

Consistently and Constantly
Shabbat B'ha'alot'cha 5786

June 5, 2026

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Several decades ago, a member of Rodef Shalom Temple in Pittsburgh posed a question to a group of Reform rabbinic scholars: “Is it actually required by Jewish legal tradition that there be an eternal light in front of the ark? Would it be a serious violation if the light is extinguished when, let us say, it is necessary to change gas pipes or electrical connections?”ⁱ

On its face, the question seems silly. Does the technology exist by which anyone **could** keep the נר תמיד, the Eternal Light, burning at **all** times, never losing power, whether electric or gas, never having to change a lightbulb? Still, the rabbis took the question seriously. They point to two verses in the Torah, one each in Exodus and Leviticus, where God commands Moses to assure that a light be kept burning “from evening to morning before Adonai,” in front of the curtain covering the Ark. Yes, Leviticus also speaks of the altar fire, which was “not to be extinguished.” However, as the responding rabbis note, “the two biblical references to the Eternal Light, ner tamid, do not say that is not to be extinguished. It is quite possible that the word tamid here does not mean ‘eternal’ but ‘regular.’”ⁱⁱ

The distinction between a fire that was never to go out, on the one hand, and a light to be kindled daily, on the other, is the difference between consistency and constancy. We may consistently celebrate Shabbat, for example, but we do that weekly, not constantly, 24/7/365. By contrast, our love of God—like our love for a spouse, children, or parents—may be constant while its expression may be inconsistent. My love for my sons, for example, is constant and unconditional, and it is often expressed positively. Still, there have certainly been moments, especially when they were younger, when my love for my children was expressed by pointing out their wrongdoing and seeking to correct it.

In this week’s Torah portion, בהעלותך, God demonstrates constant love and guidance for the Children of Israel, represented by a cloud that will rest above them throughout their journey to the Promised Land. Not only is God’s presence to be constant, but also God’s protection. The cloud shields the Israelites from the desert sun by day, then becomes a pillar of fire by night to provide needed light and warmth. The cloud also provides direction: As long as it stays in one place, the Israelites are to remain encamped, but when it moves, their journey continues.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Israelites, by contrast, put their inconsistency on display. Yes, they stay when the cloud remains, and they break camp when it moves, but their gratitude to

the God who has saved them from bondage wavers. They complain bitterly about having to eat only manna year after year, even though that nourishment miraculously appears daily and “tasted like rich cream.”^{iv} They cry out: “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!”^v

We do not experience miraculously tangible evidence of God’s undying love. Our needs are not met by manna from heaven. No cloud or pillar of fire keeps us safe or tells us where to go. Nevertheless, we know all about constant love that is not always appropriately met with the same response.

Take, for example, love of country.

I am old enough to remember the bicentennial in 1976, the year of my Bar Mitzvah. I recall an undiluted celebration, shared by virtually all Americans. The nation was coming out of significant crises, the Vietnam War and opposition to it as well as criminal wrongdoing by the President and the people around him, ending in his resignation. 1976 was an election year. The President was not universally beloved, and indeed he would go on to lose the election, but I do not recall Americans viewing the bicentennial as a celebration of President Ford or refusing to celebrate because they disagreed with him.

1976 was also a time when American Jews perceived this country to be a historically unique refuge for our people. No longer did the choices seem to be between living in Israel or putting up with constant harassment or worse. Antisemitism never completely disappeared, of course. Still, fifty years ago, violent antisemitism was rare, Jews were newly welcome in social arenas previously closed to us, and support for Israel was generally uncomplicated. We celebrated the bicentennial joyfully.

In those days, pride in America, and in being American, was nearly universal and most often felt uncomplicated. Patriotic pride was displayed, for example, at my early childhood home, where an American flag flew on every national holiday, as it did on so many others. Yes, we were aware, if not as conscious as we are today, of American white supremacy and the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, but we thought those inequalities to be largely in the past—like antisemitism, a scourge we imagined to be fading completely away.

This year’s semiquincentennial, an unwieldy word describing the 250th anniversary of our nation’s founding, feels more complicated. Artists scheduled to participate in a celebratory concert have canceled, apparently concerned that the

event risked becoming a partisan political event, hailing President Trump more than our nation.

Worse, many Americans are increasingly conflicted about the nation's goodness. Antisemitism is dangerously on the rise on both ends of the political spectrum. Racial equity, diversity, and inclusion have become dirty words to many, while their cancelation by the federal government has led others to despair of the nation's present and future. Strong opposition to immigration has led many to wonder if our country is still America, or if it is abandoning its role as a refuge for the world's oppressed and downtrodden. More and more, Americans view their political adversaries not as patriotic rivals but as enemies of our nation.

I wonder if we might learn from *פרשת בהעלותך*, God, and the Children of Israel. Patriotism, open-eyed pride in our nation and our national identity, need not falter when America is led in a way we oppose. Constant love for America is appropriate, just as God's love for the Israelites is unwaveringly demonstrated by the cloud. At the same time, just as God punishes the Israelites when they complain about the manna, giving them meat “until it comes out your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you,”^{vi} our love for America need not be demonstrated consistently. Sometimes, we celebrate our nation with festivities. At other times, we do so by voicing dissent.

I am mindful of the mass protests I attended in Israel in 2023 and 2024. The most prominent symbol carried at each of those demonstrations was the Israeli flag. Protest is patriotic, and those opposing the government and its actions made that clear as they sang *התיקוה*, Israel's national anthem, at the conclusion of each march.

One of America's most beloved patriotic songs includes the phrase, “God mend thine every flaw.” We do well to recognize that—like a spouse, like our parents, like our children—our beloved nation is not now and never has been perfect. There is much to love, and many Americans have plenty to protest now, just as others did a few short years ago. Our **constant** love of country demands **inconsistency** in our expression of that love, until one day, “all success be nobleness and every gain divine.”

Amen.

ⁱ “The Eternal Light,” CURR 8-14, <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/curr-8-14/>.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 9:15-23.

^{iv} Numbers 11:7-9. Quoted phrase is in verse 8.

^v Numbers 11:1-6. Quoted passage is in verses 4-6.

^{vi} Numbers 11:20.