LET THERE
BE LIGHT

Oil-Lamps from the Holy Land

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The Development of the Oil-Lamp and Its Components

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A floating wick would be placed in a cup or some other receptacle known as an *shabbat* ("lantern"). Discussing the law regulating the moving of an oil-lamp on the Sabbath, Rabbi Simeon permits only an extinguished lamp to be moved, while specifying the types of lights that cannot be moved: "But a cup, a dish, and a lantern which were extinguished may not be moved from their place" (Tosefta, Shabbat 3:13).

The oil-lamp used in the Land of Israel was commonly made of clay, but we also know of metal lamps, such as those used on the lampstand of the Tabernacle (Ex. 37:23) and others (Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 14b; Hullin 15a).

In the latter part of the third millennium BCE, we have the earliest evidence of a special vessel for burning oil — a rather flat pottery saucer with a rim pinched in one place for holding the wick. Only minor changes were introduced in this model during the Canaanite and Israelite periods (see Catalogue Nos. 2-3). During the Hellenistic period, it was be replaced by the closed oil-lamp (see e.g. Catalogue No. 5), introduced by the Greeks. This new type is distinguished by its two separate compartments: the oil reservoir, constituting the major part of the lamp; and the chamber into which the wick was inserted. The term *pi ha-ner* (literally, "mouth of the lamp") in Jewish sources probably refers to the latter, as in
The Lamp — Its Use and Significance in Jewish Tradition

Amit Assis

The Oil-Lamp in the Home and the Street

In order to understand the role of the oil-lamp in antiquity in the Holy Land, we must first understand the significance of darkness to contemporary people. In modern life there is not a great deal of difference between day and night, or between summer and winter; darkness is merely a temporary nuisance, easily overcome by touching a switch. Today, we can conceive of the role of the oil-lamp in ancient times only by thinking of life during a power outage.

The oil-lamp was one of the most important household appliances in antiquity. It was among the items that a husband was obliged to supply for his wife, even if separated from her (Tosefta, Ketubot 5:8). An individual who lacked a lamp was in desperate straits: to be “in want of all things” meant “in want of lamp, of knife, and of table” (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version A, ch. 20). The Babylonian Talmud explains that the “gear for exile” that the prophet Ezekiel was commanded to prepare (Ezek. 12:3) consisted of “an oil-lamp, a plate, and a rug” (Nedarim 40b-41a). When Rabbi Akiva left his town, he brought an oil-lamp with him (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 6cb).

Labourers who arose before dawn for their work and returned after sunset (Mishnah, Bezah Mitzva 7:3) would carry an oil-lamp with them (Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 2:1), while the wealthy would have their way lit for them by a slave with a lamp (Talkhot Shimonim, Ve’etchanan 835).

When there was no moonlight, streets were dark, and anyone who wanted to walk outside his house would need an oil-lamp. Although alleys in front of buildings required illumination, few people were prepared to provide lamps, and the rabbis were excessive in their praise of anyone who offered to provide illumination for passers-by (Jerusalem Talmud, Seder ‘it 37; Midrash Tanhumah, ‘Tetzaveh’ 8; Midrash Shabat Torah 5:3). Only in association with the Temple do we find a description of a lighted plaza, intended for the young priests, in case they incurred impurity at night: “The young priests each had his mattress on the ground. They did not sleep in the sacred garments, but would take them off, fold them up, and put them under their heads, and they dressed themselves in their own clothes. If one of them suffered a seminal emission, he would go out along the passage that goes under the ‘birab’ [the entire Temple structure], where lamps were burning here and there, until he reached the place of immersion. There was a fire there, and a privy” (Mishnah, Tamid 1:1).

Some people could not afford to kindle a lamp every day. Discussions in the sources regarding Sabbath and Hanukkah lamps indicate that the kindling of a lamp, even on such special occasions, was beyond the means of some people: “[If a person must choose between] the house light and the Hanukkah light, the former takes precedence, on account of [the importance of] peace in one’s home; [between] the house light and [wine for] kiddush, the house light takes precedence, on account of peace in one’s home” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 23b).

A number of testimonies tell of studying Torah at night by the light of a lamp, or by other means of illumination: Rabbi Akiva aroused his neighbours’ ire because he studied by the light of burning straw and stubble, until they complained: “Akiva, we are perishing in the smoke!” (Midrash Hagadot on Exodus, p. 36); and Rabbi Akiva’s son also studied at night, by lamplight (Talkhot Shimonim, Proverbs 958). Some people preferred studying at night by lamplight to studying during the day, when they could have taken advantage of natural light (Leviticus Rabbah 19), possibly because of the intimate nature of the light cast by an oil lamp (Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 16a-b).

The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 12b) warns against reading by lamplight on the Sabbath, lest a person come to tilt the lamp. Since the addition of oil to a lamp is forbidden on the Sabbath, it was feared that a person reading by its light would tilt the lamp when the oil was about to run out, to bring the remaining oil closer to the wick and prolong its burning. This prohibition was based on the assumption that the tilting of an oil-lamp was so routine that a person was liable to do so without thinking, as is attested by one of the leading rabbis: “Rabbi Ishmael said: Once I was reading by lamplight, and I [forgot] and wanted to tilt it. I said: ‘How great are the words of the Sages, who ruled: One may not read on Sabbath nights by the light of the lamp!’” (Tosefta, Shabbat 1:13).

In order to understand the place of the oil-lamp in everyday life, we will examine the various ends, both ritual and everyday, for which this utensil was employed, and its uses in the Temple. This will be accompanied by a survey of the technological and structural aspects of the oil-lamp as reflected in Jewish sources. In addition to the practical end of supplying illumination, the oil-lamp was also used to symbolize the transition between life and death, and to mark sacred time and space. Therefore, we will also investigate the symbolic meanings of the lamp.
The Development of the Oil-Lamp and Its Components

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A floating wick would be placed in a cup or some other receptacle known as an ashabit ("lantern"). Discussing the law regulating the moving of an oil-lamp on the Sabbath, Rabbi Simeon permits only an extinguished lamp to be moved, while specifying the types of lights that cannot be moved: "But a cup, a dish, and a lantern which were extinguished may not be moved from their place" (Tosefta, Shabbat 3:13).

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the description of a lamp mouth that was blackened by the flames: “a lamp whose mouth was burnt by the wick (l’m pur) [Mishnah, Keilim 3:2], as is one “that has lost its mouth” (ibid.). This term also appears with the same meaning in the Babylonian Talmud: “since the mouth of the lamp becomes black” (Menahot 88b). At times, however, this term refers to the upper aperture of the oil reservoir, as in a description of the use of an egg as an additional receptacle for oil that drips into pi ba-ner (Mishnah, Shabbat 2:4). The Hasmonean repudiation of all things Hellenistic included the rejection of the closed Hellenistic lamp. As a result, the “Hasmonean lamp” was based on the earlier open lamp, but the fold that formed the mouth was so pronounced that the two sides of the mouth came together (see Catalogue No. 4). This lamp gives material expression to the Jewish opposition to Greek influence in private life, as well as in the Temple.

Lamps with multiple mouths have been discovered in archaeological excavations of all periods (see Catalogue Nos. 7 and 10). The use of a lamp with two mouths, suitable for use by two people, is attested in the halakhic literature: “Rabbi Isaac bar Redfa said in the name of Rav Huna: A lamp with two mouths is credited (as a fulfillment of their Sabbath obligation) to two people.” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 13b; see Catalogue Nos. 9 and 10); and a description of a three-mouthed lamp appears in the aggadic literature (Genesis Rabbah, ed. Theodor-Albeck, para. 93; see Catalogue No. 25).

Following the Roman conquest, the centre of pottery production moved from Greece to Rome. This period saw the introduction of mass production of oil-lamps, replacing the use of the wheel for their manufacture and incised decoration with the use of moulds and relief decoration. The oil reservoir of the Roman lamp was closed by a round upper part, the discus, that lent itself to embellishment. In the centre or side of the discus was the filling hole, through which the oil was poured into the vessel. The discus was concave, in order to funnel the oil into the vessel, which could possibly explain the wording beit siklu’ - literally, the “depressed place”, that appears in the Mishnah (Kelim 2:8). The Geonim (title of the heads of the Babylonian academies from the end of the sixth century to the middle of the eleventh century), however, identified this term with a vessel resembling a fire-pan that was used as a base for the lamp and trapped the drippings and the soot produced (The Gemonic Commentary on the Order T’harot, ed. J. N. Epstein, p. 13), thereby indicating that the discus lamp was not known in their time.

The oil-lamp, with its reliefs and inscriptions, easily lent itself to embellishments, and these ornamentations are highly instructive of the cultural world of the makers and owners of the lamps. Jewish lamp decorations include the menorah (see Catalogue Nos. 43-44), the Torah shrine (see Catalogue No. 34), temple façade (see Catalogue No. 37), the lulav (see Catalogue No. 33) and etrog (a pomegranate and a citron; among the Four Species taken on the Sukkot festival), and the seven species with which the Land of Israel is blessed (see Catalogue Nos. 11, 13, 65-72). Another midrash voices opposition to using lamps that were embellished with pagan motifs: “Thus did our masters teach: An Israelite may not light a lamp from another on which an idolatrous symbol is engraved” (Midrash Tanhuma, ‘Vayetze’ 10).

Nor could such a lamp be used for the havdalah ceremony (Midrash Tanhuma, ‘Vayeshev’ 3). Other additions to the lamps included inscriptions (mostly names of the potter or dedicatior), which appear sporadically on lamps from the fifth century BCE in Greece (for Roman lamps with potter’s marks, see Catalogue Nos. 57, 72, 73). In Judaea, potter’s marks and names appear on lamps in the Hellenistic period and amuletic inscriptions occur most frequently on Byzantine (see Catalogue Nos. 54-57), Samaritan and Islamic lamps.

The discovery of oil-lamps with broken discases has perplexed scholars. Once the broken discases were thought to be a consequence of iconoclastic Christian opposition to the reliefs on the discus. It is, however, more likely that these broken discases are related to the problem of impure vessels, both for Jews and for Samaritans. During the time of the Mishnah, the rabbis were very much concerned about the laxity of the purity laws. They regarded the potters who produced the pottery as unreliable in their adherence to the purity laws concerning vessels. Unlike glass or metal vessels, ceramic vessels, including lamps, once rendered impure, could never be purified. The solution was to purchase the lamps when they were still closed, could not have been used, and therefore could not have incurred impurity. After the purchase the beverim (those who strictly observed the laws of priestly gifts and the purity laws) would open or break the discus, and only then would this piece of pottery formally become a “vessel”. The breaking of the discus was called “the hollowing out of the lamp” by the rabbis (Mishnah, Betsab 4:4; cf. Babylonian Talmud, Betsab 32a). This explanation provides the most reasonable justification for the lamps with unbroken and broken discases (see e.g. Catalogue No. 24 for a lamp with an unbroken discus and Catalogue No. 22 with a broken discus). It is also noteworthy that the Mishnah accordingly prohibits opening a lamp on a festival, since this action constituted the conclusion of the work of production, an activity that is forbidden on a festival.
Wicks and Oils

The fuel and the flame are connected by the wick, the finest of which were of flax: "They [the rabbis] deduced that only flax produces a [suitable] flame" (Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 4:4), and therefore only this material was permitted for the wicks used for the Sabbath light (Mishnah, Shabbat 2:3). Flax wicks were commonly made by the twisting and singeing (bruchut) of old clothing, and indeed, Targum Onkelos on Gen. 3:18 renders the Hebrew word petil ("wick") with the Aramaic word meaning "garment." The Mishnah (loc. cit.) sets forth a disagreement concerning the permissibility of kindling the Sabbath light with a wick from a garment that is not singed, on which the Tosefta states decisively: "One may kindle with a wick that is singed, but not with rags" (Shabbat 2:1). The Mishnah (Shabbat 2:1) lists wicks that may not be used to kindle the Sabbath light due to their inferior quality, such as lakhash, which the Jerusalem Talmud explains as oak-fibre, and the desert shrub that the Mishnah calls "the wick of the desert" (verhascum). The Babylonian sage Rabbah explains that such wicks are banned because "the fire nibbles at them" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21a), that is (following Rashi's explanation), the flame is uneven, and is prone to sputter and flare up.

2. "Nail", utensil for adjustments to the wick of the oil-lamp (after D. Sperber, Material Culture in Eretz-Israel during the Talmudic Period, p. 104).

The continued burning of the wick required much care, especially for wicks not made of flax. After burning for some time, charcoal would accumulate on the tip of the wick, and would have to be trimmed. The Tosefta speaks of the "nail" or "comb" (see fig. 2) and the "tongs" used for this purpose: "The nail with which one removes the wick and the tong with which one crushes the wick are unclean" (Kelim Bara Metzia 1:8).

In the Temple, the tongs were among the gold utensils used for the menorah (Ex. 25:37).

After discussing wicks, the Mishnah turns to the oils that may be used for the Sabbath light (Mishnah, Shabbat 2:2). Olive oil is the best of oils for this purpose, paralleling the use of flax for wicks; Rabbi Tarfon even forbids the use of other oils for the Sabbath light. In the Yavneh period (70-130 CE), during which the chapter of tractate Shabbat of the Mishnah concerning the kindling of the Sabbath lights was written, the Jewish population in the Judea suffered from extreme poverty, and the sages consequently disagreed with the view of Rabbi Tarfon, who was quite wealthy; and permitted the use of all oils. "But the rabbis permit [kindling] with all oils: with sesame oil, with nut oil, with radish-seed oil, with fish oil, with 'teman' ['a sort of resin], with tar, and with naphtha" (ibid.).

The insistence upon olive oil was especially feasible in the Land of Israel. When the Tosefta cites Rabbi Tarfon's opinion, it continues with the response by Rabbi Johanan ben Nuri, who complains that this ruling is suitable only for those living in the Land of Israel: "Rabbi Johanan ben Nuri stood up and said: What will the people of Babylonia do, who have only sesame oil? What will the people of Media do, who have only nut oil? What will the people of Alexandria do, who have only radish-seed oil? What will the people of Cappadocia do, who have neither one nor the other? You have only what they [the rabbis, actually] stated: They may kindle [the Sabbath lamp] with fish oil and with naphtha" (Shabbat 2:3).

The midrash identifies the dove, that brings an olive leaf to Noah, with the people of Israel, thus symbolically connecting the people and Land of Israel with olive oil (Midrash Tanhuma, "Tetzaveh" 5).

Lamps and Their Accoutrements

The poor would make do with a plain bowl (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 44a); sometimes with an inverted bowl over the lamp, so that the walls of the house would not catch fire (Mishnah, Shabbat 16b). The midrash provides entertaining testimony of such an arrangement, that formed a moon shape between the two bowls: "The dwelling of the moon is between cloud and thick darkness, made like two dishes, turned one over the other.

3. Lamp in bowl in foundation deposit, with upper bowl removed. Locus 3612, Lachish (Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University).
other" (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, chap. 6 [7]; Ozar Midrashim, ed. J. D. Eisenstein, p. 311; Talmud Shimoni on Job, para. 923). Lamps placed between the two bowls have been discovered in the foundations of structures, in foundation deposits (see fig. 3), in sites mainly in the western Negev and northern Sinai from over a thousand years earlier (Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages). Such foundation deposits were ritual offerings intended to protect the building from evil forces. Since the area in which such foundation deposits have been found was under the hegemony of Egypt, this custom has been explained as related to Egyptian ritual offerings, in which tools and building materials were deposited for protective purposes in house foundations.

4. Pedestal for a lamp, in the shape of a human being (after D. Sperber, Material Culture in Eretz-Israel during the Talmudic Period, p. 100).

The rich could afford elegant lampshades such as lampstands which were so large that they had to be carried in both hands (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 44a, 122a); and the andreati, a sort of pedestal, in the shape of a human being with a depiction of a slave bearing a lamp (Tosefta, Kelim Bara Metziya 4:8), on which the actual lamp rested (see fig. 4). The midrash provides a tragicomic portrayal of the Israelites in Egypt as such human lampbearers: "When an Egyptian would dine at night, he would bring an Israelite, place him before him, and kindle the lamp and place it on his [the Israelite's] head. He would warn him: 'See that you do not lean to one side or the other, otherwise I will cut off your head'" (Midrash bagadol on Exodus, p. 83).

At times the monorah rested directly on the statuette; in other instances the figure holds a sort of torch in which the lamp would be placed. The top of the torch had a floral-shaped chamber for the lamp, similar to the flowers in the Tabernacle monorah (see below). The purpose of these pedestals was to elevate the lamp and distribute its light more evenly throughout the room. At times the stand was constructed of two poles connected by a nail, enabling its height to be adjusted. The lamp could also rest on a plank (Tosefta, Shabbat 3:4) that was suspended from chains (Tosefta, Kelim Bara Metziya 4:9).

In the home, the lamp was usually placed in a special niche known as beit ishner (Mishnah, Kelim 5:3), with similar niches designated for other potentially polluting devices, such as the oven and the stove (Jerusalem Talmud, Shevuot 10:7). One discussion of the laws of the Sabbath mentions a case in which a lamp happens to be standing on the lintel of a door; the Talmud permits the door to be opened as usual on the Sabbath: "If a lamp is behind the door, it may be opened and closed normally, and if it is extinguished — it is extinguished" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 120b). At times the lamp would be placed on a table (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 20b); in such a case, however, another vessel was placed under it, to prevent oil spills. Many types of vessels were placed under the oil-lamp, so that it would provide more effective illumination, or to collect the oil that dripped from the lamp for reuse (Mishnah, Shabbat 3:6), and to prevent it from soiling the table. These lamp accessories could be used to hold the charred material produced by the lamps, as can be learned from this statement by Rabbi Judah: "A lamp is [apt to become] disgusting [and therefore may not be carried on the Sabbath], while a receptacle is not [apt to become] disgusting [and may be carried]" (Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 3:7).

The Oil-Lamp in Rites of Passage

The Oil-Lamp in Weddings

The Talmudic testimony to the kindling of oil-lamps at a wedding contains an explanation for the custom — that it imparted a public nature to the event, thus preventing confusion regarding the couple's status (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 89a). Other sources reveal that the practice of kindling lamps at weddings is even more ancient. In Jeremiah's prophecies of destruction lamplight is a metaphor for joyous life, and its absence symbolizes approaching doom: "And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and bride, and the sound of the handmill and the light of the lamp" (Jer. 25:10).

Several sources (Scholion on Megillat Taanit, Elul 17; Jerusalem Talmud, Ketubot 135; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 32b) include a baraita that is actually a sort of popular song based on the verse in Jeremiah that links the sound of the handmill and the light of the lamp with circumcision and wedding celebrations. The version in the Babylonian Talmud reads:

The sound of the mill at Burni [proclaims]

"The week of the son, the week of the son" [i.e., a
circumcision];

The light of the lamp in Beror Hayil,
“A [wedding] feast there, a feast there.”

The parallelism between the two parts of the baraita
and the repetitions at the end of each section are clearly
indicative of poetic stylization; the fact that the three
sources interpret the song bears witness to its antiquity.

The Scholium and the Jerusalem Talmud speak of the
song in reference to historical conditions related to the
anti-Jewish decrees of Antiochus Epiphanes, one of
which afforded the Greek military governor jas primae
notis, the “right of the first night” with brides on their
wedding night. The light of the lamp served as a secret
signal that the wedding would be conducted
clandestinely in order to circumvent this decree. The
celebration of such normally joyous events in private was a
fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prediction of the stilling of all
public rejoicing (Jer. 25:6). The Scholium also cites a
tradition that the Hasmonaean revolt broke out in
response to the ruler’s attempt to realize his “right” with
the daughter of Mattathias the High Priest on her
wedding day. This tradition is probably not historically
accurate, but nevertheless demonstrates the important
role of the lamp at weddings, to commemorate the
persecution by Antiochus. The Geonim ascribe the
practice of kindling lights at weddings to this period of
anti-religious oppression. In the response of the Geonim,
it is formulated: “Although the persecution was cancelled,
the practice is not cancelled” (Teshuvot bagé'onim, ed.
Harkavy, para. 361), and it is frequently observed with lit
lamps, to the present day.

Common metaphors relating to the wedding
ceremony provide possible additional reasons for the
continued observance of this practice, even though the
original reason ceased close to two thousand years ago.
The wedding is compared to the entry of the Sabbath
(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 112a, and the parallels, on
which the Sabbath eve lekha dodi hymn is based), which is
the time for kindling the Sabbath lights. Another
interpretation, based on the custom of lighting the way
for monarchs, so that they would not have to carry a
lamp themselves (Talmid Shimon, ‘Ve’echanan’ 835), likens
the bride to a king (Mishnah, Yoma 1:8; Babylonian
Talmud, Shabbat 76b); the groom is similarly described in
midrashim that are close to the Heikhalot literature
(Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, chap. 16; Pirkei Heikhalot, in Batei
Midrashot, ed. Wertheimer, 1254). In later Ashkenazi
communities, the bride lit candles after the actual
wedding ceremony under the kappah, to symbolize her
future kindling of the Sabbath lights. In a related
practice, common among Christians in these lands, a
candle was lit for each member of the new couple, and
the candle that was extinguished first signalled who
would be the first to die.

The Lamp and the Dead

The Mishnah mentions the symbolic “lamp of the dead”
(that was not used for illumination), along with the spices
of the dead (Bereishit 8:6). The latter consisted of a saucer
of perfume placed on the coffin, to enable those
attending the deceased to approach the corpse, thus
leading us to conclude that this lamp was also placed on
the coffin. A midrash portrays Abraham entering the
Cave of Machpelah, the traditional burial place of Adam
and Eve, where he sees “Adam and his helpmate lying on
their beds, sleeping, with the lights kindled above them,
and a sweet savour above them” (Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer,
chap. 35). Other sources also speak of the lamp or candle
as an element of funeral practices (Midrash Zuta on Eccoli
This explains Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi’s dying instructions to
his sons: “The light shall continue to burn in its usual
place” (Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 103a).

From the Hellenistic to the Byzantine periods, lamps
were often placed in the tombs themselves, probably as
protection against demons — or the return of the
deceased. According to a superstition that was regarded as
“the ways of the Amorite” (that is, idolatrous), lights
placed on the ground before the coffin or the tombstone
caused the deceased to suffer (Tosefot, Shabbat 6:2). The
Jewish attitude is diametrically opposed: the lighted lamp
 aids the deceased to return to his home, and is pleasing
to him; therefore, it is customary to kindle a light for
each of the seven nights of the shivah mourning period
(Rabbi Aaron of Lunel, Orhot Hayim, p. 576). All this is
in sharp contrast to the ancient practice of extinguishing
the lamp in a house of mourning (Apocalypse of Ezra 8:2).

The Sabbath Light

The Torah does not mandate the kindling of lights on the
Sabbath, but in the time of the rabbis this became one of
the foremost symbols of the hallowed day of rest. The early
sources do not consider this to be obligatory, while its
details are the subject of a discussion in the Mishnah
(Shabbat 2:1: “With what may one light and with what may
one not light?”), albeit without examining the source of
the custom. The third-generation Babylonian amora Rabbi
was the first to declare that the kindling of Sabbath lights is
mandatory (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 35b).

Sabbath lights were lit in a lamp either with a single
or with multiple wicks (for many persons). When lighting
multiple wicks, it was essential that the various wicks
should be isolated from each other; otherwise the wicks
would form a single pyre, which may not be used as a
Sabbath light (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 35b).

Many sources attest that the kindling of the Sabbath
lights marks the conclusion of the preparations for the
Sabbath and the commencement of the prohibition of labour. The last of the ḥafar blasts that heralded the beginning of the Sabbath (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 3b) was for the kindling of the lights and the consequent cessation of labour: "If he had finished blowing while the pot was on the stove, they set it on the ground. If there was a light in a woman's hand, she set it on the ground" (Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Be'er, 'Matot' 2), since the light could no longer be kindled or moved. The Mishnah states: "A man must say three things within his house on Friday with nightfall: 'Have you separated ma'aser [tithes]?' 'Have you prepared the eruv [thus permitting walking a distance of 2,000 cubits from a person's residence, and the carrying of objects within a shared courtyard]?' 'Kindle the light!'" (Shabbat 27)

Since the kindling of a lamp is forbidden on the Sabbath, but illumination is needed for the Sabbath meal, it was necessary to kindle the lamp as close as possible to nightfall, so that it would continue to burn for quite a while; thus, the kindling of the lamp came to mark the actual entrance of the Sabbath. This paradox — marking the beginning of the Sabbath by an act that itself is forbidden on the Sabbath — may explain why the kindling of lights symbolizes the Sabbath but not festivals, when the transferal of flame and the moving of a light are not forbidden.

This paradox is intensified when we understand that not only was the kindling of Sabbath lights not a self-understood obligation, it was even totally forbidden by some. The Karaites strictly interpret the verse "You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day" (Ex. 35:3) as also prohibiting the pre-Sabbath kindling of a light that will continue to burn during the holy day. This controversy led to the introduction in the Geonic period of the blessing recited over the kindling of the light (which was not recited during mishnaic and talmudic periods), and of the recitation of the Mishnah chapter of "With what may one light," that contains the laws of the Sabbath eve kindling of lights.

This strict interpretation might have been accepted by non-Pharisaic sects during the time of the Mishnah, since the prohibition of kindling lights immediately before the Sabbath is raised in one of the halakhic midrashim, that rejects this view: "[We could think that] one should not be permitted on Friday to light a lamp [...] for the Sabbath. Therefore, Scripture teaches, 'You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day' - on the Sabbath day itself you may not kindle a fire, but on Friday you may kindle a fire for the Sabbath" (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Maschkat de-Shabbata, 'Vayakhel').

Thus, over the course of time, the prohibition of kindling fire on the Sabbath itself gave birth to the burning lights that symbolize this day.

Non-Jews too regarded the kindling of lights as a distinctly Jewish symbol, one that Josephus attests was also adopted by other cultures: "And there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, not a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread and where the fasts and lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed" (Against Apion 2: 282). The acceptance of the practice arose the ire of the Roman philosopher Seneca, who proposed: "But let us forbid lamps to be lighted on the Sabbath, since the gods do not need light, neither do men take pleasure in soot" (Prohibehamus 2).

The Jewish sources give a number of reasons for the kindling of the Sabbath light. One, that is based on the verse "If you call the Sabbath 'delight'" (Isa. 58:13), considers the burning light to be the special delight of the Sabbath (Midrash Tanhuma, 'Nahal'). Another notes the Sabbath light's contribution to peace in the home (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 3b), which Rashi interpreted as the pleasure derived by those in the house, and which Rabbi Aaron ben Jacob of Lunel (Kol Bo) explained as the prevention of the anger that would result from the inability to move freely within a dark house. A third explanation links the Sabbath lights with the honour due the day (Babylonian Talmud, Peahim 53b).

**Technological Solutions for Prolonging the Burning of the Sabbath Light**

On the one hand, the lights symbolize the Sabbath, while, on the other, no actions affecting the lights, such as adding oil to the lamp, may be performed on the Sabbath; moreover, as mentioned above, even reading by the light of an oil-lamp is forbidden, lest one come to tilt the lamp, which may not be moved on the Sabbath.

These prohibitions pose a technological challenge: to design an oil-lamp that will burn for a sufficient amount of time without human intervention, in order to enable the prolonged enjoyment of its light on the holy day.

5. Sabbath lamp showing the use of an egg as a reserve oil supply for the lamp (Zohar Amar and Avivit Shwiky, Bamme Madiken, p. 97, fig. 1, courtesy of the authors).
One solution, that must be implemented only before the Sabbath, and not on the Sabbath itself, is the addition of a second oil reservoir: "One may not [on the Sabbath] perforate the shell of an egg and fill it with oil, and put it on the opening of the lamp, so that it will drip, even if it is of earthenware; but Rabbi Judah permits. But if the potter had joined it from the beginning, it is permitted, because it is one vessel" (Mishnah, Shabbat 2:4).

The Mishnah describes the use of an egg, or an egg-shaped pottery receptacle, as a reserve oil supply for the lamp. The Tosefta (Shabbat 2:6) speaks of the possibility of joining the egg to the lamp with lime or plaster (see fig. 5).

Such an additional receptacle, however, raises another technological problem. The height of the oil container in the lamp is limited by the location of the wick: the wick will be extinguished if flooded by the oil. Nevertheless, on the other hand, if the wick too far from the bottom of the oil container, it will not be able to draw up the oil once it drops below a certain level. The solution, employing atmospheric pressure, was described by Philo of Byzantium (230 BCE). A sealed tank is installed on top of the lamp mouth, with a small hole in its bottom through which the oil drips, and a tube extends from the reservoir of the lamp to the top of the reserve tank. When the bottom end of the tube is below the level of the oil in the lamp, air cannot enter the reserve tank, and its oil consequently does not drip into the lamp. When the oil level drops, the air hole is opened, and oil drips until the oil reaches the desired level and the tube is closed off again. An oil-lamp from the third-fourth centuries CE to which such an unconventional tube is attached was discovered in the Hebron region (see fig. 6). The continuation of this mishnah offers an additional solution: "One may not fill a dish with oil and place it at the side of the lamp and put the end of the wick in it, so that it will absorb. But Rabbi Judah permits."

This additional wick acted as a pump, with one end in the lamp, and the other in a vessel full of oil. The principle of equilibrium of concentrations results in diffusion within the wick, which draws the oil from the vessel. Such a system appears to have been in use in a vessel bearing the inscription "Sabbath" that was unearthed in excavations at Horvat 'Uza, to the east of Akko (see fig. 7). Within the vessel is a truncated cone on which the lamp could be placed, so that it would protrude above the vessel. We may assume that the vessel and the lamp were connected by a wick that siphoned the oil. Another solution appears in the testimony by non-Jews of wicks floating in oil in the homes of Jews on the Sabbath, thus enabling the use of an unlimited quantity of oil, with no need for a long wick.

**The Havdalah Light**

Upon the conclusion of the Sabbath, a flame must be ignited once again. Just as the entry of the Sabbath is marked by the kindling of a light, so, too, is its departure. The blessing recited over the havdalah light is for the "creation of light." This post-Sabbath process does not resemble the creation of the primordial light during the first day of Creation, but is a sort of Prometheus fire given to man: "Rabbi Yose says: Two things He decided to create on the eve of the Sabbath, but were not [actually] created until the conclusion of the Sabbath. Upon the conclusion of the Sabbath, the Holy One, blessed be He, inspired Adam with knowledge of a sort similar to the heavenly, and he took two stones and rubbed them together, and fire came forth from them" (Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 54a).

The early sources relating to the blessing of light during the havdalah ceremony speak of a blessing recited over a lamp (Mishnah, Berakhot 5:3), but from the time of the Babylonian amoraim onwards, preference was afforded to a "torch," that is, a flame produced by many wicks, instead of an oil-lamp, because of the greater amount of light produced by the former (Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 5:8a).
set up the lamps before the LORD [to burn] constantly" (Lev. 24:2-4).
According to the biblical text, the lamps were illuminated “on its front side” (Ex. 25:37; and similarly, Num. 8:2). As this statement has been explained, it describes the mouths of the lamps facing the middle lamp (Babylonian Talmud, Menabot 98b). This accords with the account given by Rabbi Simeon, who said that when he saw the Second Temple menorah in Rome, all the lamps faced the central lamp (Sifrei Zuta 8:17, Beha‘alotkha). Some modern scholars have suggested the innovative interpretation that the lamps were arranged in a circle around the centre.

The Menorah in the First Temple
The Temple of Solomon contained ten gold lampstands (I Kings 7:49), which could have been constructed according to the form of menorah in the Tabernacle. The Talmud asserts that the Tabernacle menorah (“the menorah made by Moses” — Tosefta, Sotah 13:1) stood in front of the lampstands of Solomon, five on each side (Babylonian Talmud, Menabot 98b). In either event, fate did not shine favourably upon this menorah, since the Babylonians who conquered Jerusalem at the end of King Jehoachin’s reign looted the gold vessels of the Temple (II Kings 24:13) probably including the menorah.

The Menorah in the Second Temple
While the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are silent about the temple furnishings in the Second Temple, the prophet Zechariah who lived at the time of Zerubbabel (ca. 520 BCE) sees in his vision a gold lampstand holding seven lamps (Zechar. 4:2). The book of Chronicles gives the speech of King Abijah of Judah addressing the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom in which he describes the role of the Levites in the Temple: one of their functions was to light the lamps on the golden lampstand each night (II Chron. 5:11). From this last reference, scholars deduce the importance of the Temple menorah for those living during the Second Temple period, when Chronicles was written. According to the Tosefta, the lamps of the menorah of the Second Temple were larger than those in everyday use, and contained about half a log (i.e., 0.2-0.3 litres) of oil (Menabot 103a).

The Menorah of the Hasmoneans
In 169 BCE Antiochus Epiphanes removed the menorah that had stood in the Second Temple (I Maccabees 1:21). Three years after the Second Temple had been profaned by Antiochus, on the 23rd day of Heshvan (Scholium on Megillat Ta‘anit), the Hasmoneans succeeded in reconquering the Temple and cleansing it of the pagan impurity introduced by the Seleucid Greeks. As part of the rededication of the Temple, they also had to construct
This menorah was in use in the Temple for more than two centuries until it was carried away as spoils by the Romans to their capital, where Rabbi Simeon saw it, as mentioned above.

Various artistic representations show that the menorah had a tripodal base (see Catalogue Nos. 43-44). A graphic representation of the menorah appears on two fragments of unpainted plaster unearthed in excavations of a house in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem dated to the Herodian period (see fig. 9). These two fragments are incised with a seven-branched menorah: its three left-hand branches are now missing and it stands on a triangular base. The base has been interpreted as a tripod resting on a ring at the bottom. The menorah itself is embellished with an astragal pattern, and is flanked by other illustrations: one represents the altar, and the other probably depicts the three steps which the priest ascended to trim the lamps (Mishnah, Tamid 3:9). It has been suggested that this depiction was executed by an artist who probably was a kohen and saw the Menorah itself in the Temple. It is apparent that he tried to reproduce it in detail. The proportions of this lampstand resemble those of the menorah depicted in the Arch of Titus in Rome. The latter, however (a copy of which is the official symbol of the State of Israel), presents a stylized Roman base. It has been suggested that the original tripod base might have been replaced for ease in carrying in the Roman triumphal procession, or even earlier, during the time of Herod. Another possibility is that the Roman artist depicted the base in accordance with the types familiar to him.

The Hanukkah Holiday

The kindling of lights on Hanukkah is usually associated with the miracle of the jar of oil, but this miraculous event is first mentioned only in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 21b), hundreds of years after the Hasmonaean. It does not appear in the books of Maccabees, and the description in Scholium on Megillat Tannit was most likely influenced by the passage in the Babylonian Talmud. Are the holiday of Hanukkah and its lights connected with earlier periods?

The 25th day of Kislev is not only the day established by the Hasmonaean as Hanukkah, in commemoration of the rededication of the Temple and the kindling of the menorah following their victory (I Maccabees 4:59), this was also the day on which the Hellenists first defiled the Temple (I Maccabees 1:59); additionally, the preceding day, 24 Kislev, marked the founding of the Second Temple (Hag. 2:18). Both the Hellenists and the Hasmonaean chose 25 Kislev, the day after the founding of the Temple, as the date for its pagan consecration and for its re-establishment as the holy Jewish Temple.
The end of Kislev, however, is not only the holiday of the founding of the Second Temple and its rededication; it also marks the end of the olive harvest. While the festival of Sukkot marks the harvest of grain and grapes, as spelled out in the verse “at the time when you gather in the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress” (Deut. 16:13), the olive harvest continues until Kislev. The olive harvest festival at Hanukkah completes the harvest of the three main crops of the Land of Israel, “the new oil, wine, and grain” the firstfruits of which were brought to the Temple (Num. 18:12; Neh. 10:38). The Mishnah (Bikkurim 1:6) states that the firstfruits which should have been brought at Sukkot, may nonetheless be brought until Hanukkah. The Second Temple was founded at the time of the new oil harvest festival, just as the First Temple had been established on the festival of the grain and wine harvest (I Kings 8:2).

The linkage between Hanukkah and the conclusion of the olive harvest adds an agricultural dimension to the historical aspect of the holiday just as the biblical festivals combine these two elements. The historical aspects include not only the religious persecutions and political uprising of the Jews in the Hellenistic period, but also the social and cultural tensions between the Hellenists and the Jews. The opposition to all Hellenistic culture included an aversion to the Hellenistic lamp for which they substituted a “Hasmonean lamp” (see Catalogue No. 4) based on the older traditional Judaean lamps (see above).

Another facet to this holiday is its place in the ritual calendar—the season of the year in which Hanukkah occurs. It is celebrated in the darkest part of the year (close to the longest night, the 21st of December, the day of the winter solstice), and in the darkest days of the month (from 25 Kislev to after the new moon of Tevet). An aggadic midrash in the Babylonian Talmud (Avodah Zarah 28a) attributes the establishment of the Hanukkah holiday to fear of the dark: “When Adam saw the day growing shorter, he exclaimed: ‘Woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is growing dark for me and returned to chaos. Is this the death to which I have been sentenced by Heaven?’ He began an eight-day fast, but when he saw the (coming) period of Tevet and discerned that the days were growing longer, he said: ‘This is the way of the world,’ and he kept eight days as a festival.”

The increasing darkness arouses Adam to thoughts of death. Only when the winter solstice (21 December) passes and he sees the days beginning to lengthen, does he understand that this is the natural course of events, and he conducts a thanksgiving festival. The holiday described here does not celebrate the Hasmonean military triumph, but rather is of a universal in nature, originating with the first man.

During this season, many other cultures celebrate holidays of lights. The Babylonian Talmud (Avodah Zarah 28a) mentions pagan light and fire holidays around the winter solstice, the shortest day in the year.

The Oil–Lamp as Symbol

The oil-lamp was the practical household utensil that enabled people to see in the dark, and to continue their daily activities into the night. This led to the creation of an entire system of metaphors relating to life, the family, continuity, and connection with the past. The following semantic focuses of the metaphor, each with its own emphasis, together comprise a complete metaphoric field.

The simplest metaphor is not related to the lamp that burns in the house, but to the lamp held up to light one’s way while walking on a moonless night. The lamp is accordingly compared to the word of the Lord (“Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my path”—Ps. 119:105) or to the commandments (“For the commandment is a lamp, the Torah is a light”—Prov. 6:23). A midrash vividly describes the difference between walking at night with a light to stumbling about in the dark: “To whom may the wicked be compared? To a person who was walking on the road but had no lantern in his hand, so that he stumbled over a stone and fell. Then he bumped into a tree that bruised his face. Finally, not knowing where he was going, he came upon a brook and fell into it. Thus, the wicked see no light before them, as it is said: ‘The way of the wicked is as darkness’ [Prov. 4:19]. But the righteous are like a person who was walking in the darkness with a lamp in his hand, so that when he came to a stone, he stepped aside and did not stumble; he saw the tree, that did not wound him” (Midrash Tehillim, ed. Buber, para. 119).

The lamp is frequently depicted as a force that exceeds the bounds of the material—thus one lamp can shed light for many people: “A lamp for one is a lamp for a hundred” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 122a). A metaphorical description of the artistic inspiration of Bezalel ben Uri, the artisan of the Tabernacle, underlines that kindling one lamp from another does not detract from the light of the first, in contrast with pouring from one vessel to another (Numbers Rabban 21:15). Similarly, the benefit derived from a lamp is compared to the enjoyment gained from smelling an etrog, which does not detract from the fragrance possessed by this fruit (Numbers Rabban 13:20). Continuing in this vein, the midrash tells of several examples of lamps that miraculously burned without being extinguished (Genesis Rabban, ed. Theodor-Albeck, para. 11).

The Lamp and the Soul

The lamp is commonly linked to the soul: “The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost
parts" (Prov 20:27). One midrash (Genesis Rabbah, 14:9), quoting Psalm 20:7, describes several aspects of the nocturnal activity of the soul, and compares them with the activity of the lamp: the soul warms the body when man is asleep and is regarded as dead; and it draws vitality from above. These actions are lamplike: the lamp generates warmth, and its wick draws oil from the lamp to the flame.

By defining the time of human wakefulness or life, these comparisons accentuate man's transitory nature. The laws of mourning in the minor talmudic tractate Semakot begin by emphasizing the acuteness of the transition between life and death, as they define the dying person as one whose death may not be hastened: "His eyes may not be closed. Whoever touches him or stirs him sheds blood [i.e., commits murder]. Rabbi Meir would compare [a dying person] to a flickering lamp: the moment one touches it, he extinguishes it. So, too, whoever closes the eyes of a dying person is accounted as though he has snuffed out his life" (Semakot 4).

The death of a person in old age is compared to a lamp that goes out by itself, in contrast to the death of a young person, which is like a lamp that is put out by human agency (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3). Another parable compares the possibility of repenting until one's dying day with the possibility of adding oil until the lamp is extinguished; once it has gone out, there is no point in adding oil (Ozar Midrashim, ed. Eisenstein, p. 222).

In another midrash one of the characters uses this same metaphor to deliver an indirect message to another character, as Moses attempts to break the news of his brother's approaching death: "On that day Aaron said to Moses: 'Tell me, my brother, what do you require of me?' He replied: 'Wait until we ascend the mountain.' After they had ascended, he [Moses] asked him [Aaron]: 'My brother, perhaps the Holy One, blessed be He, entrusted a deposit with you, and He requests it back from you?' Aaron said to him: 'Moses my brother, the Tent of Meeting and its vessels were entrusted to me. Perhaps I was deficient in their service?' Moses said to him: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, gave you the menorah and its seven lamps.' [Aaron] did not realize that he [Moses] was speaking about his lifebreath, [as it is said,] 'The spirit [or, lifebreath] of man is the lamp of the Lord' (Prov 20:27), but he did not realize this. [Then] Moses said to him [directly]: 'Aaron my brother, your time has come to depart from the world. When he heard this, he put his hands on his head, and cried out and wept' (Midrash Tibbona, ed. Baber, 'Hukat', Additions 2; and the parallel: Ozar Midrashim, ed. Eisenstein, p. 11).

"My Lamp is in Your Hand and Your Lamp is in My Hand"

The commandment to kindle the lamp in the Temple is portrayed in one midrash as an expression of the bilateral relationship between man and God: "My lamp is in Your hand, and Your lamp is in my hand" — man's soul is his "lamp," held in the hands of the Holy One, blessed be He, while the holy flame of the Holy One, blessed be He, is in the Temple, to be kindled by man (Leviticus Rabbah, ed. Margulies, para. 31). This relationship is mutually dependent, with each side maintaining the vitality of the other.

Other midrashim do not accept the mutuality implied in this explanation, and depict the relationship as that between a sighted person and a blind man: the sighted person aids the blind one outside, but when they enter the house, the former asks the blind man to kindle the lamp, so that the latter will not feel the need for gratitude, and to give him the sense of mutuality: "so that you would not be under obligation to me for my accompanying you on the road" (Midrash Tibbona, ed. Baber, 'Beha'alotekha' 5; Exodus Rabbah, 36:2; Numbers Rabbah 15:5). The mutuality of the covenant between God and Israel is portrayed as the kindness of the seeing (God) to the blind (Israel), so that the latter will not feel indebted.

Later midrashim understand the phrase "My lamp is in Your hand, and Your lamp is in my hand" metaphorically, not as referring to the lamp in the Temple, but to the Torah, often compared to a lamp (Exodus Rabbah, 36:3; Deuteronomy Rabbah, ed. Lieberman, 4:4). In other midrashim, the lamp in God's hand is that of the messiah, whose advent is assured as recompense for the kindling of the lamp in the Temple (Tanah Shimon, 'Tetzaveh' 378).

The Lamp and Peace in the Home

Like the kindling of the lamp in the Temple, the kindling of the Sabbath light in the private house is perceived as an expression of the mutual relationship between the home and the Creator. The kindling of the light is a commandment perceived as being in the realm of the woman, and the Mishnah warns that its neglect, along with disregard for the laws of family purity and the setting aside of hallah (see Num. 15:20), are among the causes of death during childbirth (Shabbat 2:6). The Talmud explains: "The soul that I placed in you is called a lamp, therefore I enjoined you concerning the lamp. If you fulfill them, it will be well; but if not, I will take your soul" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 32a).

Other sources explain the assignment of the kindling of the Sabbath light to the woman as atonement for the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge: "Adam was the light of the world, but because she caused him to be extinguished, she therefore was assigned the duty of kindling the light" (Avot de Rabbi Natan, version B, chap. 9; Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 2:4).

The lamp is frequently portrayed in the context of gender roles and the relationship between husband and wife. Several midrashim present family problems by means of imagery taken from the world of the lamp. The
concept that the Sabbath light is kindled "on account of peace in one's home," was cited above. The legends recounting the destruction of the Second Temple detail the moral decline that resulted in the destruction and tell of a case of adultery, presented in a laconic comment by the redactor as "two wicks in a single lamp" (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 58a).

Another story tells of a dispute that erupted between a husband and his wife on the eve of the Sabbath. The disagreement is revealed to the reader from the viewpoint of the wife, who is late in returning to her house that night and finds that the Sabbath light (symbolizing peace in the home) has gone out (Leviticus Rabhah 93; Deuteronomy Rabhah 5:13). An additional vignette (Genesis Rabhah 20) portrays a woman from a distinguished family who married a robber. When the sages heard that he was causing her to suffer, they went to the couple's home. The woman responds to the rabbi's visit by bringing out a pottery lamp (representing the husband) set on a gold lampstand (the wife), thus symbolically describing her plight.

The Lamp and the Continuity of Jewish Life

Other images connected with the lamp relate to the continuity of life, family succession, and the chain of tradition. One midrash tells how the lamp in Abraham's home went out upon Sarah's death, and was rekindled when Rebecca joined the family (Genesis Rabhah, ed. Theodor-Albeck, para. 60).

In two midrashim Joseph compares to a lamp. In one he comforts his sons, who fear Joseph's response after they learn that he is still alive and that his high position enables him to avenge himself against them: "If ten lamps could not extinguish one, how can one lamp extinguish ten?" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 16b). That is, the ten brothers did not succeed in killing Joseph, so how could Joseph possibly kill all ten by himself? In the other example, Jacob describes how he felt after Benjamin was taken with his brothers to Egypt; when Benjamin was with him, he had some solace for the absence of his dead wife Rachel (Benjamin's mother) and his son Joseph. Now, however, he is like a lamp with three mouths: when a person wishes to blow out one wick, he extinguishes them all—the absence of Benjamin intensifies the loss of Rachel and Joseph (Genesis Rabhah, ed. Theodor-Albeck, para. 93).

The imagery of the lamp forcefully evokes the struggle for survival of the Jewish people, despite the disasters that it experiences. The phrase "the lamp of God had not yet gone out" (I Sam. 3:3) is presented as describing the continuity of the Israelite leadership on the eve of the destruction of the Tabernacle at Shiloh (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 72b, and parallels); the lamp at the home of Eli the priest had not yet gone out, but the Lord had already prepared a new leader, the prophet Samuel. For the House of David, the kingship is promised through the metaphor of a lighted lamp: "There I will make a horn sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for My anointed one" (Ps. 132:17). In later periods, this verse was understood as referring to the Davidic messiah and appears in passages expressing yearnings for his coming. Thus, this idiom has also entered the prayerbook, in the prayers for the Days of Atonement, and in the text of the abbreviated Amidah prayer formulated in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 29a).

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai who re-established the Sanhedrin at Yavneh was characterized as "the lamp of Israel" (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 29a); or, according to another tradition, "the lamp of the world" (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version A, chap. 25). He was thus addressed by his students who came to him before his death and saw him weeping. The application of the description "lamp" to someone at death's door is especially significant because of the connection drawn between a lamp and the soul. It is even more appropriate when applied to Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who shepherded Israel through the destruction of the Second Temple, and re-established the Sanhedrin at Yavneh, thus keeping the 'lamp of Israel' burning (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 56b).

Lamplight, as we have seen, is most valued in darkness, but with the rising of the dawn its benefit wholly disappears before the strong light of the sun; this is the source of the metaphor of the redemption of Israel as the dawning of a new day. "[This is comparable to] a person who was walking along the road as the sun was setting. Someone came along and lit a lamp for him, but it went out. Then another came and lit a lamp for him, and it [too] went out. He said: 'From now on, I shall wait for the light of morning.' So, too, Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Master of the Universe, We made one lampstand for You in the time of Moses, and it was extinguished, ten in the time of Solomon, and they are extinguished. From now on, we shall wait for Your light'" (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, ed. B. Mandelbaum, para. 21).

This concept lies at the basis of the talmudic saying: "Of what use is a lamp in broad daylight?" (Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 60b).