An Eternal Light: Thoughts for Parashat Tetsaveh

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tetsaveh

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When I read or hear about a scandal involving a Jew, I bristle. I feel pain when Jews are accused (and convicted) of massive frauds, sexual misconduct, or any other criminal activity. Maybe you feel this way too.

We read and hear many stories about non-Jewish evil-doers; although we are unhappy about these things too, they don't impact on us as viscerally. When a Jew is disgraced, we somehow feel that we—and all our people—are also tarnished by association. We suspect that the general public will stereotype all Jews because of the misdeeds of a few of us. Members of other minority groups must feel similarly when one of theirs is in the news for criminal activity.

We Jews pride ourselves on the massive positive influence we've had on human civilization. Our Bible has inspired billions of people to lead honest, compassionate lives. Jews have made amazing contributions to the arts, sciences, business, politics and so many humanitarian causes. Some perceptive non-Jews have recognized the uniqueness of the Jews. The historian, Paul Johnson, in his *History of the Jews*, has written: "Certainly the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place....To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without the Jews it might have been a much emptier place."

This week's Torah portion discusses the eternal light that was to be kindled with pure oil in the Mishkan. Our synagogues draw on this ancient practice by having an eternal light above the ark. This light is said to symbolize the presence of God; our souls; the illumination of Torah. A special feature of the Ner Tamid is that it is a small, gentle, steady light. It draws our attention to the eternal values of the Torah in an inconspicuous way.

The Ner Tamid, in its very simplicity, reminds us of the importance of living pure, honest and humble lives. Don't be misled by the desire for excessive wealth, power or glory. Don't compromise your goodness for the sake of self-destructive behavior that undermines your life and harms others. Don't

act in a way that brings shame to you, your family, and to the Jewish People. Emulate the Ner Tamid—pure, quiet, steady, Torah true.

We are called upon to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Unfortunately, we don’t always live up to these standards. But we must keep striving…and the Ner Tamid lights our way.