Tetzaveh Torah Study – some interesting observations

There are some interesting situations that are going on with this Parsha, and they all seem connected.

Parashah Overview

- The Children of Israel are commanded to bring pure olive oil for the ner tamid, "a constantly burning light," above the sanctuary. (Exodus 27:20-21)
- Aaron and his sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, are chosen to serve God as priests. (Exodus 28:1)
- God instructs Moses to make special clothes for the priests. (Exodus 28:2-43)
- Aaron and his sons are ordained in a seven-day ceremony. (Exodus 29:1-46)
- Aaron is commanded to burn incense on an altar made of acacia wood every morning and evening. (Exodus 30:1-10)

Focal Point

You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. (see drash at end)

Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of the Meeting, outside the curtain that is over the Pact [to burn] from evening to morning before Adonai. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages. You shall bring forward your brother Aaron, with his sons, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests: Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron. (Exodus 27:20-28:1)

First, this Parsha is almost always in the vicinity of the 7th of the Hebrew month of Adar. It just so happens that this is the date of Moshe Rabbeinu's yahrtzeit – the anniversary of Moses's passing. It also, according to Midrash, is his date of birth!

Second, Moshe's name appears at least once in every single Parsha from Sefer Shemot through Sefer BeMidbar EXCEPT this one! His name is nowhere to be found! Happy Birthday? What's up with that?

"And as for you, You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly." [Exodus 27: 20]

The above is the opening verse of this week's Torah portion, T'Tzaveh. The instruction given regarding the collection and lighting of the lamps (menorah) makes no mention of Moses' name. The command appears impersonal, even cold. In fact, Alter's translation of the Torah reflects a detached almost discourteous attitude: "As for you, you shall command the Israelites. . ."

A terrible sin was committed by the People at the base of Mount Sinai. I refer, of course, to the incident of the Golden Calf (Shemot 32). HaShem becomes so angry that He/She/It threatens to

kill all the People start over again with Moshe! (Shemot 32:10) Moshe does a particularly deft bit of negotiation, presenting an ultimatum to G-d that, if He follows through on the threat to destroy the People, then "You can erase my name from Your book!" (Shemot 32:31) Long story short, HaShem let the People live, but He/She/It does something the Torah doesn't tell us about. While HaShem didn't delete Moshe's name altogether, He STILL deleted Moshe's name from one parsha of the Torah. And THIS is that Parsha! Moshe is addressed as "YOU" but not by name.

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What need was there for a continual light—especially at night when no one is about. What was the point of having a lamp, a Menorah in front of the ark, when all the Israelites were asleep, and especially when no sacrificial or sacred rituals were to be performed? Except when the High Priest ascends the platform to light the lamps, the illumination shed in the darkness during the night is unseen and unappreciated. The flames flicker in solitude, embraced by darkness and utter silence.

Symbolic meaning is given by many to the lamps and their illumination. Famously, Isaac Luria suggested that the six branches of the Menorah represent the seven scientific and academic disciplines, (See note, Etz Hayim p 816, Torah Commentary of USCJ and Rabbinical Assembly). Others saw in the lamps the Nation of Israel's mission to bring light to the nations. The Menorah among all the other sacred artifacts placed in the Tabernacle, and later in the two temples continues to carry pride of place, and has become the official seal of the State of Israel.

Yet at the root of this ritual of the lighting of the lamps and the flames which quietly glow through the night there lies a continual mystery. At once it is a solitary illumination but it also draws upon our imagination even when the lamps are left alone.

There is something extraordinary about the lamps that burn in front of the ark, alone and rarely seen. There is no priest who is present all night. Except when he lights the light as night approaches, the lamps stand alone. And every night he returns to relight the lamps till the oil is exhausted by morning.

The Yahrzeit candle, for example, when lit is imagined to be a symbol of the soul of the deceased which remains alive in the hearts of those who have been bereaved—even years after the death of the loved one. And at night when no one is about and the candle continues to burn, its very solitude is a sign that even though we may no longer physically see the ones we have lost to time and life, their souls still shines in our hearts as an eternal remembrance.

This was like the flame before the Ark in the ancient Tabernacle and the Temples. A flame that reminds us, especially when it stands alone, that it shines even in moments when it is most dark. It is a spark of eternity.

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahmani was right, of course. The light is for you and not for Me, God says. For God is eternal; but the light is a continual reminder for you that there is illumination, even at night, even when you are not there. The flickering candle is a glimmer of what is truly immortal and never-ending.

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Nothing But Radish Oil – by Ilana Kurshan

This week's parashah opens with God's instructions to Moshe concerning the oil used for lighting the Menorah in the Mishkan: "You shall instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly" (Shemot 27:20). The rabbis of the Mishnah (Menachot 8:4) explain that it was necessary to kindle the Menorah in the Tabernacle using oil of the highest quality, taken from the olives that grew at the very tops of the trees, which were crushed and put into baskets so that the oil might collect in a vessel below. Why was it necessary to use such high-grade oil? The Talmudic rabbis, in explaining this mitzvah, enter into a discussion about wealth, poverty, and the way we honor God, shedding light on their value system as well as our own.

The rabbis consider the nature of this oil in tractate Menachot 86b, which is about grain offerings in the Temple. Nearly all grain offerings were made of a mixture of fine flour, frankincense, and oil, and the Talmud asks whether the oil used in the Menachot offerings, too, had to be the same highest-quality oil required for kindling the Menorah. They respond that no, the Menachot offerings did not need to be made from such high-quality oil. Their response is based on a close reading of the first verse in our parashah, where the "oil of beaten olives" is specifically "for lighting," and not for any other purpose. Thus the rabbis conclude that such oil is required for Menorah, but is optional when it comes to the grain offerings.

Why require oil of the highest quality for the Menorah but not for the Menachot? Rabbi Elazar explains that the reason is because such oil is very expensive, and "the Torah is sparing of the money of the Jewish people." Rashi clarifies that the Menorah did not require very much oil, and was kindled only once a day, unlike the grain offerings, which were brought frequently. Furthermore, grain offerings were often brought as a poor man's alternative to the more expensive animal sacrifices; to require high-quality oil would defeat the purpose of this more affordable option.

It is for this reason, too, that the rabbis permit lighting Shabbat candles using all sorts of oils; not everyone can afford high-quality olive oil. When the wealthy Rabbi Tarfon ruled that only olive oil was acceptable (M. Shabbat 2:2), he was met with significant backlash. The midrash explains that Rabbi Yohanan ben Nuri stood up to Rabbi Tarfon, insisting: "What will the people of Babylon do, who have nothing but sesame oil? What will the people of Media do, who have nothing but nut oil? What will the people of Alexandria do, who have nothing but radish oil?" (Tanchuma Behaalotcha 1). Rabbi Tarfon's insistence on olive oil would impose significant financial hardship for communities where such oil was not readily available.

The notion that “the Torah is sparing of the money of the Jewish people” comes up at several points throughout the Talmud and midrash, where it is often pitted against the contrasting principle that there should be “no poverty in a place of wealth.” On the one hand, the Torah does not wish to place an undue financial burden on us; on the other hand, one’s actions should not be motivated by a concern for financial cost in a sacred structure like the Mishkan or the Temple.

The Talmud (Menachot 89a) cites both principles in a discussion of how the priests figured out how much oil was necessary to keep the Menorah burning all night long. According to one opinion, the priests initially used far more oil than was necessary to burn throughout the night, and then they decreased the quantity by a small amount each night until the oil lasted only until dawn. But according to a second opinion, they initially used a small amount of oil, and then they gradually increased that quantity until the Menorah remained lit all night. Those who hold by the first opinion maintain that there should be “no poverty in a place of wealth,” and thus it’s better to waste some extra oil rather than stingily trying to use every last drop. Those who hold by the second opinion argue that “the Torah is sparing of the money of the Jewish people,” and thus the priests tried to minimize the expense of their experimentation.

The Torah Temimah (Rabbi Baruch Epstein, 1902), in his commentary on our parashah, attempts to reconcile these two principles. He explains that when it came to communal contributions like the oil for the Menorah, the goal was to give lavishly and generously, using the highest quality oil as befits a place of wealth like the Mishkan. But when it came to private contributions like the grain offerings brought by individuals, the Torah did not want to tax anyone financially, and thus lower quality oil was perfectly acceptable.

In our own day, too, we aspire for our public religious institutions to be as beautiful as possible, and those who can contribute towards an adorned synagogue ark or a magnificent ark cover are encouraged to do so. But when it comes to the religious objects in our private homes, we need not feel obligated to spend in excess, especially when doing so might embarrass those of lesser means. Not everyone has the fanciest Shabbat candlesticks, but if the light of our communal institutions burns clearly and brightly, it will illuminate all of our homes and hearts.