

Menorah as symbol of Israel

First, a note for the purists - I know I should use the word "Chanukah" to describe our 8-branched candelabra, but I'm going to stick with "Menorah" to describe the 7-branched menorah of the Beit HaMikdash and the Chanukah chanukah, for the sake of simplicity.

Two months after the birth of the modern State of Israel, the government formed the "Emblem and Flag Committee", to run a design competition for the new national symbols. There were approximately 150 entries. On February 10, 1949, they selected the now-familiar emblem designed by two brothers, Gabriel and Maxim Shamir: a blue shield, bearing a white design of a seven-branched menorah, flanked by two olive branches and bearing the word "Yisrael".¹

The blue and white color scheme is self-explanatory. The two olive branches come from this morning's haftarah, in which two olive trees provide oil for the menorah. And the particular menorah design they chose carried its own symbolism: it's modeled on the menorah that appears on the Arch of Titus, showing the Romans carrying spoils from the destruction of the second Beit HaMikdash. Some argued at the time that the emblem should actually be the menorah found in the Beit HaMikdash, which looked a bit different,² but the symbolism of reversing our exile, and returning to our land, was powerful. This menorah became a symbol of our national rebirth.

But celebrating Chanukah with a menorah today, two months after the massacre; celebrating Chanukah while each day Israeli families are receiving news of children, siblings, spouses, parents killed in battle in Gaza; celebrating Chanukah while the airwaves are full of stories of the savagery of Hamas, celebrating Chanukah while more than 100 Israelis are held hostage, is very difficult. What rebirth is there, when in our own country we can suffer the barbaric assault of Shemini Atzeret, the hostage-taking, the rocket attacks? How can there be room for a celebratory menorah this year?

An answer may lie in the outcome of a classic debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai.

The Menorah of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai

The core mitzvah of lighting the menorah requires just one candle each night, but we beautify the mitzvah with more candles, and Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai debate just how many more candles we light:³

- According to Beit Hillel we light 1 candle on the first night and then increase by one each day, so that on the last night we light 8 candles
- According to Beit Shammai we light 8 candles on the first night and then reduce by one each day, so that on the last night we light 1 candle.

The gemara asks: Why does Beit Hillel start low and then increase, and Beit Shammai start high and diminish? As part of the discussion the gemara offers the following explanation:

- Beit Hillel says to build up because we have a principle of *מעלין בקודש*, that when we are dealing with sanctity we always try to build and grow.
- Beit Shammai says to reduce, just as on Succot we bring bulls as korbanot and we start with 14 on Day 1, then bring 13 on Day 2, then 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7. So here we count down as well.

I can understand Beit Hillel's position of ascending in holiness fairly easily.

- When we set up the weekly *lechem hapanim* (showbread) in the Beit HaMikdash, we first put it on a stone⁴ table, before then putting it on the more valuable gold *shulchan*, where it stays for one week. After that week, when we remove it from the *shulchan*, we put it on another gold table, not back on the cheaper stone table, because we ascend in holiness, and we don't descend.
- Another example: A mezuzah is considered holier than tefillin, because it applies 24 hours a day. Therefore, if tefillin wear out, we can use the scroll from inside as a mezuzah, but we can't use the scroll from a mezuzah for tefillin. The scroll can go up in holiness from tefillin to mezuzah, but not vice versa.⁵

¹ See <https://catalog.archives.gov.il/en/chapter/flag/>

² See <https://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/the-menorah-as-the-symbol-of-the-jewish-state/>

³ Shabbat 21b

⁴ Technically marble, I believe

⁵ Yerushalmi Megillah 4:12

- Within Beit Hillel's thought, the *lechem hapanim* are holy. Tefillin and mezuzah are holy, and our menorah is holy, a celebration of Hashem's wonderful miracles performed nearly 2200 years ago. So we ascend, we grow, we add candles, and we never subtract.

But how do we understand Beit Shammai – what is the link between the bulls brought as korbanot on Succot and the menorah of Chanukah?

It's true that Succot and Chanukah are linked. The Aruch HaShulchan even suggested that the Jews observed eight days for the original Chanukah because the Greeks had prevented the eight-day celebration of Succot earlier that year.⁶ And there are actually many links between these two eight-day holidays, more than fits in a derashah.⁷ But what is the connection of the menorah to these bulls, specifically, and the way they dwindle?⁸

A gemara⁹ teaches that the bulls of Succot are meant to represent the nations of the world. Rashi takes that as positive, that our korbanot defend the nations of the world.¹⁰ But the Maharsha explained it as a negative: with these korbanot we pray for the diminution and disappearance of our foes among the nations.

Perhaps Beit Shammai sides with the Maharsha's view, that the bull korbanot are about eliminating enemies. And perhaps Beit Shammai applies that thought to our menorah as a way of saying that the war of Chanukah against our enemies is still active.

From that perspective, lighting the menorah is not a memorial for a past victory. Rather, the menorah is a weapon in an ongoing war; it is part of that fight against the Greeks. They sought to turn us into a satellite of the Greek empire, consumers of their culture, and Hashem gave us a victory, רבים ביד מעטים – but the fight continues. Every year, in every Jewish home, the candles are our weapon in a battle to fend off the Greeks and preserve our identity.

So we have two ways to view the menorah:

- Beit Hillel sees it as a holy commemoration of an ancient miracle.
- Beit Shammai sees it as a weapon in an ongoing war.

Today

On Chanukah 5784, Beit Shammai's view resonates with me. The war didn't end in the 160's BCE, it only subsided for a bit. The war for Jewish identity continued as the next generations of the Chashmonaim became Hellenized themselves, fought civil wars, and even brought in Roman allies to help them in their intramural battles. The war continued under Rome, during and after the fall of Yerushalayim. The war continued when Caliph Umar imposed the first Jewish badge, and during the Crusades, and so on. Today, the Menorah does not feel like it commemorates history, the Menorah is part of a fight in our living memory.

But then why was Beit Hillel so positive? They lived under Rome, didn't they know that the war wasn't over? And why do we in 5784 go along with their optimistic, ascending lighting? Why don't we channel Beit Shammai's war and light in descending order? How can we bear to add a light each night during our national crisis? Let the menorah lighting be a prayer for the downfall of our enemies!

⁶ Aruch HaShulchan Orach Chaim 670:5

⁷ See Ezer Diena's shiur at <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/969539/Tishrei-in-a-Day:-When-Succot-was-Postponed>, source sheet at <https://cdn.yutorah.net/materials/Source-Sheet-547084.pdf> Both are 8 days and have a whole Hallel. We beautify our menorah lighting to be *mehadrin*, and the etrog of Succot is *pri eitz hadar*. The menorah must be below 20 *amot* to be visible, and the schach must be below 20 *amot* to be visible. We bring our first fruits to the Beit HaMikdash starting on Shavuot, but there are two deadlines for this mitzvah. The first is Succot; after that we may not recite the *bikkurim* passage when bringing them. The second is Chanukah; after that we may not bring *bikkurim* at all. And we light the menorah to celebrate on Chanukah, and they lit menorot at the Simchat Beit haShoevah in the Beit HaMikdash to celebrate on Succot.

⁸ Shiblei haLeket 185 – there is a hint to Chanukah in Succot in the Torah, as after the korbanot of Succot in Vayikra 23 we find instructions for the menorah in Vayikra 24

⁹ Succah 55b

¹⁰ Rashi to Succah 55b says it's to atone for them so that they will receive rain; Rashi on Bamidbar 29:18 says more broadly that it's to protect them. And the bulls descend in number because the nations are naturally dwindling.

Perhaps Beit Hillel was teaching us a lesson that is all the more important in our day. It reminds me of what Professor Daniel Gordis wrote this week, “[T]here’s something deeply wise about a tradition that is not interested in whether I’m in the mood or not. There’s something profound about a tradition that obligates me to light candles in a time of darkness.¹¹” Perhaps we are meant to learn to value what we received בזמן הזה, בימים ההם, to appreciate the victories in the darkness such as they are. To appreciate that some of the hostages are back with their families. To appreciate the stories of small miracles – the tuna can that set off the explosives, the dove that landed on the tripwire. To appreciate that we have a State of Israel.

Zecharyah

We aren’t the first Jews to ask how we can celebrate when there is so much to grieve. And we aren’t the first Jews to be told to do it anyway.

Just three sentences after the end of our haftorah, Hashem addressed the Jews of Zecharyah’s day, the beginning of the second Beit HaMikdash, and challenged, מי בז ליום קטנור, Do you degrade the day of small things? Do you look at what you have achieved, at the second Beit HaMikdash, at tens of thousands of Jews returning home, and think, “Yes, but the first Beit HaMikdash had miracles. Yes, but we are poor and dependent on the largesse of the Persian empire. Yes, but hundreds of thousands of us remain behind in Bavel.” Do you degrade what you have achieved, the blessing you have received?

Beit Hillel’s menorah, and the menorah of the Shamir brothers, present a powerful answer to those who degrade the day of small things. It’s true, you’re right Beit Shammai, we have a long way to go. But we have also come very, very far. Our menorah need not be a weapon every day; but today, for eight days, our menorah can be a celebration.

¹¹ <https://danielgordis.substack.com/p/we-need-to-live-in-a-world-in-which-65d>