



Divine Fire in Our Homes

The Intimacy and Mystery of the Menorah

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If Parashat Terumah were a room, it would dazzle the eyes. It would be a room full of treasures made of copper and silver and gold, of carefully crafted curtains and wooden structures built to impress. If I walked into this room the grandeur and obscurity of the objects would likely overwhelm me. But out of the corner of my eye, I would spot something familiar. Standing tall, in glittering gold, I would recognize it—the *menorah*.

Surrounded by unfamiliar objects, the *menorah* feels like home base. Finally, something familiar. Finally, an object I can picture. Of all of the images from the *mishkan*, the *menorah* has traveled through time and found a place in our modern shuls and homes—our modern *mishkans*. Since long before the Star of David, the *menorah* has been a central symbol for our Judaism.¹ We can understand the *menorah*.

Moses, however, felt differently. Rashi tells us that for Moses, the *menorah* was an especially tricky assignment. In a *parashah* full of complicated and esoteric details, what feels most familiar to us seems to have been the most confusing object for Moses. Using two different verses, Rashi brings two alternative versions of the story of Moses's struggle to understand the *menorah*:

שמות כה:לא

וְעָשִׂיתָ מְנֹרֶת זָהָב טָהוֹר מִקִּשָּׁה תַעֲשֶׂהָ הַמְנוֹרָה יִרְכָה וְקָנָה גְבִיעֶיהָ כַּפֹּתֶיהָ וּפְרָחֶיהָ מִמָּנָה יִהְיוּ:

¹ Going as far back at least as the coins of the last Hasmonean king Mattityahu Antigonus:
http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/judaea/mattathias_antigonus/t.html



Exodus 25:31

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.

Rashi explores the phrase “The *menorah* shall be made,” in passive form. He teaches:

רש"י שמות כה:לא

"תיעשה המנורה." מאליה, לפי שהיה משה מתקשה בה, אמר לו הקב"ה השלך את הפכר לאור והיא נעשית מאליה, לךך לא נכתב תעשה:

Rashi on Exodus 25:31

“The *menorah* shall be made”—by itself. Since Moses found difficulty with figuring out how to form the *menorah*], the Holy blessed One, said to him, “Cast the talent [of gold] into the fire, and it will be made by itself.” Therefore, it is not written “you shall make” [but rather “shall be made”].

In this *midrash*, Moses has so much trouble with the *menorah* that God takes over. Moses need only place the requisite amount of gold into the flame and the completed *menorah* will emerge. The fire will make the *menorah*.

The second *midrash* presents a different, but equally fiery story:

שמות כה:מ

וראה ועשה בתבניתם אשר אתה מראה בהר:

Exodus 25:40

Now see and make according to their pattern, which you are shown on the mountain.

What is God referring to here? What was Moses shown on the mountain? Rashi explains:

רש"י שמות כה:מ

מגיד שנתקשה משה במעשה המנורה עד שהראה לו הקב"ה מנורה של אש.

Rashi on Exodus 25:40

[This] informs us that Moses had difficulties with the making of the *menorah*, until the Holy Blessed One showed him a [model] *menorah* of fire.

In this version, rather than using fire to make the *menorah* for Moses, God uses fire to create a model, a template for Moses to follow.



This is not the first time God has communicated with Moses through fire. In fact, God has a habit of taking otherwise mundane objects and making them holy with the addition of fire. What was just a bush becomes the famous burning bush from which God calls out to Moses.² What was just a mountain becomes the fiery mountaintop where God speaks to Moses and the people.³ And here, what may have been just a lamp becomes a fiery *menorah*.

In these stories the fire brings an element of excitement, inducing awe and wonder. When there is fire we are acutely aware of God's holiness and grandeur. We pay attention. These are the stories that start our blood pumping harder, and make us sit up straighter in our chairs. We associate the fire with the ecstatic experience of encountering God. In the *mishkan* God's words will find their way into the ark,⁴ but God's fire is here in the *menorah*.

There is also a *midrash* where God writes the Torah for Moses with letters of black fire on white fire.⁵ To people who love studying Torah, this *midrash* makes perfect sense—the excitement of Torah, the encounter with the divine, is found in the letters and words. But Parashat Terumah is not about words, it is about symbols. By teaching Moses about the *menorah* through fire, God infuses the symbol with excitement and meaning.

Symbols hold a different kind of power. Rashi, the ultimate lover of study, delves head first into this sea of images and symbols. The usually terse commentator writes generously and in great detail about the images found in this *parashah*, and brings not one, but two stories to infuse the *menorah* with the fire of God. Rashi is trying to explain to us with words what really should be done in pictures.

The Talmud in Menahot 29a teaches us that of everything that God taught Moses on the mountain—the entire written and oral Torah—there were only three things that God showed with pictures, and among them: the *menorah*.⁶ Even in our very verbal tradition, there are some things that need to be understood visually and viscerally.

The same is true of our religious lives today. We could read Parashat Terumah every year forever and we may never feel God's presence as clearly as we do watching candles flicker in a golden *menorah*. Ritual can transport us, and this ritual transports us back to the moment of Sinai, of encountering God directly, in a unique and fiery way.

² Exodus 3:2.

³ Exodus 19:18.

⁴ Exodus 25:16.

⁵ Rashi brings this on Deuteronomy 33:2.

⁶ “The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Three matters were difficult for Moses, until the Holy One, Blessed be He, showed him with His finger, and these are: the *menorah*, the new moon, and the creeping animals.”



In his introduction to this *parashah*, Ramban tells us that the true purpose of the *mishkan* is to maintain the experience of Sinai:

רמב"ן שמות כה:א

וְסוּד הַמִּשְׁכָּן הוּא, שִׁיְהִי הַכְבוֹד אֲשֶׁר שָׁכַן עַל הַר סִינַי שׁוֹכֵן עֲלָיו בְּנִסְתָּר... וְהִיָּה בַּמִּשְׁכָּן תָּמִיד עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל הַכְבוֹד שֶׁנִּרְאָה לָהֶם בְּהַר סִינַי. וּבָבֵא מֹשֶׁה (לְהִלֵּךְ לְדָד) הִיָּה אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר נִדְבַר לוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי. וְכִמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר בְּמִתְּן תּוֹרָה (דְּבָרִים ד' לו') מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעַךְ אֶת קוֹלוֹ לִיסִרְךָ וְעַל הָאָרֶץ הָרַאךְ אֶת אֲשׁוֹ הַגְּדוּלָּה, כִּךְ בַּמִּשְׁכָּן כָּתִיב (בַּמִּדְבָּר ז' פט) וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת הַקּוֹל מִדְּבַר אֱלֹהֵי מַעַל הַכִּפְרֵת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרוּבִים וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו:

Ramban on Exodus 25:1

And the secret of the *mishkan* is that the glory of God that dwelt on Mount Sinai [also] hiddenly dwells upon it... And the glory that was shown to them on Mount Sinai was always with Israel in the *mishkan*. “And when Moses came [to it]” (Exodus 34:34), the [divine] speech that spoke to him at Mount Sinai [came] to him. And as [Moshe] said at the giving of the Torah, “From the skies, He made you hear **His voice**, to discipline you, and upon the earth, did He show you His great fire” (Deuteronomy 4:36), so too about the *mishkan* is written “[Moses] heard **the voice** speaking to him from the ark cover between the two cherubim, and He spoke to him” (Numbers 7:89).

Moses can't understand the *menorah* without a divine pyrotechnic demonstration. No amount of explanation would have helped. There are some things God can only communicate through fire. Fire has the power to bring us back to the moment of revelation, and the *menorah* has the power to offer us fire. The next time you see a *menorah*, open your heart to the power and intrigue held in the image. Take a long hard look—as if the object had simply emerged, whole, from a fire.

Shabbat Shalom.

