

Parashat Behaalotecha 5770, 2010:

Shedding Light on the Menorah

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The menorah is one of the most ubiquitous symbols of Judaism. Indeed, nearly all of us are familiar with the depiction of the Second Temple's menorah being carried away by the marauding Roman soldiers, as found on the Arch of Titus. Until our own moment, this pathos-filled portrayal bestirs the deepest feelings in the innermost recesses of our beings. Then, too, almost every synagogue in the world contains some form or representation of a menorah. It seems that this item of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), perhaps more than any other, has captured the heart and soul of our people.

The beginning of our *parasha* discusses the kohen's daily mitzvah to light the menorah:

The L-rd spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say to him: “When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall cast their light toward the face of the menorah.” Aaron did so; he lit the lamps toward the face of the menorah, as the L-rd had commanded Moses. (*Sefer Devarim* 8:1-3, this, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Immediately thereafter, we encounter a brief description of the menorah: “This was the form of the menorah: hammered work of gold, from its base to its flower it was hammered work; according to the form that the L-rd had shown Moses, so did he construct the menorah.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 8:4) The final words of the *pasuk* (verse) “so did he construct the menorah,” are very difficult, however, since we do not know to

whom the “he” of this verse refers.

The great Spanish exegete, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Nachmanides, Hebrew: the “Ramban,” 1194-1270), was one of the many Torah commentators who wrestled with the meaning of our phrase. Based in part on the principle of proximity of language (*smichut*), the Ramban determined that Moshe constructed the menorah, since his name was mentioned immediately prior to our indeterminate phrase: **so did he construct the menorah** “Moshe who was [just] mentioned.” Most students of *Tanach* (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture) know that while Moshe was our teacher, leader, the most humble person who ever lived and the greatest prophet of all time, he is never referred to as an artisan or someone with the requisite skills to create something as intricate as the menorah. Therefore, with the Mishnaic period halachic Midrash known as the *Sifrei* as his guide, Nachmanides suggested that Moshe learned how to construct the menorah based upon extensive study and yeoman efforts:

He applied himself assiduously in its study [i.e. the menorah] and he made it according to the mitzvah he had been commanded. So did they state in the *Sifrei*: “To make known to us the praise that Moshe deserved, for just like the Holy One Blessed be He had spoken to him, so did he do.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 8:4, translation and brackets my own)

In contrast, Rashi (1040-1105) explained, “so did he construct the menorah,” as referring to Bezalel, the chief artisan of the *Mishkan* (Portable Sanctuary): **so did he construct the menorah**: “i.e., the one who made it [namely, Bezalel].” Rashi's suggestion is forthright. Moreover, in some ways it is the most logical explanation, since the menorah's construction is herein viewed within the context of the overall building of the *Mishkan*. Thus, since the Torah explicitly tells us that Bezalel was the chief architect of the

Portable Sanctuary (*Sefer Shemot* 31:1-5), he would have been the most likely person to have planned, designed, and built the menorah. His renowned G-d-given talents would have made him the perfect candidate for this holy task.

Both Rashi and the Ramban offer a fascinating third candidate as the creator of the menorah. In *Sefer Shemot* 25:31 we read: “And you shall make a menorah of pure gold. The menorah shall be made of hammered work; its base and its stem, its goblets, its knobs, and its flowers shall [all] be [one piece] with it.” The Hebrew word employed for “shall be made” is “*taiasah*” instead of the expected “*taaseh*.” The first expression is passive, whereas the second one is active. Rashi formulates the significance of this grammatical change in the following manner:

the menorah shall be made: By itself. Since Moses found difficulty with it [i.e., figuring out how to form the menorah], the Holy One, blessed is He, said to him, “Cast the talent [equivalent to sixty-four pounds of gold] into the fire, and it will be made by itself.” Therefore, it is not written: *taaseh* but *taiasah*. -[*Midrash Tanchuma, Behaalotecha* III] (Underlining my own)

The Ramban closely followed Rashi’s explanation. Therefore, in our *parasha* he explained the above-stated passage as referring directly to Hashem! “[The menorah] was created via the Holy One blessed be He – by itself.” Thus, according to the Midrash, the creator of the menorah was none other than the Creator Himself! Beyond a doubt, this is a truly amazing and thought-provoking statement.

Neither Rashi nor the Ramban developed the previously mentioned idea any further. I would like, however, to build upon their explanation and suggest that it is of singular importance that G-d, not man, was the artisan of the menorah. In addition, I think it is

crucial to focus upon the miraculous manner in which the Master of the Universe chose to create the menorah. It is to this task that we now turn.

There is a famous *machloket* (argument) between Rashi and the Ramban as to whether the *Mishkan* was created before or after the horrific incident of the *Chet Haegel Hazahav* (the Sin of the Golden Calf). Rashi suggested that the mitzvah of building the Portable Sanctuary (*Sefer Shemot 25:8*) came after, and as a direct result of, the Sin of the Golden Calf. According to this interpretation, the *Mishkan*'s purpose was to serve as a bridge of communication between G-d and man, and thereby rebuild the relationship that had been all but torn asunder. In stark contrast, the Ramban maintained that the commandment to build the *Mishkan* had nothing whatsoever to do with the *Egel Hazahav* (Golden Calf). In other words, the *Mishkan* was like Tefillin or Lulav – a beautiful way to serve Hashem and not a divine response to our forefather's heinous behavior.

For the sake of my presentation, it is crucial to recognize that according to *Midrash Tanchuma 19*, the *Egel Hazahav* was a miraculous creation that came into being via the black arts of Egypt, i.e. via sorcery. This is noted by Rashi in his commentary on *Shemot 32:4*:

a molten calf: As soon as they [the Jewish people] had cast it [i.e. the gold] into the fire of the crucible, the sorcerers of the mixed multitude who had gone up with them from Egypt came and made it [the Golden Calf] with sorcery. (Underlining and brackets my own)

Given all of the above, we are now in a position to compare and contrast the creation of the menorah with that of the Golden Calf.

First the similarities:

1. They were both produced from gold.
2. They were both formed as a result of the gold having been placed into a fire.
3. Both objects were miraculous in that their very creation defied the laws of Nature.

Now the differences:

1. The Golden Calf was created through sorcery and consummate evil. As noted in cognate sources, its builders actively sought to return the Jewish people to hedonism and idol worship.
2. In contrast, the menorah was fashioned in total purity and holiness by the Almighty as a remarkable act of *chane, v'chesed, v'rachamim* (favor, kindness, and mercy) – for Moshe and the entire Jewish people.

I believe a fascinating and novel idea emerges if we adopt Rashi's position that the mitzvah of the *Mishkan* was a response to the *Chet Haegel*, and view it in the light of my analysis regarding the creation of the menorah and the Golden Calf. As we have seen, the *Egel Hazahav* was the antithesis of everything good and holy that Hashem desires in this world. It symbolized and abetted unfettered licentiousness and idol worship. Therefore, it was created with sorcery – the ultimate tool, so to speak, of the *Yatzer Harah* (Evil Inclination). In short, it represented the nadir of the relationship between G-d and our people. I believe its polar opposite was the menorah - one of the constitutive elements of the *Mishkan*. Its function was to light up the Portable Sanctuary and allow the *kohanim* to operate with a newfound vision of hope and purpose. I believe this is precisely why Hashem was its creator. In my view, the menorah was the ultimate counterbalance to the Golden Calf. How so? Just as the Torah's purpose is to bring spiritual light and meaning to the world, the menorah brought physical light to the Jewish people and, by extension,

all mankind. As *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) taught us so long ago: “*Ki ner mitzvah v’Torah or*” (“For a commandment is a candle, and the Torah is light,” *Sefer Mishle* 6:23). Since Hashem created and gifted the menorah to us, we may authentically view it as the ultimate symbol of reconciliation and rapprochement between Him and our people. Our relationship was now *shalame* (complete) and indivisible once again. At long last, we achieved complete *kapporah* (atonement) for the excesses of the *Chet Haegel*.

With G-d’s help, may we all be *zocheh* (merit) to bask in the divine light of the menorah, the Torah, and Hashem’s unlimited love for evermore. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html .

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