Reasonable Words:
How Many Priests Does It Take to Change an Eternal Light?
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The Ner Tamid or “Eternal Light” in the first synagogue I served used a 3-watt light-bulb that had been installed when the congregation’s original building was constructed in 1932. Decades later, the congregation built a contemporary home for itself and moved the Eternal Light with that original lightbulb into the sanctuary to shine above a new Ark.

That bulb stopped shining after forty-five years. Mr. Reynold Douglas, our wonderful building manager, said, “Now that was a smart investment! What else do you have that can work for almost half a century and with no maintenance? But what are we supposed to do with the burned-out bulb? Does it get buried like worn Hebrew books or a Torah scroll damaged beyond repair? Is there some other Jewish thing to do with it?”

Apparently the Book of Exodus is far more realistic than I could have imagined. Reading the instructions regarding the ner tamid as an adult, it’s quickly apparent that from the very beginning the light was not “eternal”: The text says: "Instruct the Israelites [le’ha’ alot ner tamid] to kindle a light regularly."

Regularly, not “eternally”. The Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) translates it in keeping with the explanation of the medieval commentator Rashi (France, 11th century). While there is a more intensive meaning of the word tamid, Rashi says that it is not what the text intends. The light, he says, “ner tamid” burned throughout the night — and tamid means that the priesthood must maintain and tend to it "regularly". Moses ibn Ezra, writing in 12th century Spain, agrees: the light doesn’t burn "forever" – just "regularly."

The so-called "eternal" light was an ordinary flame rekindled every night at the Israelites’ portable wilderness sanctuary. If any intimations of “eternity” arose from it, they were the product of a priest getting up on a ladder daily and servicing the olive oil lamp by refilling it so that it could shine through the night and the next day.

A celebrated Hasidic teaching explains that says that the word tamid was meant to communicate a very specific message about kindling that lamp: "Even though the act of lighting may require only a second, the lamp burns all day long." In using the word tamid, we are reminded that the results of the act may endure longer than we expect. This is true of many human actions, which can be “tamid”: What took only a moment to do may have a lasting effect on the world. The example offered is about prayer: “How long does a person need to say the morning Sh’ma? Only one minute, but if we say it with kavannah – with full spiritual concentration – it will remain with us for the day.”

Seen from this perspective, history is the accumulation of small human acts – all of them nitzizot or sparks. The lighting of a ner tamid and many beautifully crafted moments of elevated consciousness direct us to recognize the potential holiness of ordinary events. Each of them is a spark of light that diffuses through the darkness, lighting up the world for hours, days, or even years after the original flame has been kindled. Perhaps its light may be enough to perceive the world around us a little more clearly.
In 1923, the Chofetz Chayim was asked to be the keynote speaker at the first Agudath Israel convention in Vienna. He was asked specifically to speak on the subject of how he became a "Chofetz Chayim." The Chofetz Chayim said that he saw the deficiencies in the Jewish world and he decided he had to change the Jewish world. So, he tried to change the Jewish world and he couldn't. So, he said he would change the Jews of his country, Poland. He tried to change the Jews of his country, Poland, and he couldn't. So, he said he would change the Jews of his town, Radin. He tried to change the Jews of his town, Radin, and he couldn't. So, he said he would change the Jews of his shul [synagogue]. He tried to change the Jews of his shul and he couldn't. So, he said he would change the Jews of his family. He tried to change the Jews of his family and he couldn't. So he said, "Let me change myself." And when he changed himself, he saw that his family was different, his neighborhood was different, his city was different, and in a sense the entire world was different, and he had become became the Chofetz Chayim.

In a little book titled Restoring The Aleph – Judaism For The Contemporary Seeker, Rabbi Arthur Green tells a personal anecdote about a poster whose commentary on cultivating a spiritual life left a profound impression:

A number of years ago my family and I were living in Berkeley, California. Around the corner from us was, of course, a spiritual or New Age bookstore. The front of the store was decorated with a huge sign, in inverted pyramid form. The top line read, in large block letters: SCIENTOLOGY DOESN'T WORK. Beneath that, in slightly smaller letters, it said: INTEGRAL YOGA DOESN'T WORK. Then, again slightly smaller: CHRISTIANITY DOESN'T WORK. After going through six or seven more would-be spiritual paths the sign concluded, again in large letters: YOU WORK.

Seeing this sign reminded me of a definition of Hasidism that Abraham Joshua Heschel had passed on in the name of the Kotsker rebbe. When asked what Hasidism was all about, Rabbi Mendl of Kotsk replied: Arbetn oif zikh – "to work on yourself."

Rabbi Green of course – and probably the bookstore owners as well – meant no insult to any spiritual tradition. They were simply making a point: What makes any religious or spiritual tradition work for people is whether you are prepared to work on it and within it. Our small efforts at living better and with more compassion through self-reflection, prayers, and compassionate action change our lives.

Since it takes so little time and energy to achieve these incremental changes, why would we not take a page from Jewish tradition and make the effort to do so every day?

“One ought every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.”

— Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe