

The Ner Tamid

In America, people live from vacation to vacation. How does Judaism look at it?

The Temple's Eternal Service

Ner Tamid...

What is the source for the Ner Tamid that is hanging right here above the Ark?

Why does every synagogue have a light that never goes out? Where did it originate?

In this week's Parsha, we read about the building of the Mishkan, the portable Sanctuary that the Jews used in the desert. In the Mishkan, and in the Temple after it, there was a menorah that had seven branches. The candle in its westernmost branch would miraculously burn for 24 hours. The other six candles would burn only at night—but one candle would burn "tamid," or constantly. That's why the light that constantly burns in synagogues is called the "ner tamid."

But this candle wasn't the only thing that was "tamid" in the Temple. In our Torah portion, we read about the building of the Shulchan, the sacred table upon which the Lechem Hapanim, special loaves of bread, would be placed. The Torah states, "And you shall place on the Shulchan the Lechem Hapanim before Me tamid."

Every Shabbos in the Beis Hamikdash, they would place twelve loaves on the Shulchan, where they would remain all week. The next Shabbos, they would place fresh loaves on the Shulchan and remove the loaves of the previous week—but the old bread would still be as fresh as if it had just been removed from the oven. The Talmud (Tractate Yoma 39a) tells us that the Kohanim, the priests, would divide these breads among themselves: “The aggressive ones would grab large pieces and the modest ones would hold back their hands.”

Some Jews have the custom of breaking 12 loaves, not two, at the Friday-night Shabbos table. That’s why many kosher bakeries offer loaves that can be broken up into 12 separate pieces, as a remembrance of the Lechem Hapanim of the Beis Hamikdash.

The Lechem Hapanim had to constantly be on the Shulchan, to the extent that the Talmud (Tractate Menachos 99b) states, “Until they pulled the old bread from the Shulchan, the Kohanim would place the new bread on the Shulchan”—meaning that there was never a moment when there was no bread on the table.

There was yet another thing that was “tamid” in the Beis Hamikdash. The Mizbe’ach, the altar, was the most important feature of the Temple outside of the Ark, because upon it were sacrificed all the sacrifices, which was the essential purpose of the Temple. The Torah says, “A tamid fire shall burn on the Mizbe’ach; do not extinguish it” (Vayikra 6)—in other words, a flame had to be burning on the altar day and night. (On the Mishkan’s altar, the flame kept burning even while it traveled.)

As Rashi explains in the Torah portion of Bamidbar, “The flame which descended [on to the altar] from Heaven would crouch under the [packing] cloth like a lion during the travels, yet would not burn it because a bronze cover would be placed over it” (Bamidbar 4:13).

Thus, the three most important things in the Beis Hamikdash were “tamid”: the Menorah, the Shulchan, and the Mizbayach, and all did so miraculously.

No Days Off

Every organization or society has several days each year during which they are closed. You go to the post office and you discover a sign reading, “closed for the holidays” or, in the middle of the week, closed in honor of “Martin Luther King Day.” I have nothing against Martin Luther King. I think he was a great man. But why I can’t send my little package because of him... that’s the way it is. Even hospitals which are constantly open only treat “very urgent cases” on the weekends—everything that can wait until Monday is not touched.

The one place that was open every day of the year was the Beis Hamikdash. It never closed for renovations. It didn’t have hours of admission. Anyone who wanted to visit the Beis Hamikdash didn’t need to first check if the place was opened. Rather, every day from dawn to dusk, the pilgrim could come and “get service”—sacrifices would be brought for him or her. Over the course of 410 years, the place was opened “tamid.”

In the Temple itself, two public sacrifices were offered every day. The first one, offered up in the morning, would open the

day. In the evening, a second sacrifice would be brought to close out the day. After this sacrifice, no further sacrifices could be offered. Each of these two sacrifices was called the Korbon Tamid, since they were offered every day whether it was a weekday, Shabbos, Passover or Yom Kippur—they offered these sacrifices “tamid.”

These sacrifices were of such great importance that one of the reasons for the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz is the discontinuation of the Tamid sacrifice which occurred on that day—considered a great tragedy in its own right.

Be A Tamid Jew

Today, when we don't have the Beis Hamikdash, how can we possibly fill the void caused by the absence of the Tamid? It's wonderful that the Ner Tamid burns in the synagogue—but what are we to do in our personal lives?

The Rebbe points out something very interesting.

The Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, begins with the words “Shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid”—I set G-d before me tamid. In many synagogues, one will find these words upon the cantor's podium or above the ark. The purpose is that every Jew set the Creator of the Universe before his eyes “tamid.”

However, the first of the four sections of the Shulchan Aruch, known as Orach Chayim, the Path of Life, ends with the words “Tov lev mishteh tamid”—a good heart feasts constantly. This means to say that a Jew needs to be happy “tamid”—all the time.

The Rebbe explains that these are the two “tamids” of the Jew, replacing the 2 daily Tamid sacrifices. 1. G-d must constantly be before Him, and 2. to be constantly happy. These two constants are the secret to a happy—and a meaningful—life.