

THE CANDELABRA - *Its Laws, Construction and Symbolic Meaning*

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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION - Goals

In my discussions with fellow Shomrey members I frequently mention the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch whose symbolic methods profoundly influenced our understanding of Biblical commandments. In illustrating Rav Hirsch's symbolic methods I invariably cite the Menorah - the Temple Candelabra - is the best example. As a result, some people have indicated to me increased interest in Rav Hirsch.

Accordingly I thought it would be of interest to give a succinct, totally self-contained exposition of Rav Hirsch's explanation of the Menorah. Rav Hirsch's commentary on the Menorah forms a 25 page essay that may be found in his commentary on Exodus 25:31.

The exposition will be middle of the road -- it will be self contained and read smoothly. However references and detailed lists are provided for the more interested reader. A major purpose of the exposition is to expose people to Rav Hirsch's symbolic methods -- consequently, I will always highlight the exegetical novelties which Rav Hirsch introduced.

SECTION II: The Menorah Construction^{*1}

One of the highly striking characteristics of Rav Hirsch's symbolic methods was an emphasis on detail.^{*2} Thus one of the great joys of Hirschian symbolism is the opportunity to become totally familiar with all legal details of a domain. Rav Hirsch saw it as his obligation to show the connection between the general symbolic theme he introduces and all details of the legal domain he was studying. Accordingly, we now describe in complete detail the Menorah. We first describe the Menorah *parts* and then indicate the *position* of these parts.

The Menorah was a *golden* object that resembled in appearance a *tree*. The Menorah was measured in units of *Tepachim* -- each *Tepach* is roughly 3-4 inches. The entire Menorah was *eighteen Tepachim*. In particular the *main shaft* of the Menorah was 18 *tepachim*. There were 6 other *branches* to the Menorah.

The Menorah had various *plant-part-ornaments*. These *plant-part-ornaments* resembled in appearance the *plant-stem*, *the plant-bud*, and *the plant flower*^{*3} It will facilitate the exposition if in the sequel we use the more familiar terms - *stem*, *bud*, *flower* - vs. the Hebrew technical terms - *geviah*, *caftor* and *perach*.

In the 2 previous paragraphs we described the 7 Menorah parts -- (a) the *main shaft*, (b)

the 6 additional shafts, (c) the stems, (d) buds and (e) flowers. (f) As noted above the Menorah was made of gold. Actually the technical law is as follows: It was preferred that the Menorah be made of *gold*; however it was permissible to make the Menorah of any *metal* provided it was *not scrap-metal*. (g) The Menorah had to be *sculptured* from one piece of gold (vs. having various components *soldered* together).

Having indicated the Menorah parts we now indicate the position of these items.

The first 2 Tepachim of the Menorah were simply a base. (I) There was a *flower* at the *third tepach* (that is, between positions 2 and 3 on the main shaft). (II) There was a *stem-bud-and-flower* at the *sixth tepach*. (III) *Three buds* were placed at the *ninth, eleventh and thirteenth tepach*. (IV) On all six branches, as well as on the main stem, the *sixteenth tepach* had *three stems*; the *seventeenth tepach* had a *bud*; the *eighteenth tepach* had a *flower*. (V) The *six additional shafts* branched out from the *buds* at the *ninth, eleventh and thirteenth tepach* (So e.g. 2 branches came from the bud at the *ninth tepach etc.*^{*4})

The Menorah was situated in the *Southern part* of the Temple.^{*5}

Finally, we should explicitly note that since the goal of the Menorah was to give light, it had *wick-oil containers* which were lit -- these containers sat on top of each of the 7 branches. These *wick-oil-containers* were slightly tilted so as to face the central shaft.

III: THE SYMBOLIC MOTIF

Many people are unaware that Rav Hirsch did not emphasize homily in his quest for symbolic interpretation. On the contrary symbolic interpretation should be natural and simple flowing from a *motif*.

A good example of the *motif* approach is seen in the dreams that Joseph interpreted while in prison (Gen 40). Joseph interpreted these dreams by presenting a *fundamental motif*. Thus Joseph interpreted the three baskets as symbolizing three days. The day-basket association is a *motif*. It is a single, simple embryonic idea from which the meaning of the rest of the dream naturally flows. For example, once you accept the *motif* that baskets are days it immediately follows that "the birds eating from the 3 baskets on my head" symbolize "the birds eating my flesh in 3 days (because I am about to be executed)."^{*6}

In analyzing the Menorah Rav Hirsch presents three *motifs*. One of these motifs was presented above: The Menorah is an 18 tepach object with branches, flowers, long cups and spherical objects. The *motif* of the *tree and plant* immediately comes to mind. This *plant motif* will, by itself, suggest many further symbolic themes.

The second Menorah *motif* is the symbolic meaning of *light*. Most exegetes would suffice with the well known association of *light* with *knowledge*. And indeed Rav Hirsch brings about half a dozen verses confirming this well known metaphor.^{*7}

However Rav Hirsch never sufficed with the obvious -- rather he was very thorough and meticulous, carefully scrutinizing the wealth of Biblical metaphors and seeking exceptions to the obvious. Rav Hirsch points out that *light* can equally symbolize *emotional happiness and satisfaction*.^{*8}

Then, in true Talmudic fashion Rav Hirsch seeks a unifying theme to *knowledge vs. happiness*. Rav Hirsch therefore suggests that *light* symbolizes the *soul* or *spirit* since the *soul and spirit* is the source of both *knowledge and emotions*.

Rav Hirsch concludes

"Accordingly we feel justified in taking the *light* in the sanctuary as the symbolic representation of the spirit in its double relationship; the theoretical and the practical; understanding and the will to do things; knowledge and action."

Finally, the third Menorah *motif*, is the association of *Tepachim* with *years*. If the Menorah, the bearer of *light*, symbolizes the growth and development of the *spirit and soul*, then, we may identify the *18 tepachim* of the Menorah as symbolizing the educational spiritual growth requirements during the *first eighteen years of life*.

IV: PLANT ANATOMY

We have already alluded to the association of the Menorah parts with plant components. We symbolically interpret these plant components by studying their function.^{*9}

Stems support buds and leaves and serve as conduits for carrying water, minerals, and food. The vascular system inside the stem forms a continuous pathway from the root, through the stem, and finally to the leaves. It is through this system that water and food products move.

A bud is an undeveloped shoot from which leaves or flower parts grow. Buds grow into either stems, flowers or leaves. Thus a leaf or flower bud is composed of a short stem with embryonic leaves or flowers.

Flowers, which generally are the showiest part of a plant, have sexual reproduction as their sole function. Their beauty and fragrance have evolved not to please humans but to ensure continuance of the species. Fragrance and color attract pollinators (insects or birds) that play an important role in the reproductive process.

In summary, the **(a) stem, (b) bud, and (c) flower** have as their functions **(a) the gathering of nutrients (b) the embryonic outline of further plant parts (c) reproduction**. In the intellectual-spiritual-emotional sphere this would correspond to **(a) raw knowledge and exposure to an item, (b) intuitive feel and familiarity with an item, (c) an ingrained reproducible habit**.

Each reader will probably formulate the plant-spirit correspondence in a somewhat

different manner; particular details and formulation are not important. Rather, the awareness of three stages that roughly correspond to *stem-bud-flower* is what is important. We give illustrations in the next section.

V: THE SYMBOLIC DETAILS

To illustrate the ideas we have been developing let us apply them to a familiar and specific example -- **learning to pray.**

Prayer is both an intellectual and emotional act. In the beginning the student must simply learn how to pronounce the words, when prayers are said, what they mean etc. This would correspond to the **stem** stage of raw nutrients.

Then a person would learn basic ideas about prayer: For example, the idea of acceptance of God as King, or the idea of supplicating to God about ones needs or the idea of praising God for what he has done for us. Similarly one would learn the basic ideas of praying with a quorum of people and in a synagogue. This would correspond to the **bud** stage of prayer since one learns the basic motifs.

Finally the learning would flower into a *reproducible habit*. Thus the person might start going to minyan every day. Additionally the person might become a cantor or perform other praying functions. This would correspond to the **flower** stage since the learned activity has become a habit and ingrained in the personality.

The **stem-bud-flower** all contribute to the *light* -- the development of the spirit and soul.

There are many other examples of spiritual-intellectual-emotional activities that go thru these three stages. For example the sphere of **learning** is traditionally divided into *mishnah* (**the stem** stage when we acquire laws), *Talmud* (**the bud** stage when we see embryonic ideas) and *rabbinic ordination* (**the flower** stage when we are able to *reproduce* law by creating new applications of principles to current questions).^{*11}

VI: CONCLUSION

Throughout this essay we have presented many of Rav Hirsch's ideas on symbolism. We have shown (a) his attention to detail (b) the skillful use of symbolic motifs and (c) the exhaustive review of Biblical usages. These are the hallmarks by which Rav Hirsch was known.

We have presented the basic tools. Rav Hirsch in his commentary gives the symbolic meaning of the remaining details of the Menorah. We conclude by quickly sketching three interpretations: We hope this whets the reader's appetite for further study

(1) **School Curriculum:** Rav Hirsch derives the entire Pre-Kindergarten thru seminary

curriculum from the Menorah. For example, at age 3 you simply expose children to activities (*Flower* at 3rd Tepach = 3rd year). By contrast Kindergarten *should* expose the children to a little bit of laws, reasons and activities (*flower-bud-stem* at the 6-th tepach = 6-th year).

(2) **Secular culture:** The main shaft symbolizes *spiritual relationship with God* while the other 6 shafts symbolize our *relationship with secular culture*. The symbolic meaning of the requirement of **soldering vs. sculpturing** is that we should not e.g. first make our million in the business world (*secular*) and then think about devoting ourselves to God (*soldered*) but rather we should simultaneously devote ourselves to God while going up the business ladder (*sculptured from one piece*).

(3) **Spirit vs Environment:** The development of our *spirit (light)* should ideally take place in a *golden* environment. But it is nevertheless permissible to make the Menorah out of any metal symbolizing that even in *bronze and Iron-curtain times* we still have obligations for spiritual development. In all cases however the development of our spirit must be with fresh energy and never a secondary thought after doing other activities (The Menorah may not be made from *scrap metal*)

FOOTNOTES

*1 There are many sources for the layout of the Candellabrah. See <http://www.Rashiyomi.com/h1n19.htm> for a short summary. This section however will be self contained.

*2 In this respect Rav Hirsch disagrees with the Ramban who explicitly states in his commentary on Shir Hashirim that "the symbolist has the right to give a *general* symbolic meaning without this symbolic meaning necessarily fitting each and every *detail*." The Ramban's view may be consistent with the Talmudic observation on Joseph's dreams: "Not every detail of a dream need be fulfilled--for example although Joseph dreamt that the **sun**(*Jacob*) and **moon**(*Rachel*) bowed to him, only Jacob lived to see him Vice-King."

*3 The Hebrew terms for these 3 plant items are as follows: (a) *Perach* is well known to mean *flower*. (b) The Hebrew *Geviah* is well known to mean *cup* --the Menorah *Geviah*, according to the Talmud, resembled a long cup and consequently resembled the plant *stem* which also looks like a long cup. (c) Very little is known in Hebrew about the 3rd term used in the Menorah ornaments -- the *caftor*. Tradition says it resembled Cretan apples. Since we know that plants have *stems, buds and flowers* it seems reasonable to see the *caftor* as looking like a *bud* -- this association of *caftor* with *bud* is consistent with the Talmudic description of resemblance to a Cretan apple (that is a bud appears as a spherical object)

*4 There is a controversy among the early authorities (*Rishonim*) *whether the additional shafts* looked like a **V** (i.e. *branched diagonally*) or a **U** (i.e. *curved up*).

*5 There is a controversy among the *rishonim* whether the Menorah (in the South) had its six shafts along the east-west axis (Rashi, Raavad and most rishonim and our present day synagogue practice)) or the north-south axis(A minority view of the Rambam)

*6 For a more comprehensive approach to Rav Hirsch's approach to symbolism read his *Groundlines for Jewish Symbolism* which e.g. you can find in volume 3 of his collected works which has been translated by Feldheim. I have presented a succinct 5 page summary of Rav Hirsch's methods in my article **Genesis 1 speaks about the creation of Prophecy, not the creation of the world** which appeared in the journal B'OR Hatorah. This article can be accessed at <http://www.RashiYomi.com/gen-1.htm>

*7 e.g. Ps 119:105, Prv 6:23, Ps 19:9, Ps 119:130, Is 42:6, 51:4, 2:5 60:2

A typical example might be Ps 119:105 "The word of God is a lamp for our feet and a *light* for our path."

*8 A typical example is Job 21:17 "But for how long does it last? The *lamp* of the wicked becomes extinguished and misfortune overtakes them." Here *light* denotes emotional happiness not knowledge. Other examples brought by Rav Hirsch are Job 29:2, 21:17, Ps 132:17, 97:11 Prov 13:9, 20:20, 24:20, 15:30, Eccl 11:7, Job 30:26, 33:28, 33:30, Is 59:9, 26:19 Jer 13:16, Es 8:16

*9 There are many books on plant parts. I borrowed a rather nice summary from <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/mg/botany/index.html>

*10 Recall that the beauty of flowers is used to attract pollinators to assure reproducibility. This would e.g. correspond to praying with a minyan (in a group of other people) vs. praying by oneself. The "other people" serve as "pollinators:" since they help reinforce the habits.

*11 Rav Hirsch in his commentary concentrates on knowledge in his examples but obviously his methods are extendable to other spheres like prayer. Hence the examples we presented. We have deviated somewhat from Rav Hirsch's outline of the 3 stages -- as noted in the paper, different individuals will approach the symbolic details differently)