

Notes on Tetzaveh: Olive Trees and Olive Oil and Light
Rabbi Eliot Malomet February 24, 2024 15 Adar 1 5784

It used to be that when you needed a new light bulb, you went to the store and bought a plain, ordinary, incandescent one, and the only thing you considered was its wattage. Those bulbs were not that much different from the one Edison invented not too far from here, but now, they have been displaced by LEDs because LEDs last longer and use less energy. We have all learned new things about lighting, including lumens and efficiency. **Color temperature** is particularly important: **lower temperatures feel warm and glow orange, while higher temps feel cold and glow bluish.**



The glow of a candle is **warm**, just under 2000K, which is the color of sunrise or sunset, the two most dramatic points in the day. All this is to illuminate that light, which is necessary for life, makes us **feel** something. Particles or waves, as the first item created by God, light is the essence of creation itself. When we kindle a flame we imitate God, and thus the act has profound meaning other than its practical function of illuminating a darkened space. How to kindle it? What fuel to use? These are questions we take for granted but are spelled out in the tabernacle instructions.

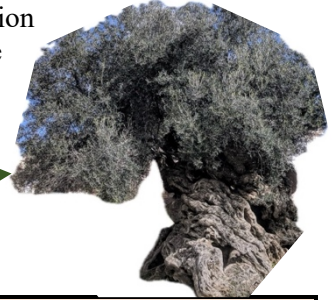
וְאָתָה תְּצַוֶּה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלֶיךָ שֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ כְּתִיב לְמָאוֹר לְהַעֲלֹת נֵר תָּמִיד. (שְׁמוֹת כ"ז)
Now you, command the Children of Israel, that they may fetch you oil of olives, clear, beaten, for the light, to draw up a lampwick, regularly. (Exod. 27:20)

Why olives? This is a question asked by the midrash:

וְשֶׁמֶן זַיִת זָךְ כְּתִיב לְמָאוֹר. לְמָה לֹא שֶׁמֶן אֲגוּזִים וְלֹא שֶׁמֶן צְנוּנוֹת וְלֹא שֶׁמֶן דָּגִים אוֹ שֶׁמֶן אֲחֵרִים? אֲלֵא שֶׁמֶן זַיִת? לְפִי שֶׁזַּיִת סִימָן אֹרֶחַ לְעוֹלָם.	Pure olive oil beaten for the light. Why not oil derived from nuts or radishes or fish, or any other kind of oil? Why only olive oil? Because the olive is the symbol of light in the world.
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Why do we love olives? 1. It is one of the defining species of the land of Israel. 2. They are plentiful. 3. Olive oil burns cleanly. 4. Olive oil has a pleasing scent and is loaded with nutrients. 5. No animals are harmed in making olive oil. 6. It is relatively simple to produce. 7. Mythic antiquity. When Noah sees the dove with an olive branch, he understands that he is in a new era because olive trees have the extraordinary capacity to regenerate themselves after tremendous damage. For that reason, it is the ultimate symbol of survival, renewal, and hope. In a process known as **coppicing**, one can cut an olive tree all the way to ground

level and stimulate rejuve-nation and the growth of shoots. Olive trees have been known to last hundreds, even thousands of years! The Olive Tree of Vouves, Crete, is believed to be over two thousand years old!



שְׁנֵי רְבוּתֵינוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה זֵיתִים וּבְהֵן שְׁלֹשָׁה שְׁלֹשָׁה שְׁמָנִים. הַזַּיִת הָרִאשׁוֹן מִגִּבְרָתוֹ בְּרֹאשׁ הַזַּיִת כּוֹנֵסוֹ לְבֵית הַכֶּדֶד טוֹחֵנּוּ בְּרִמְסִים וְנוֹתְנּוּ בְּכֵלִים טוֹעֲנּוּ בַקּוֹרָה וַיּוֹצֵא מִהֶן רִאשׁוֹן. פּוֹרֵקוֹ וַטּוֹעֲנּוּ שֵׁנִיָּה וַיּוֹצֵא מִהֶן שֵׁנִי. הַזֵּהר טָחַן וְטָעַן וַיּוֹצֵא מִהֶן שְׁלִישִׁי. רִאשׁוֹן לְמִנְחָה שֵׁנִי לְמִנְחוֹת.	Our Rabbis taught: There are three types of olives, and of them there are three, three types of oil. The first olive crop ripens at the top of the tree. They bring it to the press they grind it in the mill and put (the mash) into containers they crush it with the beam and out comes the first oil. They remove the oil, and then crush it a second time, expelling the second oil. Again, they grind and crush it, and the third oil is expelled. The first is for the lamp, and the second for the meal offering.
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Tanhuma Tetzaveh 6:3

The third grade of oil would simply be cooking fuel or heating fuel. Taking their cue from Jeremiah, the rabbis build the olive into an elaborate metaphor for Israel.

זַיִת רַעְיָן יָפֶה פְּרֵי תָאֵר קָרָא ה' שְׁמֶךָ... יִרְמִיָּהוּ יֵאָמֵר	"A leafy olive tree, Fair, with choice fruit." GOD called you... Jeremiah 11:16	The rabbis elaborate (Menachot 53b):
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אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי: לְמָה נִמְשְׁלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזַיִת? לֵאמֹר לָךְ מָה זַיִת אֵין עָלָיו נוֹשְׂרִין לֹא בִימֹת הַחֶמָּה וְלֹא בִימֹת הַגְּשָׁמִים אֶף יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין לָהֶם בְּטִילָה עוֹלָמִית לֹא בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְלֹא בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא.	Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: Why were the Jewish people likened to an olive tree? It is to tell you that just as the leaves of an olive tree never fall off, neither in the summer nor in the rainy season, so too, the Jewish people will never be nullified, neither in this world nor in the World-to-Come.
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According to Rabbi Yehoshua, the perennial nature of the tree corresponds to the indestructibility of the regardless of whether the conditions in the world are harsh or calm.

וְאָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: לְמָה נִמְשְׁלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזַיִת? לֵאמֹר לָךְ מָה זַיִת אֵינוֹ מוֹצֵיא שְׁמֵנוּ אֲלֵא עַל יְדֵי כְּתִיבָה	And Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Why were the Jewish people likened to an olive tree? It is to tell you that just as an olive tree brings forth its oil only by means of crushing,
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אף ישראל אין חוזרין למושב אלא על ידי יסורין.	so too, the Jewish people, only return to their best by means of suffering.
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According to R. Yohanan, the **crushing**, ie. the suffering that we have experienced through persecution, hatred, and ruthless barbarism, brings out the good, even the best in us. Prof. Avigdor Shinan understands this as an attempt to cope with the catastrophic destruction of the Second Temple and the crushing defeat of the Bar Kochba revolt that followed. R. Yohanan, and the rabbis of his generation would *see suffering and anguish as educative experiences that inevitably shape a person and direct them to seek the meaning in their suffering*. As challenging as this theology is, it is tempting to put it on a continuum with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, articulated in *Man's Search for Meaning*, which puts forth the idea that even in the experience of terrible suffering one can find meaning. Suffering, in one form or another, will visit us all in life. Rather than be *embittered* by their suffering, the rabbis are attempting to be *ennobled* by it.

Another midrash (Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:3) gives us a chorus of comparisons between Israel and olive oil:

מה השמן הזה מר מתחלתו וסופו מתוק, כך, והנה ראשיתך מצער נאחרייתך ישגה מאד. (איוב ח:ז)	Just as this oil starts out as bitter and ends up sweet, so too, Your beginning is small but your destiny is great. (Job 8:7)
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Despite the bitterness of all of your sufferings, your destiny will be great, just as the sweetness of the oil emerges from the bitterness of the fruit.

מה השמן הזה אין מתערב בשאר משקים, כך ישראל אין מתערבים באומות העולם, דכתיב: (דברים ז:ג) ולא תתחתן עם.	Just as this oil does not mix with other liquids, so too Israel does not mix with the other peoples. As it is written, You shall not marry them. (Deut. 7:3)
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The commandment in Deuteronomy prohibits the Israelites from marrying the inhabitants of the land (the Hittites, Girgashites, Emorites, Canaanites, Perizites, Hivites, and Jebusites) for fear *that they will turn your children away from Me*, and lead them to idolatry. The midrash uses the analogy to present a fundamental feature of Jewish existence: the unassimilable nature of the Jewish people: ie. the inability of Jews to assimilate, anywhere and anytime.

מה השמן הזה מביא אורה לעולם, כך ישראל אורה לעולם, שנאמר: (קהלכו גוים לארץ. ישעיה ס:ג)	Just as this oil brings light to the world, so too, does Israel bring light to the world. As it is said, And nations will walk by your light. (Isaiah 60:3)
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From the Bible to the ball-point pen,¹ to the Big Bang Theory,² our contribution to civilization has been a light to the world. This idea imbues us pride and responsibility.

מה השמן הזה עליון על כל המשקים, כך הם ישראל עליונים על כל האמות, שנאמר: ונתתה ה' אלהיך עליון. (דברים כח:א)	Just as this oil is elevated above all other liquids so too, is Israel elevated among the nations. As it is said: ה' your God will set you high. (Deut. 28:1)
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Some will read a text like this with an air of chauvinism. But this distorts its meaning. God *sets us high* on the condition that we adhere to the mitzvot. It is the profound nature of our sense of obligation to God that elevates us and differentiates us, and is a source of humility. This next text is complicated:

מה השמן אין לו בת קול, כך ישראל אין להם בת קול בעולם הזה, אבל לעולם הבא כתיב: ושפלת מארץ תדברי. (ישעיה כט:ד)	Just as this oil does not emit a bat kol so too, Israel does not emit a bat kol in this world, but in the World-to-Come it will, as it is written: And you shall speak from lower than ground... (Isaiah 29:4)
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What is a *bat kol*? Is it an echo? An *if-you-build-it-he-will-come*³ heavenly

whisper? Here, it probably just means *a sound*. When you pour olive oil from a jug, it doesn't make any sound. It is a quiet liquid, unlike water, which splashes and makes noise. The rabbis are saying that Jews are quiescent when subjected to abuse. That may have been true under Rome, and while we are not yet in the World-to-Come, **it is certainly not the case today**, when we make plenty of noise against those who hate us and want to destroy us.⁴ The rabbis were

אתה מאיר לכל העולם ואתה מצונה להעלות נר תמיד? אנו באורך נראה אור ואתה אומר להדליק נרות? You light up the entire universe, yet you command us to light a constant light? By Your light we see light and yet you tell us to kindle lights?
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puzzled as to why God would need **us** to light the menorah in the first place. God doesn't need the light. Even though *we see light by God's light* (Psalm 36:10) we still have to light darkened spaces; we need the **color** and the **warmth** of the glowing candles. Moreover, we need the aesthetic experience, and the joy associated with kindling. Don't think that because God's light fills the universe that our act of lighting is meaningless. We still need to kindle lights in a darkened world. And considering that Jews are still being held hostage in darkened tunnels - it is now Day 141 - every **photon** of light that we can kindle in the world, matters. *Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom!*

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Nanette and Dave Cohen in honor of the 3rd Birthday of their granddaughter, Sabrina Jade Petraroli. Mazal Tov! עם ישראל חי! Shabbat Shalom!	שבת שלום! Am Yisrael Hay!
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¹ Invented by Laszlo Biro, a Hungarian Jew who escaped the Nazis.

² Discovered by the late Arno Penzias, former Temple member.

³ The best example of a cinematic *bat kol* from the movie *Field of Dreams* in which the Iowa corn farmer, Ray Kinsella, (played by Kevin Costner) hears a mysterious voice in his cornfield prompting him to build a baseball field, so that the legendary "Shoeless" Joe

Jackson will show up, with a team of baseball heroes from a bygone era.

⁴ In Isaiah 29:4-6, Israel speaks quietly when oppressed. But when God redeems Israel, it will be *With roaring, and shaking, and deafening noise...*The rabbis took this as a source of inspiration: we may be quiet now, but we won't be in the future.