

Parashat Titzvaveh 5774 – Shed a Little Light, Oh Lord

I imagine I speak what many of you feel.

Enough. In Hebrew, which we speak in smidges in our household, *maspik, dye*.

In the words of James Taylor, my favorite musician Red Sox fan,

“Shed a little light, oh Lord
So that we can see
Just a little light, oh Lord.””

Yes, shed a little light, oh Lord. Shed a little sun, oh Lord. Shed a little warmth, too. Maybe a few days of thaw in the 40’s so we squirrels can build up our reserves of acorns for the remainder of the winter.

We all have our strategies for dealing with Michigan winters, but they’ve certainly been taxed this year. We cannot deny the impact of this severe winter on us – deeper emotional ruts, disconnection from nature and, perhaps, a more intense longing for sources of comfort to soften Mother Nature’s impact. Whether that be good books which take us way away, toasty bowls of soup, or more time under the covers.

Light, I believe, or lack of it, is at the heart of the winter malaise. I could tell, just the other day, how true that was. On Monday, it was only 20 degrees, yet the sun was out, some of the snow melted, and Dairy Queen was busy. I felt like I was in Florida – sun pouring through the window, DQ Blizzard in one hand, other hand breezing through my Evernote collection of sayings and writings on gratitude as I prepared for mussar

class later that evening. Listening to a family joyfully enjoying their ice cream treats, all my senses were operating in a way that I hadn't felt for many weeks.

But light was at the heart of it. It was the key that opened the door to my fairly mundane yet absolutely delicious moment of nirvana, which enabled me to see past the potholes and ice on the roads – and in my life -- to the good things to come.

Light, it so happens, provides our entry to the parasha this week, Titzaveh. Of all the directives given in this parasha, the directive to maintain light in the sanctuary is the only one that has survived the span of Jewish history. All the other directives in this parasha went the way of the priesthood after the destruction of the 2nd Temple.

The light of ancient times, of parashat Titzaveh, of the mishkan, and of the later Temples, illuminates the outfits, architecture and work of the priests, equipped to mediate between God and the Israelites. The same light still burns today, but in synagogues, illuminating a wholly different means of worshipping God – prayer, study and good deeds, the possessions not just of the priests, but of all Israel.

In ancient times, the priests were ultimately responsible for bringing God's light to the people. The people provided some of the ingredients – such as the olives mentioned in verse 1 of the parasha, and the many building and decorating materials mentioned in last week's parasha – but the priests and Levites built the tabernacle, lit the lamp and invited God's presence to burn within it. Today, the fate and quality of that light that burns right in front of us is dependent on every Jew -- within in a synagogue on every member of a community.

Does God burn through that light? I hope so, but I don't know. The answer is in all our hands.

Returning to the weather, we cannot depend on what is out of our control. The radiance of the sun and the elements is but one factor that fills our lives with light, and it's one we cannot control. It will return, but we need to be patient for it – and not make our winter hardship worse by complaining or miring ourselves in self-pity. There are things we can do to maximize our exposure to physical light – like making sure we get outside, bundled and all, when it's sunny, like utilizing our fireplaces, like sitting under a sun box – but there are many more things we can do to enhance that light that hangs in front of us each day, each Shabbat.

Winter challenges us to dig deep into our tool box, sometimes against the grain, to create sufficient light in our lives. A Dairy Queen or a new shirt might bring a little short-term light, but as James Taylor continues in his song,

“Can't get no light from the dollar bill
Don't give me no light from a tv screen.”

God knows there are plenty of fires to be kindled through mitzvot such as bikkur cholim, visiting the sick. There is incredible warmth and passion to be generated through Jewish study opportunities in our community. And there is the intensity of our relationship with God that can be generated right here in tefilla. The opportunities are endless.

But there is no mistaking that we need to generate the energy to turn on the light, from within. Talking with Amy about the winter malaise a few nights ago, she said to

me, in a straightforward manner, “Mark, you have to create more light in your life.” Reach out and make friends, she suggested – still an immature process for me less than a year into our relocation. She is right, absolutely.

As I mulled over Amy’s words of wisdom, browsed through the beginning of parashat Titzaveh the next morning in tefillot, listened to Linda daven, and reflected also on the mussar class just passed, the possibilities for uncovering that needed light all of a sudden seemed much more proximate than the end of winter.

As the drash commentary in Etz Chaim emphasizes, the light of the menorah in the mishkan needs to come from olive oil – because of its purity and the persistence required to cultivate olives and derive their oil. I need to be persistent, diligent, unbowed by the potholes, in discovering the light.

Linda’s singing of the song of the sea during morning tefillot reminded me to expect the unexpected, that little miracles occur everyday, not to the scale of the splitting of the sea, but still miracles nonetheless.

Reflecting on the character values of humility, anava, and gratitude, hakarat hatov, which are predicated on recognizing the good in others and enabling their expression of their gifts, I realized that a goodly amount of light lay unrealized in my interaction with others and with you. Whether over breakfast after minyan, in calls about your welfare, in the visits I am trying to have with many of you, that’s where I can find the light. It can get awfully cozy, perhaps too comfortable, in that office down the hall, particularly on days like this past Wednesday, when the snow blows in every which direction outside and drains the desire to engage the elements.

We often underestimate the light generated by our relationships, even more so with those people we don't generally consider part of our circles of relationship. This point was driven home to me as I read the first part of Like Dreamers, Yossi Klein HaLevi's highly touted book on Israel's evolution after the Six-Day War. He cites Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, a religious nationalist who gained much of his light and inspiration from the secular kibbutzniks who pioneered the country, yet occupied a completely different worldview, lifestyle, and vision of the Israeli future than his own.

Winter can make us like bears, but, unlike bears in the winter, we need light all year round. It takes hard work to uncover it, and to uncover the presence of God in it. Looking at the ner tamid each time we are in shul, let it be a stimulus to us to be diligent, humble and grateful as we realize the ohr, the light, which God creates on the first day. It is a fundamental building block of life. And as God says, it is good.