

D'var Torah
Parsha Tetzaveh
By
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This week's parsha is one of presence and absence. Moses is absent in that his name, like that of God in the Megillah, is never mentioned. The absence of Moses' name notwithstanding, God is, through the handiwork of the Israelites, establishing a place for Godself to dwell, to be present with, the people.

It seems to me that in this parsha, God is preparing us, not only for the death of Moses by foreshadowing his absence, but also for the birth of the people's own direct connection to God.

The majority of the parsha is a preparation for God's dwelling *in the midst of the children of Israel* (verse 45); the priests are dressed meticulously and undergo their investiture. The golden altar is made for burning incense. The ner tamid, commonly translated as the "eternal light," is kindled.

From Exodus chapter 28:

4And these are the garments that they shall make: a choshen, an ephod, a robe, a tunic of checker work, a cap, and a sash. They shall make holy garments for your brother Aaron and for his sons to serve Me [as kohanim].

5They shall take the gold, the blue, purple, and crimson wool, and the linen,

6and they shall make the ephod of gold, blue, purple, and crimson wool, and twisted fine linen, the work of a master weaver.

7It shall have two connected shoulder straps at both its ends, and it shall be entirely connected.

8And its decorative band, which is above it, shall be of the same work, [emanating] from it: gold, blue, purple, and crimson wool, and twisted fine linen.

The outlay of detailed instructions in this parsha indicates that God will not simply abide and dwell with us because we want (or don't want) God to do so. God requires some work on our part before God will come down and "arrange meetings with you and speak to you there"(verse 42).

I think about this idea of God dwelling with us whenever I hear people saying, after one trip to High Holy Day services or one Erev Shabbat, "I went, but I didn't really feel anything." It resonates with me because I used to say this myself...until I began to spend Shabbat mornings sitting next to Johnathan Goldstein, may his memory be a blessing.

Each Shabbat throughout my twenties, Johnathan, when he was not leading Shaharit services, would deign to sit with me and answer all of my many twenty-something's questions:

"why is that happening?"

"what are they doing now"

"what does that mean"

"do you believe in God?"

And, of course "do you ever get bored?"

Johnathan, in addition to answering all of my other questions, told me in no uncertain terms that yes, he did get bored, and on more than just a few occasions, too. But he kept coming. And so did I.

Even if I was not sure why he kept coming. I knew why I did. I kept coming because my other old-man buddy, Michael Balch, may he rest in peace, told me to.

When Johnathan was on the bima, I would sit with Michael, who would also answer my questions, one of which was "I don't really feel anything and I don't understand most of this. What should I do?" To which Michael replied, "keep coming."

One interpretation of the ner tamid, the light kindled in the mishkan, might be helpful here. Quoting from Balashon, a Hebrew etymology website, "Jacob Milgrom in the [JPS Numbers](#) [Torah commentary] translates ner tamid as "regular burnt offering" and writes "*Tamid* means 'regular,' not 'perpetual, eternal'." In a footnote he continues:

...*ner tamid* (Exod. 27:20) refers to the regular lighting of the menorah each evening.
... Milgrom's colleague in the JPS series, Nahum Sarna, writes:

Hebrew *tamid* may mean "with unfailing regularity"

Even though nobody wants to hear it, worship is work. Just as the Israelites had to build, dress, and sacrifice according to God's specifications, which was clearly no easy task, we, too, can't just sidle up to the mishkan and expect enlightenment. We have to cultivate it. We have to build it. It's work. And part of that work is, not only to keep coming, but to sit in, be with, and dwell in the rituals.

We are in relationship w God. God is not a vending machine into which we can just throw a few quarters and get the spiritual equivalent of a snickers bar. A Rabbi Noa Kushner, says, Judaism is not to be ingested, but to be entered.

Sometimes, we need to sit in a service and be bored lost frustrated or curious. Sometimes, if we do this, and if we are lucky, after much "keep coming," a prayer, a melody, or even a word will jump out and speak to us. And then, just for a moment, we are "there." We feel it. Something happens.

In order for these moments to happen, we have to foster the conditions which make them possible. Just as we need to create an environment conducive to falling asleep (no screens, dark room, lowered thermostat), we also need to create an environment conducive to (spiritually) waking up.

I had such a waking up experience recently. I was at (zoom) Shabbat evening services. I didn't really feel like coming, but the rest of my family was busily engrossed in the Penn State wrestling meet and I had nothing better to do. As I sat through the service, going through the motions and staring at my candles, I heard Rabbi Hugenholtz read a prayer that I had undoubtedly heard many times before, yet had never heard before.

"Create a pure heart in me; let my soul wake up in Your Light," she read. Amid the sounds of the referee's whistle and the raucous cheers from the Hawkeye fans emanating from a closed door upstairs, I, alone in the living room, burst into tears. When were there words more beautifully spoken? How could it be that I had never heard this prayer before? Just for a moment, I "got it." I felt it. I was there, comforted and cuddled up with the liturgy, enveloped in its meaning.

Even as this poem/prayer touched me deeply, I knew that, had I not "kept coming," this would not have happened. It was the practice, the rituals, the repetition of the acts, the light of the tamid - the regularity - that brought me to that moment, however brief, of divine connection. It was the sitting there, lost and confused and unsure, that created the space for this moment.

This is why I keep coming.

I keep coming in the hopes that God will arrange a meeting. And God will arrange a meeting because I keep coming.

And one loaf of bread, one loaf of oil bread, and one wafer from the basket of matzoth that stands before the Lord,

24and you shall place it all upon Aaron's palms and upon his sons' palms, and you shall wave them as a waving before the Lord.

25You shall then take them from their hand[s] and make them go up in smoke upon the altar with the burnt offering as a spirit of satisfaction before the Lord; it is a fire offering for the Lord.

Keep coming: it's how we build our modern-day mishkan.

Shabbat shalom.