

Tetzaveh 5774 Lights

Shabbat Shalom.

I have to start with a confession.

I like Ellie Goulding.

Who is she?

She is a British pop singer-songwriter in the electronic dance music genre. She is played on all the radio stations that my kids like - and now, yikes, I sort of like. That is strange for someone who used to listen only to Classic Rock.

I found Ellie's song "Lights" to be a lot of fun. And then I found out she is Jewish. Not that Jewishly committed as far as I can tell, but Jewish nonetheless; and that was kind of exciting.

On my way back from volunteering in Ghana in 2012, I needed some music to help me decompress on the flight so I put "Lights" on a loop. It repeated over and over again.

I must have listened to it a hundred times; I think it is permanently etched in my brain.

Should we sing it?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NKUpo_xKyQ&feature=kp

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During these bleak winter months when there is less daylight, we all need light. A sunny day always cheers me up, while a cloudy day doesn't.

Imagine what a difference light made in the world if we go back just a few hundred years, before electricity. The world was dark.

Very dark.

It was not only potentially depressing, but it was also dangerous.

Imagine going back in time hundreds of thousands of years before hominids developed means of producing fire. When it was dark, it was dark.

It was scary.

The Midrash says that when *Adam Harishon*, the first human being, experienced the daylight diminishing, he grew terrified.

“He did not know what darkness was, and felt himself becoming enveloped in a sea of blackness.

“So he screamed. He cried out to God: “What is happening? I can’t see anything! I cant move! Help me!

“He groped in the darkness, hoping for divine intervention.” (*A Day Apart*, p. 164)

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Our *parashah*, our Torah portion this week, opens with this theme of light.

“*V’atah tetzaveh* - You shall further command the Israelites to bring clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly.” (Ex. 27:20)

Our *Etz Hayyim Humash* astutely points out that the Israelites would not have been able to procure olives in the wilderness and thus, this text must have been a “presentation of a later idealization.” Nonetheless, we know that this did take place in the *Beit Hamikdash*, in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

This eternal light, known as the *ner tamid*, makes its way into our

synagogues; there it is, right behind me -- a constant reminder both of God's presence and of our connection to these ancient traditions.

And though we live in a far more illuminated world than our ancestors, it still works. When I drive by the shul at night when all the lights are out, I still see a glow coming from the cupola in the center of this sanctuary. That is the *ner tamid*. Even when the building is empty and the lights are off, it is on, providing a measure of comfort, a reminder of the *K'vod* - of God's presence.

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The great 20th century biblical commentator, Nechama Leibowitz, juxtaposes this passage with the opening verse of last week's parashah. In *Parashat Tetzaveh*, this morning, we learn of the oil for light and the instructions about the clothing of the *Kohanim*, consecrating the *Mishkan* - the portable sanctuary, and the incense altar.

Last week, in *Parashat Terumah*, we learned about the building materials for the *Mishkan*, the Israelites portable sanctuary in the wilderness, a forerunner of the Temple in Jerusalem.

There, the text reads

"*Dabeir* - speak to the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gift for Me from every person whose heart so moves him." (Ex 25:2)

So, what's the difference?

Well, one is about gifts which are the building materials and the other is about oil.

Speak vs. Command - *Dabeir* vs. *Tetzaveh*

Which is stronger?

Command.

The rabbis in the midrash point out that it's not optional - God wants gifts if our heart moves us to give and usually, we do not give so much that it hurts. We give something extra.

I have an extra painting that I do not have room for in my house so I'll donate it to Temple Emunah for our Casino Dance Night on Saturday night, March 8 - shameless plug.

<http://templeemunah.org/component/rsform/form/12-casino-dance-night>

But again, we don't usually give so much that it hurts..

However, when we are commanded to give, hopefully, we take it seriously.

One medieval commentator: Rashbam writes that "the command is for all time, to provide oil for lighting, year in and year out."

This is for all time. We must sustain the *Mishkan*, later the *Beit Hamikdash* in Jerusalem and now our synagogues. While we may want to beautify them with art, we have to give so they have light and heat. We must sustain them and take care of their basic needs, their overhead.

That is why we just recited a prayer for our community, a prayer for those who sustain our community. And there (middle of page 148 - I can't get that page announcement out of my head!) we asked for blessings upon those who established this synagogue, those who enter it to pray (mini plug for the 10-for-10 program) and those who give funds for the heat and light - *neir lama'or*."

It may not be the most glamorous kind of giving, but it is vital!

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There is another strange difference between the openings of these two Torah portions. Leibowitz points out that last week, God says that we are to bring gifts to God - to Me, the texts states. But, this week, the Torah states: "*Vayikhu eleikha*" - they shall bring it to you.

But God is speaking to Moses, so why does God want Moses to take the oil for himself?

Some interpreters try to find a simple solution. Nachmanides: The oil was brought to Moses "so he could see if it was pure and properly pounded."

That makes sense - the oil had to be kosher. I used to think that oil is oil. But now, there is extra virgin olive oil and organic kinds and it has to come from California. I have to say that I do become quite confused in the oil aisle at Costco.....

Similarly, Abravanel explains that since "Moses entered the *Mishkan*, (the sanctuary) at all times, [the oil was brought for him] for his benefit to give Moses light when he entered." And thus, even after Moses' death, the oil is needed for those who would work in the Temple in Jerusalem, or a synagogue today.

Another explanation which builds on a midrash is brought forward by the *Meshekh Hokhmah*: "A person's mind is clear only when it is light and we associate light with joy. Moses required the conditions appropriate for Divine communion and these involved a mood of well-being and joy."

Light bring joy and joy helps us feel God's presence.

Light makes us smile and smiling does worlds of good.

Last night, they lit the Olympic torch in Sochi, a light that had travelled around the globe.

And of course, darkness is different. We cannot see in the dark, we can fall, we are afraid.

The Midrash teaches: “When one is in the dark, he stumbles. He feels his way, comes up against a stone and stumbles on it, comes up against a gutter, falls in it, his face striking the ground. Why? Because he went without a lamp, [without light.]”

And then the Midrash relates this to Torah: “So it is with someone who does not know words of Torah. He comes up against a transgression and stumbles on it.”

Darkness cause us to fall and light helps us move forward.

Spiritual darkness leads us astray, off the moral path; whereas spiritual light, Torah, illuminates our direction and leads us to the right place.

Beyond Torah, our tradition has other associations with light: “a person’s soul is likened to a flame - *nishmat adam, neir Adonai*” - the line that some recite when you light the seven day *yartzeit* candle. Thus, we light a candle during *shivah* and on *yartzeits*. It is also likened to the *mitzvot*, as is stated in Proverbs (6:23) “*ki neir mitzvah v’Torah or - for a commandment is a candle and Torah is light,*” when we perform the commandments we bring more light into the world.

But ultimately and most powerfully, light is like God. Rabbi Harold Kushner offers us a scientific explanation: “Like light, fire is not an object. It is the process of liberating the potential energy in each of us to be good,

generous, and self-controlled. If light is the symbol of God, then fire - the product of human technology - represents human efforts to bring the reality of God into our world.” (Etz Hayyim, p.503)

That is why we have a blessing for seeing both the natural light of sunrise and sunset - *oseh ma'aseih vereisheet*, we praise You God, Who continually creates the world and we have a blessing for human light - fire. At the end of Shabbat, at *havdalah*, we recite *borei meorei ha'eish* - we praise You God who created the lights of fire. Even though we light a fire, we understand everything in the universe as a gift from God.

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Let me take you back to the Midrash about Adam calling to God for help in the darkness. “What did God do when the Almighty heard Adam crying for help? How did God respond to his terror, his utter paralysis in the (enveloping) [suddenly threatening] Garden of Eden?

“What does God do? Does God perform a miracle? Turn night into day? Lighten up the horizon?

“No.

“Instead God says to Adam: Feel around you. See, there are two flints by your feet. Take those flints, and rub them together until you see a spark. Eventually, you will create a flame, and with that flame you will light up the darkness and stop stumbling.”

It's a good reminder.

There is light in the world

And there is also darkness.

When the darkness begins to take over, we are commanded to bring

oil, to make more light -- and it's something we need to do all the time. Light has a tendency to go out, unless we refill it with oil.

Each week, we model that with *havdalah* - reminding ourselves that just as Adam was taught to light his own fire and dispel the darkness, so can we.

Just as the Torah commands.

Shabbat Shalom.