

Shabbat Parashat B'ha'alot'kha Let the Light Shine Through

At the beginning of this week's *parasha*, Aaron receives the laws for the lighting of the *menorah* in the *mishkan* (the Tabernacle or "portable desert Temple"). Each day of the week, one of the seven lamps was to be lit until the entire candelabra burned brightly. The *menorah* itself was hand-crafted of fine gold, a sign of the object's central role in Israelite worship. Even though the Jewish people no longer has its *mishkan* or its Holy Temple in Jerusalem, lamps and candles continue to play a major role in Jewish religious life.

In our tradition, fire and light serve as powerful reminders of many religious messages. Light is the first thing that God created in the Creation story. Therefore, light reminds us of God's and our own creative powers when we strike a match and kindle a flame. The light of the Shabbat and festival candles serve as reminders of the requirement for us to cease from creative work on these days, just as God ceased and completed the work of Creation on the seventh day. We light candles when we remember lost loved ones or fallen martyrs of Jewish history as a symbol of our wish that the light of their lives and their memories stay bright for us as we move forward. The eternal light of the Temple and synagogue remind us of God's everlasting presence in our lives. Finally, God commands the Israelites in the desert to act as an "*or l'goyim*" a light unto the nations of world, setting the example of moral and ethical behavior motivated by faith in God and Jewish values. Therefore, going back as far as the beginning of the world and our religious understanding of its origins, light fills a deeply rooted place in our existence.

Making "light rituals" part of our weekly routine has the potential not only to bring Jewish ritual practice more prominently into our lives, but also has the ability to add a new spirituality to family life. The light of the Shabbat candles escorts the peace and sacredness of Shabbat into our homes. This short and relatively simple ritual is imbued with tremendous power. If Shabbat candles are already part of your family's practice, how about trying the Havdalah service, which contains a braided candle whose fire (its kindling being our first act of now permitted work) marks the beginning of a new week of the labors from which we ceased during Shabbat? Bringing new light into your life could also include finding new ways to allow Jewish values to inform your behavior and activities. Perform acts of *g'milut hasadim* for others in a new or more frequent way.

Peter, Paul, and Mary sang, "Don't let the light go out; it's lasted for so many years." Truer words for Jewish ritual practice could not have been written. By finding new ways to bring light into our lives and into the world, we will ensure that we fulfill this charge.

Shabbat Shalom!