

# Light Up

Rav Baruch Frydman-Kohl  
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Our Torah reading today began with these words: And the Eternal spoke to Moshe, saying, Speak to Aharon, and say to him, When you go up to kindle the lights, the seven lamps shall give light towards the body of the candlestick.”

Light up to make the light ascend.

In 1875, an amateur archaeologist began excavating in a cave in Altamira, Spain. A few years later, in 1879, he brought his nine-year-old daughter, Maria, with him. Standing in the cave she directed the lantern light to the roof above. “Look, Papa, oxen”. The paintings of bisons, created between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago, shed new light on pre-historic time. Marcelino de Sautuola had missed them for years. He had forgotten to shed light above his head.

Light is a universal symbol which has particular meaning for Jews. Candles mark our transition into and from Shabbat, proclaim awareness of Hanukkah miracles, and are kindled in memory of those we love.

The first divine words are “Let there be light” and the Presence of the Holy One is experienced by a fiery Mt. Sinai and a pillar of fire to guide the journey to the Land of Promise. The flame of the menorah, mentioned in this Torah portion and mounted on the wall of this sanctuary, testify to the enduring Presence of the Divine.

Take a moment to remember the memorable times you experienced the light of the menorah.

I recall of standing with Josette and our son, in his stroller, near the Arch of Titus in Rome where the menorah is carved onto the stonework.

I remember explaining to a group of Christians and Muslims the significance of the menorah carved onto a small stone table in the ancient synagogue of Magdalah.

I think of the Bet Alpha synagogue floor in the Galilee reproduced on the foyer at Beth Tzedec in Toronto.

I stood with Canadian members of Parliament in front of the large menorah at the entrance to the Knesset.

I carry images of the many places we kindled the *hanukkiyah*, the 9 branched menorah used on Hanukkah: in JFK airport, Paris, Italy, New York, Jerusalem, Toronto, and this year, Ottawa.

And I think of a photo of a *hanukkiyah*, in a window across from Nazi headquarters in Kiel, Germany in 1931. On the back of the picture, Rachel Posner wrote: Chanukah 5692/ "Death to Judah"/ So the flag says/ "Judah will live forever"/ So the light answers.

What images do you have of the menorah?

In Hebrew, the word menorah means "lamp." The ancient menorah had seven branches. It was originally intended for use in the Wilderness Sanctuary and then in the Temple in Jerusalem. It became a popular motif of religious art in antiquity and a symbol of Zionist national revival in modern times.

The menorah is first mentioned in the biblical book of Exodus. According to Torah reading today, the design of the lamp was revealed to Moses by God. It was forged by Betzalel from of a single piece of gold with a central shaft and "three [branches] on one side, and three on the other" (Exodus 25:31). Its cups and knobs in the shape of flower blossoms and branches suggest the tree of life.

The Temple of Solomon had 10 golden candelabras, 5 on each side of the entrance to the inner sanctuary. The Second Temple, built after the return from Babylonian exile, contained only one menorah.

Josephus reported that the seven lights remained lit during the day, but the Talmud teaches that only the center lamp was left burning, a sign that the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, was present.

In Magdalah, near the Kinneret, north of Tiberias, the ruins of a synagogue were discovered in 2009. The pottery and synagogue artifacts date from before the destruction of the Second Temple.

Imagine living far from the Jerusalem Temple. Did Jews believe that God's presence was to be experienced only in the Mikdash or also when they gathered in the synagogue? The stone, measuring 45 x 60 x 75 cm, carved with images of the Temple was situated in the middle of the ancient synagogue. It has a depiction of the seven-lamp menorah, possibly chiselled by an eyewitness to the actual Temple menorah.

After the destruction of the Temple, three dimensional menorahs were prohibited. Why? Possibly to avoid the idea that there could be a substitute for the sacred site.

It took centuries for rabbis to work out the idea that you could use Temple motifs without violating the prohibition against multiple temples developing.

Eventually, the synagogue did become a stand-in for the Temple and the menorah became a popular symbol signifying national revival. Representations of the menorah decorated tombs, synagogue walls, and mosaic floors, such as the one in Bet Alpha..

The menorah is not only Judaism's oldest symbol, it is also the oldest continuously used religious symbol of Western civilization. It came to be used to distinguish synagogues and Jewish cemeteries from the places of worship and cemeteries of Christians and pagans.

In addition to its Jewish significance, the menorah was memorialized on the Arch of Titus in Rome. Dedicated after the Emperor's death, it celebrates his victory in the Jewish War. Among the images carved onto the arch is one of Roman soldiers carrying the spoils of war through the city, including the menorah and other treasures of the destroyed Temple.

Steven Fine, in his book, *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel*, points to how the Arch of Titus became important to Jews in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. While Jews knew about Titus, until then few had seen the Arch of Titus. After a photograph appeared in the Eastern European Hebrew newspaper *HaTzfirah*, Jews were excited that one of the most important Roman monuments had a Jewish history.

For emancipated Jews, it showed we had a history in Europe. Zionists saw the menorah being carried away from Jerusalem and imagined an historic reversal in their hoped for return to the Land of Israel. German Jews began to display seven-branched menorahs in their homes in the same way that Christians would display crosses. "The menorah was the branding object for modern Jews."

Traditionally, the Hanukkah menorah had eight lamps at the same level and another above or on the side. The menorah of the Temple and the menorah of Hanukkah were linked by midrash and Torah reading, but didn't look like each other. But once modern secular Jews began making seven branched menorahs, Jews began to use the same form for nine-branched Hanukkah menorahs.

The menorah became associated with Zionism and a replica of the menorah from the Arch of Titus stands in the entrance to the Knesset as the national symbol of the State of Israel.

As Cohen puts it, the menorah is an object, a text and a laser beam through Jewish history. It has been significant in the past and in contemporary times.

In addition to symbolizing the tree of life, the menorah has been understood to represent the ideal of wisdom, or the days of the week oriented toward Shabbat at the centre. Its light is also a metaphor for our souls and for divine direction.

In the Wilderness, we had a pillar of fire to guide our people. Eventually, the light that would guide us became the portable scroll. A midrash portrays God saying “Carry my light, the Torah, in your hand and I shall carry your soul-light in mine.”

We can carry God’s light by the way we carry and act out the mitzvot. We can become a light for others.

Remember your menorah image? Can you be proud of Jewish symbols? Can you light up to see what is above you? What will light your path?

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