The Eternal Flame

“Command the Children of Israel... to kindle a continual lamp.” (Leviticus 24:2)

Go into any Synagogue when it’s dark and you will see a small lamp shining above the Holy Ark. It’s called the ner tamid — the eternal flame.

That lamp is a memorial of the ner ma’aravi (western lamp) of the menorah which the priests lit in the Holy Temple. The western lamp burned miraculously. It never went out. Every evening, when the priest came to kindle the flames he would find the western lamp still alight from the previous evening. He would remove the still-burning wick and oil, clean out its receptacle and then put back the burning wick and the oil. Then he would kindle all the other lamps with the western lamp.

However, when the Romans destroyed the Temple it seemed that the little solitary flame had been put out forever.

In Rome, there stands a triumphal arch built by the Emperor Titus. One of its bas-reliefs depicts the menorah being carried through the streets of Rome as part of the booty pillaged from the Temple. All its lamps are dark. It looks like some expensive antique, soon to languish under the dust of ages in some Vatican vault.

But did Titus really extinguish that eternal flame?

The Holy Temple is a macrocosm of the human body. If you look at a plan of the sanctuary in the Temple, you will notice that the placement of the various vessels — the altar, the table, the menorah — corresponds to the location of the vital organs in the human body. Each of the Temple’s vessels represents a human organ.

The menorah is the vessel that corresponds to the heart.

Why is it that so many young people today are choosing to return to the beliefs and practices that their parents had forgotten, and their grandparents despaired of seeing continued? It is as though some mystical force is transmitted in the spiritual genes of every Jew. A light burning on the menorah of the Jewish heart across the millennia. A light which can never be extinguished, which burns miraculously, even without replenishment of the oil or wicks of mitzvah observance.

So, in a mystical sense, the light Titus tried to put out continues to burn in the menorah of the Jewish heart. But there’s more.

It would come as a great disappointment to Titus, but the menorah that is collecting dust in the Vatican is not the original Menorah. It is a copy. The original menorah was hidden away (together with the other vessels) in the caves and tunnels under the Temple Mount.

If while the Temple was standing the western lamp of the menorah burned miraculously without human assistance, so why shouldn’t it go on burning even after it was buried?

That western lamp continues to “burn” under the Temple Mount throughout the long dark night of exile. It continues to “burn” to this day. And it will continue to “burn” until the Messiah comes. Then, the light of the menorah of the Jewish heart will be revealed as identical to the light of the menorah in the Holy Temple.

The Merit System

Why will G-d surely not abandon His people Israel? “For G-d will not abandon His people,” states one passage in Samuel, “because of His great Name.”

Another passage in Psalms declares, “G-d will not abandon His people nor forsake His heritage.” When Jews in the Land of Israel are in trouble, G-d promises not to abandon them because of their merits and the merit of their land which is called G-d’s heritage. But when Jews are outside of the Land of Israel G-d has mercy on them so that His great Name, which is identified with them, will not be desecrated.
**Thou Shalt Love**

Faron Lebson wrote:

In the Torah, why does G-d command us to love Him? I thought that love was a natural response that could not be demanded of someone?

Dear Faron,

When we speak of loving G-d, we are not referring to “falling in love” with G-d, as though love, like a pit, were something that you “fall into.” Genuine, lasting love comes from respect and appreciation.

That is why, on the whole, we understand this commandment to mean that we should act as though we love G-d. We should keep the commandments faithfully, and make personal sacrifices for G-d just as we would towards a child, spouse or parent whom we love.

On a deeper level, though, the Torah is revealing a secret here: Planted within each person is a hidden capacity to truly love G-d. Acting with love towards G-d cultivates this dormant emotion until it grows and shines forth.

The study of the Torah, with its breathtaking depth and beauty, is a prime way to cultivate this love.

Another way to awaken our love for G-d is to study science and nature. Consider, for example, the fact that your stomach is full of acids that are strong enough to dissolve ox leather, yet these very same acids don’t melt through the soft flesh of your stomach! This is because the Creator provided you with a specially formulated mucus lining to protect against this. Becoming aware of countless such kindnesses will certainly nurture our innate feelings of thankfulness and love towards G-d.