Light for Our Synagogues:Thoughts for Parashat Tsav

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“And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring unto you pure olive oil beaten for the light, to cause a lamp to burn continually” (Shemot 27:20).

The Ner Tamid (eternal light) was a basic feature of the Mishkan as well as of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Symbolizing the Almighty’s constant presence and providence, the Ner Tamid has been a vital component of our synagogues throughout the generations.

In many communities, the lighting of oil lamps in the synagogue was a sign of respect for the beauty and holiness of the sanctuary. This custom derived from a verse in the book of Isaiah (24:15): “Therefore with lights show honor to the Lord.” In Sephardic congregations, those who receive an Aliyah to the Torah in memory of a loved one often make a contribution of “shemen lamaor,” oil for illuminating the synagogue. This is a vestige of the old custom of providing oil for lighting lamps in the sanctuary. In some communities, it was customary to sell the honor of providing oil for the synagogue lamps as a means of raising funds. The highest bidder would then have the mitzvah of glorifying the sanctuary with lights.

Rabbi David Ibn Zimra (Radbaz), one of the outstanding rabbinic scholars in Egypt during the 16th century, dealt with the following case (Responsa, I: 387): A man had the longtime honor, also held by his ancestors, of donating a large quantity of oil to light the synagogue lamps. Unfortunately, his financial condition worsened, so he now sent only a small quantity of oil. The synagogue officers did not want to accept this small gift, and they transferred the honor to someone else who could donate more. The question: did the first man, now in poor straits, lose his ongoing “hazakah” of providing lights for the synagogue? Or did this right belong to him in view of the many years that he had performed the mitzvah?

Radbaz replied: The person did not lose his “hazakah” to provide lights for the synagogue. “The congregation did not act appropriately by being unwilling to receive from him the oil he did provide. The offering of a poor person is as

important to the Almighty as an offering of a wealthy person. …And if the congregation saw that the oil [he provided] was not enough for the honor of the synagogue, they should have used communal funds [to meet the need] and avoid embarrassing the donor." Radbaz was underscoring the importance of all heartfelt contributions, whether large or small. He was arguing for maintaining the honor of a longstanding donor who fell on hard times. He was reminding the community that concern for human feelings takes priority to financial considerations.

The synagogue is a sanctuary that is built for the glory of God and that should reflect thoughtfulness and compassion to all those who worship in it. Yet, what about the financial needs of the synagogue? If a donor no longer could contribute on the same level as in the past, why shouldn't the honor be sold to a wealthy donor who can contribute more? Isn't that better serving the needs of the community? Yes, the synagogue must seek to meet its financial needs…but not at the expense of humiliating a longtime, devoted member whose financial condition had deteriorated. The synagogue's officers needed to think of other creative ways of raising funds in a way that would not diminish the respect due to the original donor.

On one level, synagogues and charities are businesses. They have budgets to meet and they need to raise funds. But on another level, synagogues and charities are embodiments of the ideals of Torah. They must not only be concerned with the finances to cover their operations; they must be concerned with why they exist in the first place, what their spiritual and communal responsibilities are. Anyone in the synagogue and Jewish non-profit world knows how difficult it is to maintain a proper balance of hard-headed business practices while at the same time maintaining idealistic, humanistic responsibilities.

One of the problems facing synagogues and Jewish non-profits is how to generate the needed funds without losing the spiritual dimension. In our society, donations are purely voluntary…and people can decide to give or not, as they wish. Ultimately, synagogues and non-profits must raise funds by gaining the trust of their constituents; by providing meaningful services; by promoting a feeling of generosity and idealism.

The custom of lighting lamps in synagogues, I believe, is not merely to beautify the sanctuary and increase the feeling of holiness. It is also to remind us that the light of truth is the essential element in Jewish life, without which synagogues (and charity organizations) cannot function properly.

Angel for Shabbat