

*Parashat T'tzaveh* (Exodus 27:20-30:10)

*Parashat T'tzaveh* opens with the command to use *shemen zayit zach*, pure virgin olive oil, as the fuel for a *ner tamid*, a perpetual light (Ex. 27:20, 21). The *ner tamid* has been a staple of synagogue architecture for centuries. It evokes the memory of the *mishkan* (Tabernacle) and is understood mostly as a symbol of God's eternal presence.

Early rabbinic commentators, though, use *shemen zayit zach* and *ner tamid* as metaphors to debate the nature and purpose of the Jewish people. Olive oil refuses to blend with other liquids and always separates itself after mixing. So, too, the Jewish people are, ... *am l'vada yishkon*, a people dwelling apart (Num. 23:9), who remain separate from the world in order to safeguard the Torah. Alternately, just as God reveals the Torah to the Jewish people to light their way, the Jewish people's mandate is to reveal the Torah to the world and to be an ... *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations (Is. 42:6) (Ex. Rabbah 36:1-2).

This seems a stark binary choice, representative of an older time and mindset. But rabbinic texts often present multiple perspectives, recognizing the nuances of complex issues. So, the verse "For a *mitzvah* (commandment) is a lamp and Torah is light" (Prov. 6:23) allows a third view to bridge the divide: acts of *chesed* (kindness) brighten the darkness in this world while also illuminating God's transcendent nature, which is often opaque or "dark" to us (Ex. Rabbah 36:3). One who performs a *mitzvah* becomes a *ner tamid*, bringing light to that particular place and time.

Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom