The Eternal Flame

"Command the children of Israel ... to kindle a continual lamp." 24:2

Go into any Synagogue when it’s dark and you will see a small lamp shining above the holy ark. It is called the Ner Tamid - the eternal flame. That lamp is a memorial of the Ner Ma’aravi (western lamp) of the Menorah which the Kohanim lit in the Beis Hamikdash. The Ner Ma’aravi burned miraculously. It never went out. Every evening, when the Kohanim came to kindle the flames he would find the Ner Ma’aravi 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.

But when the Romans came and destroyed the Beis Hamikdash, 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 Beis Hamikdash. 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?

In his commentary on Chumash, the Malbim explains that the Beis Hamikdash is a macrocosm of the human body:

If you look at a plan of the Heichal (Sanctuary) in the Beis Hamikdash, 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. In other words, each of the Temple’s vessels represents a human organ. The Menorah is the vessel that corresponds to the heart.

The Menorah is the Jewish 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 dispaired of seeing continued? It is as though some mystical force is transmitted in the spiritual genes of every Jew. A light which burns away 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 that Titus tried to put out, continues to burn in the Menorah of the Jewish heart. But even in the physical world, the light of the Menorah burns on...

It would come as a great disappointment to Titus, but that Menorah which is collecting dust somewhere 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, so it would not be taken as booty.

Now, 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?

In fact, that Western Lamp continues to burn miraculously 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 Mashiach comes. Then, the light of the Menorah of the Jewish heart will be united with the light of the Menorah in the Holy Beis Hamikdash.

"Command the children of Israel ... to kindle a continual lamp." 24:2

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Insights

"And you shall count to yourselves from the day after the Shabbos [i.e., the day after Pesach] from the day of your bringing the Omer offering which is waved, seven Shabbosos - complete and perfect must be." (23:15)

“When are they perfect? When they do the will of The Omnispresent.” (Midrash)

Nothing in this world lasts forever. Everything has its time and then passes. Even the heavens and the earth will pass into nothingness. Nevertheless, everything that comes into the world has a certain period of existence, however short or long. However, there is one thing in the world for which the concept of ‘span of existence’ has no meaning whatsoever. It is no sooner present, than it has already changed, passed and is no longer. That thing is Time itself. Every second as it emerges into Creation, in the blink of an eye, it is gone.

Concrete Time

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Nachi from Jerusalem wrote:

We were planning to buy our children pet hamsters. Is there anything wrong with having/playing with an unkosher animal? Is there anything wrong with buying/wearing pigskin gloves or having a pigskin attached case? (Should one prefer cowhide instead?) The Chassidic 'Streimal' is rumored that it is made from beaver tails. Wouldn't touching one or wearing one make someone 'tameh' (ritually defiled)? It seems strange to me that a considerable number of Jews wear these 'tameh' skins while they daven [pray]. I would be most grateful if you can clarify this issue.

Dear Nachum,

First let’s talk about pets in general. By caring for pets, children can learn to be responsible and caring. A pet can cheer up a lonely person. Dogs can guard against intruders. You can even learn good character traits from animals — e.g., modesty from a cat and industriousness from an ant.

But causing pain to animals is a Torah prohibition. If your pets are hungry, you must feed them before you yourself eat. Causing them pain or delaying their food — even once — is a serious transgression. For this reason, Rabbi Eliezer Pupo (b.1785 Sarajevo) advises against raising birds, and the same can be said of hamsters and other pets.

So you must be extremely careful to treat your pet with kindness, especially pets. The doctor said.

A dog can keep away intruders. But does the dog always know who is an intruder? I know a family whose German Shepherd growls menacingly at new visitors, while the owners smile and say “Sweet dog... He won’t bite!” A truly Jewish home is open and friendly, a place of warmth for guests and visitors.

You must make sure your animal doesn’t cause damage. For this reason, the Sages looked unfavorably on raising certain animals, such as dogs, unless you live in a dangerous area where you need one for protection. Sadly, most places nowadays probably fit this description.

If your pet gets loose on Shabbat, trapping it is forbidden in certain cases. Even handling an animal can be forbidden, due to the prohibition of muktzah. Another consideration: It’s a Torah prohibition to have your pet sterilized.

As far as having/playing with a non-kosher animal, there is in fact a Kabbalistic idea that one shouldn’t stare at an unkosher animal.

What about ‘unkosher’ hats and gloves? It’s permitted to touch an animal carcass, even though it imparts tumah — ritual defilement. Furthermore, once the hide is processed it no longer imparts tumah.

By the way, Hassidim aren’t the only ones who wear fur hats: The Lithuanian-style ‘Borsalino’ is made from a hare/wild-rabbit fur blend.

Which reminds me: A balding gentleman goes to a dermatologist, who tells him to buy a rabbit and put it on his head.

“A rabbit?” asked the man. “How will that help?”

“Well, from a distance it looks like hare,” the doctor said.

Sources:
- Pele Yoetz, Ba’alei Chaim
- Beit Yosef, Yoreh Deah 107
- Shulchan Aruch, Chosen Mishpat 409:1,3
- Shulchan Aruch, Even Haezar 5:11,14
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 316:12, MB 54,57
- Simirat Haguf V’hanefesh 237:2
- Rambam Hilchot Avot Hatumah 1:9

Katz in Hats
Sacrifice of the South

Korbanos - the offer of sacrifices - was not a Jewish monopoly, for non-Jews - “Bnei Noach” - offered sacrifices as well. But what sort of sacrifices did they offer?

This point was disputed between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina. One view was that they were also able to offer Shlamim sacrifices in which only some fatty parts of the animal were burned on the altar while the flesh was consumed by the owner of the sacrificial animal. The other view contends that the non-Jew was limited to the Olah sacrifice which is burned in its entirety.

The latter view bases his position on a passage in Shir Hashirim (4:16): “Let the north be aroused and the south enter,” which he interprets in this fashion: “Let those whose service is in the north (the Jewish non-Jews who can be slaughtered even in the southern part.)” This transfer of importance from the north to the south was noted, says Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, was except that even through his eating of sacrificial flesh a man participates in the service of his Creator is limited to the nation whose multitude of Torah commandments trains it to comprehend such a challenge and opportunity.

• Zevachim 116a

Where East Meets West

The site upon which the Beis Hamikdash stood, says Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, was divided between the Tribes of Yehuda and Binyamin. The eastern part, which contained the entrance from the Temple Mount and the courtyards leading up to the altar belonged to Yehuda. The western part, containing the Sanctuary itself, belonged to Binyamin. In regard to the altar itself it stood on Binyamin’s territory but a narrow corridor extended from Yehuda’s territory to encompass the eastern wall of the altar.

The saintly Binyamin saw in a divine revelation that he would not have the entire altar in his share and felt deep anguish that he could not absorb that corridor so that he should have the privilege of the entire sacrificial service being performed in his area. As a reward for such a sacred longing he was given the honor of hosting the Divine Presence which rested in the western part of the Beis Hamikdash which was indeed in his area.

This teaches us, points out Rabbi Yaakov bar Shlomo Ibn Chovav, the author of Ein Yaakov, that when someone has an ambition to personally complete a mitzvah with his own efforts and resources, his ambition is not to be condemned as an expression of self-centered craving for honor but is rather a demonstration of a will to serve Hashem which is deserving of praise and reward.

• Zevachim 118b

1. Which Kohanim are bound by the laws of Tumah?
2. In general, a Kohen is forbidden to come into contact with the Tumah of a Mes (corpses) unless the dead person is a close relative. What is the exception to this rule?
3. Is a person permitted to cut his beard with scissors?
4. How does one honor a Kohen?
5. How does the Torah restrict the Kohen Gadol with regard to mourning?
6. The Torah states in verse 22:3 that one who “approaches holy objects” while in a state of Tumah is penalized with Kares (excision). What does the Torah mean by “approaches”?
7. What is the smallest piece of a corpse that is able to transmit Tumah?
8. Who in the household of a Kohen may eat Terumah?
9. If the daughter of a Kohen marries a “Zar” she may no longer eat Terumah. What is a Zar?
10. What is the difference between a Neder (vow) and a Nedavah (free-will offering)?
11. May a person slaughter an animal and its father on the same day?
12. How does the Torah define “profaning” the Name of Hashem?
13. How big is an Omer?
14. On what day do we begin to count the “Omer”?
15. Why do we begin “counting the Omer” at night?
16. How does the Omer differ from other Minchah offerings?
17. The blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is called a “Zichron Terumah” (“sound of remembrance”). For what is it a reminder?
18. What is unusual about the wood of the Esrog tree?
19. Who was the father of the blasphemer?
20. What is the penalty for intentionally wounding one’s parent?

I Didn’t Know That!

“You shall afflict your souls on the ninth day of the month in the evening” (23:32)
If one eats and drinks on the ninth of Tishrei, the Torah views it as if he has fasted both on the ninth and the tenth of Tishrei.

Berachos 8b

Answers on back page
Time is used to do a mitzvah, to do a kindness, or to learn Torah, then because these things are eternal in themselves, they in turn eternalize Man’s time. This is what the Midrash means when it says “When are they (the priests) to be barred from the priestly functions of bringing the offerings? However in contrast to these people, the Haftorah depicts those priests who, revering their ancestor Zadok, showed a brilliant contrast and kept the true spirit of the tribe of Levi.

• Adapted from Rabbi Mendel Hirsch

**Parsha QA**

1. 21:1 - All male Kohanim, even those who are disqualified from service in the Beis Hamikdash because of physical defects.
2. 21:1 - A Mes Mitzvah (a person who has no one else to bury him).
3. 21:5 - Yes, the Torah only forbids cutting one’s beard with a razor.
4. 21:8 - He is first in all matters of holiness. For example, a Kohen reads from the Torah first, and is usually the one to lead in saying blessings before and after meals.
5. 21:10-12 - He may not allow his hair to grow long, nor attend to his close relatives if they die, nor accompany a funeral procession.
6. 22:3 - Eats.
7. 22:5 - A K’zayis (olive’s size).