

A Tale of Three Menorahs

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Our *parashah*, BeHa'alotekha, contains one of the classic symbols of Jewish religion, the *menorah*. The *menorah* is a symbol that was absorbed from the outside culture but became a primary channel of Jewish teaching and values. This development itself illuminates the Jewish way through history.

Judaism is a covenant of *tikkun olam*, i.e.: if humanity plays its proper role of repairing the world (in partnership with God), this planet will be turned into a paradise. Jewish religion teaches that this worthy mission is one to which all humans should commit their lives.

This covenant is not a one-time contract. It is rather a commitment to a journey through history, teaching these ideas, serving as role-models for the work, and working with other nations and religions as well.¹ Overall, Jewry has faithfully clung to its mission. It has taught these values in times when such ideas were more credible and in times when they went against the grain of the general civilization.

In the course of this journey, Judaism has sometimes absorbed symbols and religious icons from outside cultures, and has also been open to the reshaping of its own symbols. The

¹ See some of my prior thoughts in my essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, "Covenantal Pluralism," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenantal-pluralism>, and my essay on Parashat VeYehi, "The Covenant Between the Generations," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant-between-generations>.



menorah is a particularly illuminating example of this process.

The *menorah* was widely present in civilizations contemporary with the Bible. Later Jewish authorities raised the question of the dissonance in the use of the symbol of the *menorah*. In lighting candles, one seems to be making light for God—as is done in pagan religions—whereas the Jewish view is that God shines light for others and does not need to be supplied with light, as it says in Psalm 36:10: “*Be’orkha nir’eh or / by Your light, we see light.*”

But the *menorah* was absorbed into Jewish culture because it represented a central and most important image of the Jewish religion: the Tree of Life, the base being the trunk, and the branches, the arboreal coverage. Therefore, the *menorah* took on the symbolic meanings of two distinct manifestations of this central Jewish image.

First, life is planted in God. Life is not an atomistic physical power. Rather, everywhere life is found, it grows in—and is nurtured by—the unseen Divine Ground. Second, the *menorah* evokes the actual Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden which, “if one eats from it, one will live forever” (Genesis 3:22). This is a harbinger of the ultimate and most visionary idea of Judaism, that we can overcome death. “*Bila ha-mavet la-netzah / death will be swallowed up in eternity*” (Isaiah 25:8).

This second message has become more credible in our time because of the amazing life extension over the past two centuries. In turn, this has led to the whole “singularity movement,” which believes that humanity is on the brink of extending life for eternity, and can do this using technology. For millennia, this life for eternity idea was absolutely absurd, as bizarre as a claim that there was green-eyed life on Mars. In contrast, although the insistence that life is grounded in the hidden God was widely accepted in certain civilizations, it has gone against the cultural grain in more recent times. Jewry kept its commitment to persist in its teaching and would not let itself be intimidated by general cultural opposition or



by countervailing majority opinion.

Sometimes, a symbol is so rich that it grows in usage through the ages. Out of perennial usage, the symbol becomes more deeply embedded. Out of multiple applications, it speaks in new and different ways in different cultures over time. So it has been with the *menorah*. The Temple *menorah* and its service came under attack during Maccabean times. In fact, the Greek Hellenists polluted the sacred oils and cut off access to the Temple service for traditional Jews. Still, the Jews stood fast. They fought the Maccabean wars over this very issue.² And when they won the war and recovered the Temple, they purified the oils and reinstated the *menorah* service in all its glory.

One outcome was that when the Maccabees felt they wanted to celebrate the miracle of winning the war and of restoring the *menorah*, the cost in war—in lives, and in religious devotion to restore the Temple service—only made it more precious in their eyes. Therefore, they wanted to acknowledge this in the form of a *menorah* that would reflect the victory, but would not be identical with the Temple *menorah*, precisely because it had become too holy to duplicate.³ So, they ended up creating a second instantiation of the *menorah*. This time, the candelabrum had nine branches with a central trunk in the middle and the other eight branches orienting to the central trunk. This version reflected and preserved the idea of the Temple seven-branch candelabra, in which the three lights on each side oriented toward the central trunk—but without duplicating the iconic Temple version. The outcome was a kind of a second expression of the symbol—similar in structure, but differentiated.

During the Roman wars, the Temple's *menorah* was taken to Rome and paraded in the victory march. The Arch of Titus was emblazoned with the *menorah* as an icon of the Roman victory.

² See my essay on Parashat Mikeitz, “Learning the Lessons of Hanukkah, Then and Now,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/learning-lessons-hanukkah>.

³ For a Rabbinic discussion of this prohibition, see the traditions towards the bottom of Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 43a.



To Jews, however, it became all the more valued as a religious symbol that was taken from us by force, and which we could not restore because of our political and military weakness. And yet, we never accepted this outcome as a *fait accompli*. We dreamed and planned of the day when we would rebuild Israel and recover the *menorah*.

One paradoxical effect of this deprivation was that the Hanukkah *menorah* version spread widely, in highly diversified forms, because it could be created in every creative form, shaping, or expression of art. The sheer dazzling variety of *menorahs* produced during the next two-thousand years helped the *hanukiyyah* spread widely through the Jewish people. The more it took on highly diversified forms, the more it spread. People were enabled to redesign and recreate in unlimited forms and expressions. This made it all the more meaningful to every individual.

When the modern political Zionist movement began, it was mostly started by secular Jews. While the religious message was less central to them, the *menorah* had become more powerful to them as the symbol of the land from which we were taken by force and to which we were denied access. As secularists, they were less inhibited by the idea of duplicating a biblical image, and so the Zionist movement adopted the biblical *menorah* as a central icon. Israel's first Knesset building, the Jewish Agency building, featured a massive *menorah*, and so does the modern day Knesset. Indeed, that *menorah* is the official emblem of the State of Israel.

In the twentieth century, Jewry was struck by the tragedy of the Holocaust. One of the most powerful rituals of memory initiated by the folk was to light a candle in memory of the dead. This evolved into a modern custom of lighting one candle for each million of the six million martyrs. Hence, this image of a cluster of candles rose to the surface again, this time numbered six, when I first encountered Yad Vashem in 1961. At the time, Holocaust memory was not strongly entrenched and the institution was a little neglected, maybe even ratty and



rundown. The staff were considering a plan to design an official *menorah*, which I thought was a profoundly Jewish religious application of historical memory. I admit I tried to convince them that instead of designing an official version from their own staff, they should open it to an international competition, on the grounds that this would evoke the amazing diversity of design that made the *hanukiyyah* so widely accepted and displayed in every home.

But, in 1961, my opinion wasn't worth much. The institution went ahead and issued the six-branched *menorah*—the official Yad Vashem Holocaust *menorah*, still offered to the world as an official symbol of Holocaust memory. This model, without a trunk, simultaneously evoked the rich history of the *menorah* while preserving the distinctiveness of this tragedy with its own icon of memory.

I believe that lighting a candle is one of the most evocative memorials to the dead. Since a cluster of light evokes the Tree of Life, it is a subtle reaffirmation image of our continuing belief that life is grounded in God and that our belief in the ultimate triumph of life is unbroken. To this day, the *menorah* represents Jewish renewal and the ongoing counterforce of life, responding to this horrific—albeit temporary—period of death.

I tell this tale of three *menorahs* as an inspiring example of religious historical development—albeit not without an occasional private twinge that there might have been multiple iterations more widely adopted as a symbol for the Sho'ah. The challenge of creating an appropriate authentic icon of such a tragedy was a staggering one. I am deeply grateful to the Yad Vashem authorities who had the profound religious historical consciousness to create a new *menorah*.

