

## *Sacred Light*

---

In the Book of Exodus, as the Tabernacle is constructed and furnished, we find a long list of ritual instructions: for the lighting of Temple lamps (Ch. 27), the making of priestly vestments (Ch. 28), the ordination of priests (Ch. 29) and construction of the incense altar (Ch. 30). Read as much as you can of these chapters, then let's focus upon the first two verses: 27:20-21.

*"You shall further command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn regularly. In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that is before the covenant, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a perpetual ordinance to be observed throughout their generations by the Israelites"* (Exodus 27:20-21).

Read these verses slowly, prayerfully and try to imagine the scene and its significance.

Do we have the picture? Just outside the innermost section of the shrine containing the stone tablets inscribed with the Decalogue ('ten commandments'), stands a lamp which is lit by the priests every evening. It is lit using high quality fuel ('clear oil of beaten olives') and it burns throughout the night until morning.

This ritual lighting takes on a significance that will be transmitted through generations. Much later in Jewish history, synagogues came to feature an ever-burning lamp (*ner tamid*: an eternal light) suspended in front of the ark which contains the sacred Torah scrolls, similar to the way many churches have a sanctuary lamp near the Tabernacle.

Some commentators express surprise at the placing of this verse. Why here? Why not later when the priests have been ordained, vested and the sanctuary is ready to be used for worship. Wouldn't that be the time to think about lighting the lamp?

How would you enter this conversation? Would it help to recall that one of the most compelling images in the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish tradition is that which describes the Torah as spiritual illumination?

"But those who study the Torah give forth light wherever they may be. It is like one standing in the dark with a lamp in his hand, as it says, 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path' (Ps. 94, 105)" [Num. R. 11, 6].

Perhaps then we can see a deeper reason as to why the lamp lighting instructions take priority, even before the ordination of priests. More than a practical ritual detail, it signifies the whole purpose for the tabernacle: that by a life faithful to the Lord's teachings, the people of Israel may dwell always in the Lord's light.

"If My light will be in your hand, your light will be in My hand" (Exodus Rabbah 36, 3).

Reflect on the quotations above. In your life, is your engagement with Scripture a priority? What is your experience of God's word lighting your way, drawing you closer to God's people?

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (New York, 2007). Scripture: NRSV.

© Teresa Pirola, 2013. [lightoftorah.net](http://lightoftorah.net)

Reproduction for non-commercial use permitted with acknowledgement of the Light of Torah website.