



**DVAR TZEDEK:**  
*Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice for 30 years*

**AJWS**  
at **30**

*The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.*

## Introductory Reflection

In her 2012 Dvar Tzedek, Rabbi Wendi Geffen writes about the *Ner Tamid*—the Eternal Light—which burned in the *Mishkan*—the Tabernacle—and later in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The *Ner Tamid* is unique among the *Mishkan's* holy objects because its maintenance was communal. While the elite priestly clan lit the menorah and stoked the sacrifices, it was the responsibility of the collective Jewish people to ensure that the Eternal Light was always illuminated. Because of this, Rabbi Geffen writes, "*Parashat Tetzaveh* teaches that we need to approach how we bring 'light' differently. There will be no *tzedek* [justice] unless and until each of us brings our portion of the fuel to illumine justice in the world."

Rabbi Geffen relates this idea to the ongoing struggle for LGBT rights in India, where a groundswell of activists have worked together to overturn a Colonial-era law criminalizing homosexual sex that has furthered discrimination and persecution of LGBT people. At the time Geffen wrote, the activists had succeeded in convincing the High Court of Delhi, India to declare the law unconstitutional in 2009. Unfortunately, since then, the Supreme Court reversed this decision and upheld the law.

Despite this defeat, India's LGBT community has continued to build political pressure around this issue. In a hopeful but aspirational act, activists petitioned the Supreme Court to revisit the ruling—something the court had only done three times in its history. Just a few weeks ago, On February 2nd, their efforts paid off when the Court ruled that the bench will conduct a comprehensive hearing of arguments around the law's constitutionality. LGBT and allied activists in India are cautiously hopeful about this historic step. This revives the legal battle and is one step closer towards ending legally sanctioned discrimination against India's LGBT community.

Like the *Ner Tamid*, lit by many, this victory was powered by a collective of individuals who each bore the responsibility to kindle the change they want to see in the world. "Too often," Geffen writes, "we view global social justice like the modern *Ner Tamid*: an ideal by which we are drawn and mystified, but something with which we do little to engage directly." Rather, she says, "The best way to kindle the Presence of the Divine is through our consistent and regular efforts to fuel the fires of justice." Let us heed her call to action and support the rights of LGBT people in India and around the world.

Read a recent [blog post on the work of AJWS grantees](#) in this historic judgement, and read Rabbi Geffen's piece below.

# Parashat Tetzaveh 5776

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen  
February 20, 2016  
(Reprised from March 3, 2012)

In third grade, my Hebrew School teacher took our class into the sanctuary to point out its most important fixtures. After the Ark and the Torah scroll, he directed our eyes up to the very top of the ceiling, from which hung a sphere-shaped lamp. With our necks craned to gaze up at the orb's flickering light, he announced: "That is the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Light—it NEVER goes out!" Our ooohs and ahhs abounding, we stood mystified, attributing the light's sustained flame to Divine power. Of course, we later learned that it was fueled by the electric company, but nevertheless, at no point did we worry that the light might be extinguished, nor did we feel any responsibility to maintain the spark ourselves.

It hasn't always been this way. The original *Ner Tamid*, described in *Parshat Tetzaveh*,<sup>1</sup> illumined the most sacred physical location known to our ancestors, the Ark of the Covenant in the *mishkan* (Tabernacle) and then the Holy of Holies in the Temple.<sup>2</sup> Far from a Divine miracle, it was the responsibility of human hands to ensure that the light illuminating God's presence would never go dark.

Furthermore, this awesome responsibility wasn't the special reserve of the elite priestly clan. In a Torah portion focused almost entirely on the priests and their charge, it is significant that the Torah specifically commands the common people, *b'nai Yisrael*, to provide the fuel for the flame. Without this, the priests would be unable to do to their job of actually kindling the light. The ultimate responsibility for fueling the light rested in the hands—not of a small, elite group, but rather—of all the people.

The collective accountability for the maintenance of this most holy object can inform how we perceive our responsibility in maintaining a just, equitable world today. Too often, we view global social justice like the modern *Ner Tamid*: an ideal by which we are drawn and mystified, but something with which we do little to engage directly. The problems and solutions—like a light hanging high from a synagogue's ceiling—seem too distant for us reach, and we leave it up to the perceived elite—the "priests" among us—to do the work. But *Parshat Tetzaveh* teaches that we need to approach how we bring "light" differently. There will be no *tzedek* unless and until each of us brings our portion of the fuel to illumine justice in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically *Shmot* 27:20 – The entire verse reads: "*V'atah tetzaveh et bnai-Yisrael v'yikchu aylecha shemen zayit zach katit la'ma'or l'ha'a lot ner tamid*" "You will command the Israelites to bring clear oil of beaten olives for lighting to cause a lamp to burn always/regularly." Of note, the commentators disagree on the meaning of "*tamid*." Some define it as "always, never ending" and others as "with unfailing regularity."

<sup>2</sup> This *ner* is described only twice in the Torah: in our *parshah* and in *Vayikra* 24. The *ner* functioned first in the *mishkan* and then in the Temple.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) •

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Take, for example, the ongoing struggle in India for sexual rights. LGBTI people in India face a long history of discrimination and persecution that was embedded in a 148-year-old colonial law, which made homosexual acts illegal as “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” The law compounded already existing prejudice, providing the police and homophobic community members with a legal framework that they used to harass, intimidate and discriminate against LGBTI people.

While Indian LGBTI advocates and their allies secured an enormous victory in 2009, achieving a ruling from the Delhi High Court overturning the law, the case was re-opened recently by religious and political groups that want homosexual sex to remain a crime.

While this injustice is fought on the ground by courageous human rights groups and civil society organizations in India, AJWS provides the kindling for a strong movement against the law. With AJWS’s support, grantees from across India’s human rights sector have banded together to fight the legislation, increase the visibility and broaden the support base of their campaign, and raise funds. Refusing to be discouraged by the law’s re-emergence, they have strengthened their efforts, with the ultimate goal of systemic change across their country—decriminalizing homosexuality and protecting the rights of people of all sexual orientations. Many of AJWS’ grantees also are doing important work to ensure that LGBTI people in the rural areas of the country have access to legal and other services to fully benefit from the decriminalization of homosexual sex.

AJWS supports this work not just in India but throughout the world. In the words of one of its grantees working to overcome the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill, which even more vehemently attacks LGBTI people and their supporters, it takes both action and fuel to achieve a goal: “Vision plus commitment plus resources equals light.”<sup>3</sup>

Civil society members are like the priests, actually lighting the flame through their courageous work. But we, like the Israelites, need to provide “fuel” in the form of financial support and advocacy in our own country to enable justice to be done. When the light of justice finally shines in India, it will result not from the efforts of a few, but from the broad and consistent efforts of many, who know that we cannot and should not rely on miracles for justice to infuse our world. The best way to kindle the Presence of the Divine is through our consistent and regular efforts to fuel the fires of justice. Our ancestors’ contributions of oil enabled the light of holiness to be real in their lives; our contributions to global social justice should prove the same.



**Wendi Geffen** is the senior rabbi at North Shore Congregation Israel in suburban Chicago. Dedicated to social justice and its Jewish textual roots, she regularly works to empower the synagogue and her larger community to act on the Jewish imperative to pursue *tzedek*. Wendi can be reached at [rabbigeffen@nsci.org](mailto:rabbigeffen@nsci.org).

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this issue and AJWS’s work in India, visit [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org).

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