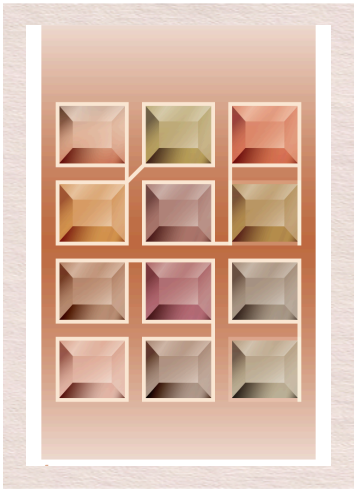
Tetzaveh: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?

God commands Moses to receive pure olive oil from the Israelites in order to feed **the everlasting flame of the Menorah**, which his brother Aaron is to kindle each day. The priestly garments are discussed at length, including the special outfit of the Kohen Gadol, or high priest. Finally, God delivers detailed instructions for a weeklong initiation of Aaron and his four sons into the priesthood.



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"“I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites, and I will be their God.”"

Take a deeper dive

Here's the first, and most curious, thing to know about this week's parsha: Tetzaveh is the only parsha in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers that doesn't mention Moses. It does, however, mention his brother, Aharon, no less than 37 times, and focuses on all things pertaining to the priests: Their clothes, their accessories, their duties and everything else related to their work.

But this detailed discussion of the Kohanim kicks off in a very weird way: "And you shall command the children of Israel," the parsha tells us, "and they shall take to you pure olive oil, crushed for lighting, to kindle the lamps continually. In the Tent of Meeting, outside the dividing curtain that is in front of the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall set it up before the Lord from evening to morning; [it shall be] an everlasting statute for their generations, from the children of Israel."

Why start the discussion with talking about "the children of Israel"? And why linger on lamp kindling? The first two verses teach us everything we need to know.

First, while the priests are the elite, the Mishkan, God's temporary dwelling place on earth, belongs to the entire Jewish people. We, the people, are the ones who entrust the priests to serve HaShem on our behalf, and because of this trust, HaShem, too, endows them with holiness. This very first sentence, seemingly innocuous, is **an important warning against receding in our own spiritual efforts and leaving the business of connecting with God to the elites.**

But the parsha is just getting started. The light, it informs us, resides "outside the dividing curtain." Wouldn't it have made much more sense to make sure that this sacred flame burns from within the holy of the holies, and that only the exalted priests can see it? The parsha, however, is here to tell us the opposite: God, too, isn't interested in a holiness that is reserved for the rarified spheres; **He wants His glory to live in the real world, His light to illuminate our mundane and all too human lives.**

Which leads us to the third, and deepest, insight: the work that the priests do, we're told, lasts "from evening to morning." Which, naturally, is the opposite of the usual formulation, from morning to evening. This, the rabbis of the Talmud taught us, is because we must understand that our job in this world is to follow the priest's example. **We must begin to shine our light when it is darkest outside, and not stop until we've made the entire world brighter.**

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