

Parashat Beha'alotecha 5777, 2017:

The Meaning of the Menorah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etiel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Menorah is one of the most ubiquitous symbols of Judaism. Therefore, nearly every synagogue in the world contains some form or representation of this sacred object. It seems that the Menorah 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 *kohan'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 Bamidbar* 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." (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 exegete, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (the Ramban, Nachmanides, 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 (*s'michut*), the Ramban, in his *Commentary on the Torah* on our verse, determined that Moshe constructed the Menorah, since his name was mentioned immediately prior to our indeterminate phrase.

Most students of *Tanach* (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture), however, know that while Moshe was our teacher, the most humble person who ever lived and the greatest prophet of all time, he is never referred to as an artisan with the requisite skills to create something as intricate as the Menorah. Therefore, with the *Midrash 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 notable contrast, Rashi (1040-1105) explained the phrase, “so did he construct the Menorah,” as referring to Bezalel, the chief artisan of the *Mishkan* (Portable Sanctuary): “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 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 build 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 “*ta’aseh*.” The first expression is passive and reflexive, 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., understanding how to create 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: *ta’aseh* but *taiasah*. – (Based upon *Midrash Tanchuma, Behaalotecha* III, underlining my own)

The Ramban closely followed Rashi’s explanation. As such, he, too, 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, Rashi and the Ramban, the designer of the Menorah was none other than the Creator Himself! Beyond a doubt, this is a truly powerful idea.

Neither Rashi nor the Ramban developed the previously mentioned notion any further. I would like, however, to expand upon their explanation and suggest that it is of singular import if G-d, not man, was the artisan of the Menorah, for after all, one of its major functions was to bring light to the *Mishkan* and allow the *kohanim* to operate with a newfound vision of hope and purpose. Moreover, I believe, that the golden 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, so, too, did the Menorah bring 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 ohr*” (“For a commandment is a candle, and the Torah is light,” *Sefer Mishle* 6:23). The Midrash's explanation of Hashem as the creator of the Menorah, therefore, leads us to view it as the ultimate symbol of reconciliation between the Master of the Universe and our people. Our relationship was, once again, *shalame* (complete), for at long last, the Menorah signified our complete *kapporah* (atonement) for the excesses of the Golden Calf.

With the Almighty's help, may the *Beit HaMikdash* be rebuilt soon and in our days, so that we 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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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3)