

# Stop Asking

Our Torah reading this Shabbat, Emor, returns to the iconic Jewish symbol – the Menorah. In the book of Exodus, as the Tabernacle is designed and erected, Moshe and Aaron were given instruction to permanently keep the Menorah kindled. Here, we find a repeat of that directive: “Command the people of Israel, that they bring to you pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamps to burn continually.” (Lev 24:2) Why does the Torah seem to repeat itself?

Nachmanides suggests a distinction between the original command in Exodus and this command. Originally, the tribal princes brought their gifts to the Temple to be used in the service of the God. Among their gifts, they brought pure olive oil for kindling. But now, in Leviticus, God must return to the issue of securing kindling oil when the princes’ oil gift is consumed. How would they replace the oil once it had been fully consumed? Here, the Torah gives us the answer: Instead of the princes continually refilling the oil for kindling, the oil would have to be replaced by the community. (See Ramban, Lev, 24:2)

Securing the menorah kindling is a call to the people to engage with generosity. It is interesting because this type of request is different than the past requests. At the outset of its design, the very construction of the Tabernacle was made possible by civic involvement; the people donated all the raw materials. God requested everyone with a ‘giving heart’ to contribute. This was not a tax; contributions to the Tabernacle were voluntary. Yet, as the Torah later describes, the people were so generous with their gifts that they needed to be stopped for giving.

These are the two spirits of giving, two different types of appeal, the community encourages. And it is this spirit of giving that communities need to call upon today as well. Particularly now, more than ever before, the insular, tight-knit, Jewish community is fraying. We are more than ever reliant on communal engagement and generosity for community health. This is the irony and challenge of Jewish communal life today: We live in an open door Jewish community –people are welcomed to enter, but will also freely, easily leave. A decentralized community has no authority to proscribe engagement – the loosely affiliated Jew is skittish and easily frightened away by the demands of continuity. On the other hand, a soft-spoken appeal to Jewish communal continuity works only on the initiated, the ones who get it. What does a community do?

Asking is not engaging. Communities must initiate before asking. For much of communal life, this is the challenge of balance: we ask in a forceful way that scares people off or we ask in a way that is so gentle that it’s easy to ignore. Let’s stop asking. First, the Jews went free from Egypt. Then they received the Torah and *then* they built a Tabernacle. We must first nurture something precious inside of us before we devote our time, resources and energy to building a home for it.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach  
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