many of us have collections of old jewelry from parents and grandparents that often sit in jewelry boxes or safe-deposit boxes. Recycling and reusing these beloved heirlooms creates precious new pieces that honor the memory of the past while promoting a viable and ethical future.

The ultimate challenge is the cultivation of a holy, honorable, and harmonious relationship with gold. Let us reevaluate our perceived need for gold and ask ourselves if the jewelry we buy truly reflects our values. As we adorn our gold, are we aware of the destruction it is causing the earth, as well as the villagers and animals living near the gold mines? As we celebrate our happiest occasions with traditional gifts of gold jewelry, are we linking our joy to Hashem's full earth? As conscious Jews, we must start viewing our use of gold through the pure glimmer of the Cohen's golden headplate, and be sure that we are adorning ourselves not just in splendor, but with honor and holiness. (*Shimshon Stuart Siegel is the director of Impact Boston at Brandeis University, a service learning program for Jewish teens.*) [1] The Fellowship of the Ring, J.R.R. Tolkien. [2] Shemot 25-28, multiple verses [3] Rashi on Shemot 28:5, explained in Shemot 39:1-5 [4] Ibid. [5] See here. [6] "New toxic spill hits Eastern Europe." BBC News, Friday, 10 March, 2000, 23:59 GMT. [7] Medicine Sans Frontiers 2012 [8] USAID GEMS guidelines. Full PDF can be found here. [9] Shemot, 28:2 [10] Shemot 25:2; Shemot 30:12-16 [11] Oxfam America. See also NY Times.

[Ahasuerus in Aaron's Clothes by Bex Stern-Rosenblatt](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ba6uIL0qL10eU6eSpv3_J_knHWSZlfsM/view)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ba6uIL0qL10eU6eSpv3_J_knHWSZlfsM/view

This week is Shabbat Zachor. Just before Purim, we are called to remember what Amalek, from whose tribe Haman descends, did to us. We read, "And it shall be, when the LORD your God grants you respite from all your enemies around in the land that the LORD your God is about to give you in estate to take hold of it, you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens, you shall not forget." But it is not while firmly planted in the land that we will experience triumph over Amalek. Rather, it is in the exile described in Megillat Esther that we will defeat Amalek's descendants.

There is something very bitter about this. The entirety of the Torah is concerned with getting us into Israel and teaching us how to live there. Yet as readers of the Tanakh, we know that we will not remain in the land for long. We know exile is coming. We know the beautiful systems described in the Torah will have to be adjusted, reinterpreted, to work in an existence outside of being able to exercise full sovereignty in the land.

This week's parashah is replete with hints of the loss to come. Ostensibly, the parashah describes the clothing of priests and how they are to be consecrated. We read vivid descriptions of color and finery. The visuals are overwhelming in

their majesty. However, hidden behind nearly every visual is the knowledge that these things and these people will be lost. What should be an eternal institution will be taken away from us.

The parashah opens by listing those who will be consecrated as priests: Aaron and his four sons, Nadav and Avihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. But we know that nearly as soon as the consecration ceremony has ended, Nadav and Avihu will die. Their impending loss changes the feeling of the description of this ceremony. One could read it as we read the Akeda. These sons are not being gussied up to serve God, but rather they are being given their very tools which will lead to their deaths.

The sense of doom underlying pageantry continues in the next verse. We read, "And you shall make sacred garments for Aaron your brother for glory and for splendor." These garments will be "gold and indigo and purple and crimson." These clothes are a really, really big deal. Medieval commentator Sforno explains that the "glory," the *kavod*, is to give *kavod* to God. The "splendor," the *tiferet*, is to inspire fear and awe among the Israelites. By wearing these clothes, Aaron embodies and allows for Israel's relationship with God.

Therefore, it is absolutely horrifying what will happen to these clothes. Rabbi Yosei bar Chanina explains (Megillah 12a) that Ahasuerus wore these clothes. He quotes Esther 1:4, describing when Ahasuerus held a feast during which "he showed the wealth of his kingdom's *kavod* and the worth of the *tiferet* of his greatness." The repetition of these two specific words point us towards understanding that what Ahasuerus displayed was none other than the fine clothes of the high priest. These are clothes that are handed down, father to son, upon the death of the father. To imagine the chain of transmission disrupted so badly that a despicable foreign king ends up parading the symbol of our relationship with God during a bacchanalian feast is disheartening. The *kavod* we gave to God becomes a celebration of the wealth of Persia.

However, the story does not end there. Later on in Megillat Esther, when Ahasuerus issues the decree reversing Haman's decision and allows Jews to exterminate whoever attacks them, Mordechai also takes action. We read, "Mordecai came out before the king in royal garb, indigo and white, and a great golden diadem and a wrap of crimson linen." These clothes, this "royal garb" appears to be the very clothing of the high priest which Ahasuerus had displayed so disrespectfully. Mordechai wears them now.

All that had been made wrong is made right. Almost. While we take our clothes and our relationship with God back, we do not yet take our sovereignty or our land back. Success comes in exile. The promise of the Torah has not been made real again. We return again to the injunction of what to do about Amalek. In exile, we wipe out Haman, we wipe out the remembrance of Amalek. But we are also commanded not to forget. Perhaps this command points us towards not forgetting

what we have lost. We are instructed to recall our original experience of *kavod* and *tiferet*, and to strive to return to that state. (*Bex Stern Rosenblatt is the Conservative Yeshiva's Faculty-in-Residence for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States, teaching Tanach, using the techniques of close-reading, theater, feminist readings, and traditional commentators. Bex also directs the CY's recruitment efforts in North America.*)

[Death is Not Always the Worst Option by Vered Hollander-Goldfarb](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ba6uL0qL10eU6eSpv3_J_knHWSZlfsm/view)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ba6uL0qL10eU6eSpv3_J_knHWSZlfsm/view

Spoiler alert: It ends badly.

The Shabbat before Purim is known as Shabbat Zachor for the short passage read reminding us of the commandment to remember (“zachor”) what Amalek did to us when we left Egypt and erase their memory. The story of Purim has been associated with Amalek because Haman was an Agagite. Agag is the name of the king of Amalek that Saul spares when he kills the rest of the Amalek people, as is told in this haftarah.

Samuel the prophet instructs King Saul to kill all of Amalek, and he fulfills the commandment. Almost. While ruthlessly killing the people of Amalek he leaves Agag alive, making us wonder about the logic of such a move. My grandfather believed that leaders are hesitant to demonstrate to their own people that leaders can be killed or removed.

The day following the battle Samuel, who got some insider’s information from God, arrives to have a harsh conversation with Saul. Since Saul did not see it fit to kill Agag, the Amalekite king, Samuel orders Agag brought before him. “Then Samuel said, “Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.” So Agag came to him cautiously. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.” (15:32).

The commentators were conflicted about the meaning of Agag’s statement. Did he assume that Samuel would spare him? If that was the case, there was no need to call for him, Saul had already decided not to kill him. Perhaps his referral to the bitterness had a different meaning.

Ralbag is a good representation of those who read Agag’s statement as a misunderstanding of the situation that he was in: “It would seem that Agag was fearful when he was presented before Samuel... but when he saw Samuel, whose form reflected his kindness and mercy, he said “indeed, the bitterness of death has passed for I have fallen into the hands of someone who will have mercy on me.”

According to Ralbag, Agag was evaluating the situation based on the risk to his life, an understandable concern in a war setting when all those around him had been killed. He misunderstood Samuel’s role in the situation and thought that appealing to him would save his life.

But some found it difficult to read the situation this way. Abarbanel and Malbim

both thought it was more complicated, noting that Agag was after all a king. The bitterness that Agag is speaking about is not death but rather his current situation as a lowly prisoner. "...for until now he was given a disgraceful life of slavery rather than death, and this is very difficult in the eyes of great people, more than death. Therefore, he [Agag] spoke of bitterness, for this situation was more bitter than death, and so he was pleased with his death." (Malbim).

Samuel kills Agag "before the Lord in Gilgal" (15:33). Agag lost his life but may have retained his dignity. Depending on which reading you choose, that might have been a bad, but not the worst, outcome as far as a king was concerned.

(Vered Hollander-Goldfarb teaches Tanach and Medieval Commentators at the Conservative Yeshiva and is a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly message on the weekly Torah portion.)

[The Ner Tamid: Must It Always be Lit: by Joshua Kulp](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ba6uL0qL10eU6eSpv3_J_knHWSZlfsm/view)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ba6uL0qL10eU6eSpv3_J_knHWSZlfsm/view

Jewish law was designed with a system for ranking the importance of most mitzvot. A mitzvah that is from the Torah (*de'orayta*) takes precedence over a mitzvah that was created by the rabbis (*derabanan*). A mitzvah usually takes precedence over a custom, and when it does not, this is usually noted. Avoiding transgressions takes precedence over performing a precept. While of course there are many exceptions to these rules, they serve well as rules of thumb.

However, in the popular mind, this is not how Judaism works. Oftentimes there are customs that in people's minds far supersede their technical, halakhic importance. The greatest example of this is Mourner's Kaddish, a custom that does not appear in the Talmud and took quite a long time to fully develop. From a technical, source-oriented, halakhic perspective Kaddish is not particularly important. But of course, in actual practice, for most people the recitation of Kaddish is the most important aspect of mourning.

There is a practice alluded to in this week's parashah that I believe also fits into this category, a practice which is at best alluded to in classical sources, is found in only a few medieval halakhic books, but which plays a prominent role in Jewish lives and probably has for a long time. The first verse of this week's parashah reads, "You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly (*ner tamid*)."

On many occasion, someone has come up to me in a synagogue and said, "Rabbi," (to which I instinctively reply that I am not a rabbi), "the light on the Ner Tamid is out." When they come into the synagogue many Jews are quick to notice the Ner Tamid, and if it's out, someone, usually the rabbi, is going to hear about it.

But where does this custom come from? Does the Ner Tamid have to always be lit? Professor Israel Ta-Shema addresses the history of the Ner Tamid in an article in which he discusses the transfer of Temple law to the synagogue. In

Ezekiel 11:16, God says, “I have indeed removed them far among the nations and have scattered them among the countries, and I have become to them a lesser sanctuary (*mikdash me’at*) in the countries where they have gone.” On Megillah 29a, Rabbi Yitzchak says that this “*mikdash me’at*” refers to synagogues and study halls. Ta-Shema points out that in classic rabbinic literature the concept of the synagogue as a “mini-Temple” usually refers to restrictions—activities one should not do in a synagogue out of respect for its sanctity. The major exception to this is the lighting of a symbolic lamp in replacement of the lamp found in the Temple. In this one way, Jews have for centuries taken Temple practice and brought it into the synagogue.

The earliest explicit reference to this practice is found in a geniza fragment of a midrash published by Levi Ginsberg, “Three sections of the Torah are prefaced by the word *tzav* [command] because they had been established immediately and for all generations: the sections on lights, ... As for the section on lights, whether in the Temple, the synagogues, or the academies, Jews are obligated [to light them ritually] since synagogues and academies are similar to the Temple, as it is written: ‘I will be for them a lesser sanctuary’” [Ezek. 11:16].

Ta-Shema demonstrates that many medieval sources discuss the lighting of a symbolic lamp in the synagogue. For many authorities, these lamps are not simply meant to provide light—they, like the Hannukah candles, are symbols, and as such, some authorities held that it is prohibited to derive benefit from the fire. For instance, the 12th century Sefer Hahasidim writes, “One who lost his coins in the synagogue at night should not take the lamp that is in front of the Ark to look for his coins.” While some of geonim (Babylonian leaders in the 9th-11th centuries) disagreed with this position and do allow for the common use of these lamps, in the popular imagination this lamp was a holy symbol—not just simple lighting for the building.

To return to my original framing of this issue—the technical status versus the popular imagination, the Ner Tamid never quite made its way into the realm of a firm technical obligation. The Shulkhan Arukh (Orah Hayim, 151:9) writes, “It is customary to treat them (synagogues) with honor...and it is customary to light lamps in them in order to honor them.” The Mishnah Berurah (late 19th century) notes that the custom was to light before people came to pray to symbolize the notion that the Shekhinah (God’s presence) arrives before the minyan. Like the Temple lamp which was lit only at night (see [Rashi](#)), the Ner Tamid in the synagogue does not seem to have been lit at all times, but mostly at night. Indeed, the Shulkhan Arukh (Orah Hayim 514:5) refers to lighting the lamp in the synagogue on Yom Tov—clearly these lamps were not always lit. With the advent of electricity, and the adoption of the use of an electric light for the Ner Tamid (primarily due to safety) it is not difficult to leave this lamp on at all times.

However, there is no halakhic necessity to do so. (*Rabbi Joshua Kulp is an American-Israeli Talmudic Scholar*)

Yahrtzeits

Karen Brandis remembers her father Stanley Grossel on Tuesday March 7th.

Amy Copper remembers her father Norman Pearlman on Thursday March 9th.