



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY MAY 31ST, / כז' אייר

PARSHA:

Behaaloscha / בהעלותך

SERMON TITLE:

Menorah - Symbol of the Jewish People

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ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Behaaloscha

Menorah - Symbol of the Jewish People

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi's get all kinds of questions, including, "Rabbi, where's your Chai? Why don't you wear a Chai necklace around your neck?"

So why do many Jews wear "Chai?" Since when did the Chai become a Jewish symbol?

Seemingly, this comes from the well-known expression "Am Yisrael Chai." I don't know when the Chai medallion turned into a Jewish symbol, but it's clear that as of this day, Chai symbolizes being Jewish.

But there are other symbols that symbolize Jewish identity which we're all familiar with. For example, we've got the Magen David (which actually translates to "Shield of David," not "Star of David"). Everyone recognizes the Magen David as a universal Jewish symbol.

But when and where did the Magen David originate?

Some claim that this image was engraved on the shield's of King David's warriors. But historians say that this is not correct.

(Others say that King David's personal battle shield was shaped like a six-pointed star.)

The image of the Magen David with six corners is an image spoken about in a Kabbalistic book called Razi'el HaMalach—but there, it's not mentioned by the name "Magen David" and not as a Jewish symbol.

Some claim that over 800 years ago, a false Messiah named David El-Roi adopted this symbol for himself and called it the Magen David after his own name. This explanation posits that the Magen David is really formed of two triangles, one on top of the other—and that the letter Daled in old Hebrew script has the appearance of a triangle, thus rendering the two triangles of the Magen David as hints to the two Daleds that appear in the name David.

So it's not clear when they started to use this image as a Jewish symbol.

There are ancient synagogues in Lebanon in which there were found Magen David symbols. But as a symbol of being Jewish, it seems that this began in the Middle Ages, particularly in Ashkenazic countries. It is told that in Prague of 700 years ago, King Karl the Fourth allowed the Jews to raise their own flag, and they chose the Magen David as their symbol.

The more the years went by, the more and more popular the Magen David became as a symbol of being Jewish. But the ones who popularized the Magen David as a symbol of being Jewish, to our great anguish, were the Nazis, may their name be erased. It was they who made every Jew wear the "Yellow Star" which was really nothing more than a Magen David, and likewise made all the Jewish-owned stores in Germany display Magen Davids so that no German would go in and buy anything.

But there's a Jewish symbol that even more famous than the Magen David. And here we come to this week's Parshah.

Last week, in the Torah portion of Naso, we read about the dedication of the Mishkan. The Torah describes at great length how in the course of the first 12 days of the dedication, the Nesiim, the leaders of the Twelve Tribes, each brought a sacrifice as the representative of his Tribe. And immediately after that, in our Parshah this week, the Torah continues with instruction on how to inaugurate the Leviim, the Levites—how to induct them into being servants of G-d.

But in the middle, between the dedication of the altar and the dedication of the Leviim, the Parshah sticks in a few lines about the Menorah! It's totally out of place.

As a matter of fact, in the beginning of the Parshah, we read how G-d tells Moshe to give Aharon instructions regarding the Menorah—and commentator Rashi immediately asks, "Why was the episode of the Menorah put next to the episode of the Nesiim?"

And Rashi answers: "Because when Aharon saw the dedications of the Nesiim, he felt left out as he was not among them in the dedication, neither he nor his Tribe."

Everyone knows that the Jewish Nation consists of 12 groups—the famous Twelve Tribes—plus the Tribe of Levi. (I know that that adds up to 13, but the way it works is that the Tribe of Joseph was split into two, Ephraim and Menasheh, and then the Tribe of Levi was removed from the official list of the Twelve Tribes to be put into a category of their own.)

But when it came to the dedication of the Mishkan, all the Tribes were represented—except, as mentioned, the Tribe of Levi. Now why did G-d not command that the representative of the Tribe of Levi bring a sacrifice? Who was the Nasi of the Tribe of Levi? Aharon the Priest: the Kohein Gadol. It was specifically he who did not bring a sacrifice along with all the Nesiim. So Aharon said (as the Midrash puts it), “Woe is me! Perhaps because of me the Tribe of Levi is not accepted!” Aharon blamed himself for perhaps causing his Tribe to lose out—perhaps because he was involved in the act of the Golden Calf that G-d pushed aside his entire Tribe.

Now as a general rule, no one likes to be out of the picture, and here, everyone brought a sacrifice and only he didn’t, and so of course Aharon had a “weakening of the mind.” Rashi continues and says: “G-d said to him, ‘By your life, your portion is greater than theirs, because you will light and adjust the candles.’ ” In other words, you’ll have a greater merit: You’ll light the Menorah.

Why is this more important than bringing sacrifices? The Midrash continues: “The sacrifices were kept as long as the Temple stood—but the candles are forever” (Midrash Tanchumah, Behaaloscha, Letter 5). In other words, the sacrifices are something temporary: It’s been 2,000 years since the last sacrifice was brought.

But “the candles are forever”: What does this mean? Didn’t they stop lighting the Menorah in the Temple after the Destruction of the Temple? So the Ramban, or Nachmanides, explains that it means the Chanukah candles—that they are the continuation of the candles of the Menorah in the Temple. And it is those that we continue lighting to this day.

But perhaps we can say that it is more than that.

In the Haftarah that we read this week, we read about the vision of the prophet Zechariah, who saw "a menorah completely of gold... and its seven candles upon it." Commenting on this verse, the Rebbe quotes the words of the Alter Rebbe, who writes in his *Likkutei Torah* that the Menorah symbolizes the Nation of Israel: "The aggregate souls of Israel are called a "menorah," and they have seven "candles," which symbolize seven ways in serving G-d.

Thus, we have the menorah symbolizing the Jewish people.

Just like the Menorah was made of one piece of pure gold, so too is the entire Jewish Nation solid pure gold.

Just like the Menorah could not be made of several pieces welded together but rather, "beaten [out of one piece of] gold from its stem to its flowers," so too does the Jewish Nation consist of Jews from the spiritual level of a foot, the "stem of the Menorah," until Jews at the spiritual level of the "flowers," the top of the Menorah—they are all but one complete body.

And the Jewish Nation is not a collection of individuals like every other nation but one entity—they are all the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; they are all a part of the same piece of gold.

Finally, the Menorah consists of seven branches. These symbolize seven paths in serving G-d. Everyone is not required to be the same—there's more than one way to serve G-d.

And this brings us to a classic question, one that rabbis are asked all the time: "If the Ashkenazim pronounce the prayers one way and the Sephardim pronounce it another way, which way is the true way? Which way is right?" The answer is that there is more than one way; both the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic pronunciations are correct, and you can serve G-d with both of them.

There are Jews who mainly study the Torah, and there are those whose primary passion is helping other Jews. Yet others' passion is to go to shul and pray or serve as chazzan.

All of these paths are legitimate, since they all lead to the same destination, the same goal. And this, my friends, is what Moshe Rabbeinu was commanded by G-d.

When Aharon was to light the Menorah, he was to light it "towards the face of the Menorah." And Rashi explains: "The three west-side candles' wicks were turned towards the central face, and so too the three east-side candles' wicks were turned toward the central face"—they all pointed in one direction, towards the one goal of connecting with G-d.

What is interesting here is that the Menorah indeed became a symbol of the Jewish Nation. As a matter of fact, some researchers claim that on King David's shield was the image of a menorah. Additionally, the last king of the Chashmona'i dynasty stamped the image of a menorah on his coins—and in virtually every archaeological dig in the Holy Land, the image of the Menorah is found everywhere.

Now why indeed did the Menorah become a symbol of the Jews of all the vessels of the Holy Temple? Why not the Mizbayach, the Altar?

The answer is simple: the Altar symbolizes sacrifice—and sacrifice is something very lofty, but it is not the mission of the Jewish Nation. If the Jew must sacrifice to do a mitzvah, the Jew will do so happily—but that's not what the Jew is looking for.

When G-d commanded Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, to sacrifice his son, Avraham was prepared to do so—but he didn't personally seek out such an opportunity. What Avraham Avinu felt was that his entire life's mission was to brighten up the world with the light of faith in G-d.

Our mission as Jews is to serve as “a light unto the nations.”


There are other religions that have embraced and sanctified the concept of sacrifice, turning it into their symbol. The Jewish Nation, however, continues to march in the path of G-d—and the first thing said in the Torah, the Book given to us by G-d, is “Yehi ohr!”—“Let there be light!” Why? Because this is the entire reason for the creation of the universe.

And this is exactly why the Menorah—the same Menorah lit by Aharon and carried on through all the generations each year at Chanukah—became the symbol of the Jewish Nation: to be lights that shine.

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