A SOURCE OF LIGHT

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Opening Joke

There’s an old tale about a guy who sees his friend on the street – who’s had a few too many l’chaims – searching anxiously on hands and knees.

“What are you looking for?” he asks.

“My keys”

So he joins his friend in the search. Ten minutes later, they’ve still found nothing.

“Are you sure this is where you lost them?” he asks his friend.

“Oh no, I lost them on the next block. But the light’s much better here…”

The Torah portion this week, Tetzaveh, continues the theme of the building of the Tabernacle with a focus on light. Ve’atah Tetzaveh es Bnei Yisrael – Moses is told. And you shall instruct the Jewish people and they shall bring to you pure olive oil, crushed so as to give light, in order to kindle an eternal flame.

As is so often the case, that simple sounding verse, the instruction to kindle the Menorah daily in the Holy Temple, contains within it so much more. In fact, it carries within it the key to one of the greatest mysteries of all time; the survival of the Jewish people.

In 1898, Mark Twain wrote an essay title “Concerning the Jews”. In it, he wonders about the impact the Jewish people have made on the world. Where statistically we should barely even ever be heard of, the impact the Jewish people have made on almost every field of human endeavor is tremendous. But even more, he wonders about our very existence. All of the various people have sprung up, made such a vast noise and effect, but are long since gone.
As he concludes: “The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was... All things are mortal, but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”

Imagine that for a moment. We are witnessing – right this very moment – one of the greatest wonders of the world. The fact that in 2016, 3,300 years after Abraham, almost 2,000 years after the Destruction of the Temple and our dispersion from the Holy Land, here in _________ at a major university, where there are all kinds of other very attractive opportunities available to you on a Friday night, you – us – Jews are gathered together at a Shabbat table defies any explanation.

It’s hinted at in the words of the text above – le’ha’alos ner tamid – to kindle an eternal flame. The flames of the Menorah, the light brought into the world by the Jewish people is eternal, and continues to shine through all of the darkness and the challenges of history.

Optional Extra Details

The Midrash relates that when the Tabernacle was being consecrated with an offering from each of the tribes, Aaron was dejected that his tribe, the Levites, had been excluded. G-d responded: “I swear on your life, your portion is greater than theirs! For you will kindle the Menorah, which will continue on forever...”

One of the ways the Midrash explains the eternity of the Menorah kindling is that the Menorah continues to be remembered even now after the destruction, by the Chanukah candles. So, in effect, the lights of the Menorah continue in perpetuity, even long after the offerings in the Temple ceased with the Destruction.

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But there’s even more than just the promise of eternal flame in this verse. There’s also a hint of how it will be achieved.

The Torah tells us kasis la’maar, that the olives were crushed so as to become a source of light. The Talmud relates: The Jewish people are compared to the olive. Just like an olive, the more you crush it the more it releases its oil, so too the Jewish people, the more they suffer, the more they are persecuted and challenged, the more light they give.

Chassidic teaching takes it a step further. Kasis la’maar. The Torah doesn’t just say that by being crushed the olive gives light, but rather by being crushed the olive becomes a source of light. In other words, the challenges and persecution we face bring out within us a whole deeper element we may not have otherwise been able to access. Because when everything is on the line, when a Jew is put to the test and forced to declare: Who am I really? What am I about? What is my deepest, core identity? Again and again throughout Jewish history we have risen to the test, and specifically at those moments reached the highest expression of who we really are! From the story of Purim when our ancestors faced annihilation and, specifically then, reached the highest degree of connection to Torah and the Divine, to the story of Chanukah, from the Inquisition to
the Holocaust, from ancient times to our own day, so often the attempts of our enemies to crush us are actually what brought out the best and highest within our people.

Optional Story

A couple of weeks ago, Dr. Jacob Eisenbach, a 92-year old recently retired dentist in California, told his story at the Chabad on Campus West Coast Shabbaton. He talked about his youth in Lodz, Poland. He told about the horrors of the occupation by the Nazis, the increasing persecution, the deprivations of the ghetto. And he told the following:

Jacob received a deportation order, to report to the train depot. By that time, they had heard about the destination. The trains headed east, to Auschwitz, loaded with people. And nobody came back.

Jacob and his brother hid. They got reports that the Nazis had searched their abandoned apartment several times already. So after a few weeks they decided that would be the safest place to hide. They padlocked the door from the outside, found a way to creep in, and spent the next few weeks in hiding.

Late one night they hear Nazi guards approaching. The Nazis come to the door. One says to the other: “Look, it is locked, nobody’s here.” But the other one says, “No – let’s check it out.” They break the lock, search around the apartment. And again, one says to the other: “Nobody’s here, let’s go…” But again the other one responds, “No, there’s a pile of rags in the corner, let’s check.”

So Jacob and his brother were found. Seemingly, everything was over for Jacob. His brother decided that come what may, he was sticking with him.

They report to the deportation. The trains head off. But, this time, instead of heading to the extermination camp at Auschwitz, the Nazis decide to use the men for slave labor, replacing workers at a munitions factory who had been conscripted to the Russian front.

So Jacob and his brother survived the war. By being caught, they avoided the fate of all those left in the ghetto when it was liquidated a short time later. In the concentration camp next to the munitions factory, Jacob met his wife, and went on to live a full life here in the US – surviving, building a family, and now sharing his light, his Jewish pride and inspiration, with generations to come.

The more they crush us, the more light we give!

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But does that mean we’re destined to suffer? What about when we don’t have challenges, when anti-Semitism takes a rest? What about in lands of plenty – as, for the most part, we currently enjoy? Can Judaism survive even there?

In his last edited Chassidic discourse, the Lubavitcher Rebbe addressed this question. He spoke of the generations, that he had personally experienced, who found such depths of courage
under Hitler and under Stalin. But what about when that core identity is no longer being challenged? Can it be awakened without?

And the Rebbe argued for another interpretation of “crushed.” Even when everything is wonderful, he argued, because we have everything we need both materially and spiritually, a Jew still can experience the prodding that being crushed elicits. Because our true nature is to desire perfection. Our true nature is to experience, and demand, nothing less than a perfect world, a complete revelation of G-dliness and goodness in our world. Nothing less than the utopia of Moshiach. And since our world isn’t quite there yet, since there is still injustice and spiritual imperfection in our world, it is in our very nature to be crushed. Not crushed as in dejected. But crushed so as to be uncomfortable in Galut, in exile. Crushed so as to call out, even in all of the current comfort, for a better world, for a world that is more perfect, more G-dly, and more good.

That discomfort with the status quo defines the Jewish condition. And it’s that discomfort that leads us to always work towards a better world, towards a more perfect world. Kasis lama’or. We are crushed, therefore we need to tap in to our deepest essence and become sources of light. And when we do that, we are promised lehaalos ner tamid – that we will in fact kindle an eternal flame. Ultimately, we will be successful in lighting up this dark world, and tipping the balance of goodness and kindness in our lives and the lives of those around us, ultimately ushering in the coming of Moshiach!

Good Shabbos!