

### The Eternal Flame

Scripture repeatedly uses the word תמיד in describing the extent to which the lamps of the Tabernacle's candelabrum had to be aflame (Exodus 27:20; 30:8, Leviticus 24:2; 24:4). תמיד can be translated to mean eternal, perpetual, or continuous. But adjacent verses indicate that the lamps are to be lit in the evening (Exodus 30:8) with a sufficient supply of oil to last only until morning (Exodus 27:21; Leviticus 24:3). In the morning, the extinguished lamps are to be cleansed in preparation for the upcoming evening's lighting (Exodus 30:7). Accordingly, תמיד should be translated as continually, and not continuously or perpetual. The notion is that of a regular, but not an uninterrupted, act.

Rashi offers several proofs that, with respect to the Menorah's light, תמיד means all night and not all day and night. Scripture uses the word תמיד in describing the daily communal sacrifices (Numbers 28:3). Those offerings were brought twice daily, morning and afternoon. Accordingly, something that happens daily, on a regular schedule, can be identified as תמיד despite its not at all being continuous. Similarly, the High Priest's pancake offering, described as תמיד, was brought daily, half in the morning and half in the afternoon (Leviticus 6:13).

In contrast, the Torah requires that the Showbread be תמיד before the Lord (Exodus 25:30). Yet the Showbread ceremony, performed on the Sabbath, was a weekly rite, not a daily one – and obviously not “continuous” as measured by a weekly yardstick. However, for the Showbread, תמיד is indeed understood to mean continuous – but only in the sense that, from start to finish of the Showbread ceremony *per se*, not even for the briefest moment could the Tabernacle's Table be devoid of that sacred bread. As the old loaves were slowly removed, inch by inch, the fresh loaves were simultaneously inserted onto the Table's trays (Mishnah Menahot 11:7).

Ibn Ezra also understood תמיד in Exodus 27:20 to mean that the Menorah's lamps were lit on a regularly recurring basis, not that the lamps were perpetually lit. His proof that תמיד need not mean continuous came from the verse concerning the High Priest's wearing of the sacerdotal tiara: “It shall be on his forehead at all times תמיד (Exodus 28:38).” Clearly, in this

instance, תמיד cannot mean every moment of the day, as it is forbidden for the High Priest to wear the sacred vestments when he is beyond the Temple precincts or when conducting mundane affairs. Rather, תמיד means that the tiara must be on his forehead for the entire time that he is on the premises conducting the sacrificial service.

The halakhic Midrash, aware of the difficulty in understanding the תמיד requirement of the Menorah, posits that תמיד was meant to include occasions when one might otherwise have concluded that the Menorah ought not be lit. Jews' kindling a fire is forbidden on the Sabbath everywhere, including in Jerusalem -- except, only, on the Temple grounds and as part of the Temple rituals. Thus, תמיד teaches that this special lighting overrides the ban on Sabbath labor. Even so, restrictions on it include that an impure priest should not perform the lighting and that ritually impure oil should not be utilized. Still, were the majority of the community to be in an impure state, then even impure priests, and impure supplies, can be utilized in order to light the Menorah (Sifra Emor 13).

The Midrash explains the reference to seven candles in Numbers 8:2 vis a vis the use of the singular in Leviticus 24:3 to describe the "perpetual" candle. It concludes that whereas the other six candles burn only at night, the "western candle" burns continuously and its flame is used to relight the other candles during the late afternoon lighting ceremony (Sifra Bamidbar 59). If, in the morning, the western candle was discovered to be extinguished, it was relit from the flame of one of the other candles or from the fire atop the outer altar (Mishnah Tamid 6:1). Legend has it that during the forty-year High Priestly tenure of Simon the Righteous the western candle miraculously remained aflame all day. After his death, the miracle did consistently repeat itself (Yoma 39a). The miracle was regarded as a sign that God's presence rested among the Jews (Shabbat 22b).

The Talmudic sages and later commentators disputed the identity of the "western candle." According to some, the Menorah was positioned in a north-south direction. Hence, there was no, and could not be, a "western" candle. Rather, the middle lamp atop the central shaft of the golden candelabrum was pointed to the west (toward the Holy of Holies) in contrast to the other lamps, which were pointed toward the central shaft. The dominant view, however, is that the Menorah was positioned east-west. Maimonides identified the western candle as, simply, the westernmost candle of the Menorah. However, most commentators identified the western candle as the candle adjacent to the easternmost candle, on the reasoning that, from the perspective of an officiating priest, that was the first candle encountered that lay west of another candle.

Looking beyond rabbinic literature to other classical sources, we find a range of opinions about how many of the Menorah's candles, if any, were perpetually aflame. Describing the setting of Samuel's first prophetic experience, Scripture reports: "The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the Temple of the Lord where the ark of God was (I Samuel 3:3)." This clearly implies that, on a typical night, the Menorah's lights would cease burning. Jacob Milgrom comments that in the Ancient Near East, and notably at the Hittite shrine of Nerik, it was customary for cultic centers to have lights burning from evening until morning.

Writing about the devastation of the Temple committed by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Diodorus Siculus (a first century BCE Greek historian) noted: "And he put out the lamp, called by them eternal, which burns continuously in the Temple (Bibliotheca Historica 34:1)." Did Diodorus know of a Jewish tradition concerning the perpetual character of the lamp, or was he merely offering his own translation of the words נר תמיד? We cannot be certain, though he was not the only gentile author to have that understanding of the Menorah's lights. Josephus cited Hecataeus of Abdera (a late fourth century BCE Greek philosopher): "There is an altar and a candlestick, both in gold, and in weight two talents. Upon these there is a light that is never extinguished, neither by day nor by night (Against Apion 1:22)."

Josephus himself claimed that three of the Menorah's seven lamps gave light all day long (Antiquities 3:8:3). Another passage in rabbinic literature, discussing the multi-stage process of cleansing the Menorah each morning, suggests the possibility that the two easternmost lamps remained lit all day long (Mishnah Tamid 3:9).

Maimonides held that all seven branches of the Menorah were lit both evening and morning (Hilkhot Temidin u'Musafin 3:12). Scripture commands: "And Aaron shall burn upon it aromatic incense morning after morning; when he tends the lamps he shall burn it (Exodus 30:7)." Whereas all other rabbinic expositors understood "tending" (הטבת נרות) to mean removal of the lamp's refuse, refilling its oil supply, and replacing the wick, Maimonides added the act of kindling the fire (Kessef Mishnah). The philosophical underpinning of Maimonides' ruling is the notion that candles perpetually flickering adds an element of solemnity to the House of God that results in a greater fear of Heaven by those who enter His abode (Guide for the Perplexed 3:48). It is nearly impossible to reconcile Maimonides' ruling with the relevant Talmudic passages. Yet his opinion does seem to mesh with what we have learned from extra-rabbinic and extra-Judaic sources.

Contemporary Jewish practice is to place an eternal light in front of the ark of the synagogue. The origins of this practice are unclear. Many popular explanations connect our

modern “Ner Tamid” with Exodus 27:20 and the Menorah of the Tabernacle. They justify this association by citing the Talmudic teaching that the synagogue is a miniature version of the Temple מקדש מעט (Megillah 29a). This appears to be incorrect. The earliest reference to the lighting of a candle in front of an ark is a Midrashic passage extolling Obed Edom the Gittite for lighting a candle in the morning and another in the evening in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant during the Ark’s three-month stay in his home (Numbers Rabbah 4).

An anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> century halakhist noted that it is the universal practice for a candle to be lit in the synagogue before any worshipper arrives for services. He speculated that the reason for this practice might be the Talmudic dictum that the Divine Presence arrives before the quorum (Berakhot 6a), or that it was customary to light candles in the Temple (Kol Bo 17). Yet this custom plainly did not involve maintaining a perpetual flame. Both the Tur and Shulhan Arukh record the custom of lighting candles in the synagogue, making it clear that the purpose was to give honor to the house of prayer (Orach Chaim 151:9). No mention is made either of imitating the Holy Temple.

Interestingly, as indicated by a Geniza fragment, the Karaites understood the Rabbanite Jewish practice of lighting candles in the synagogue to be an intentional mimicking of Temple practice. Accordingly, the Karaites vigorously opposed the custom, just as they opposed all other attempts to bring Judaism into a post-Temple era by memorializing Temple practices.

With the advent, first, of kerosene lamps and, later, of electric lights, it became much easier to maintain an eternal flame in front of the arks in our synagogues. It is a constant reminder of the eternality of God’s covenant with Israel, and of our individual, and collective, responsibility to keep the flame alive.