The Menorah as Symbol: Thoughts for Parashat Beha'aloteha

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beha’aloteha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week’s Torah reading begins with the dramatic account of Aaron lighting the Menorah of the Mishkan. The Menorah was to be a feature of the spiritual life of Israel in its formative years, during the days of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, and for generations thereafter.

While the Torah goes into considerable detail about the construction and lighting of the Menorah, it doesn’t explain its purpose. The ark held the sacred Tablets of the Law. The altar was used for offerings. The various vessels each had a practical function. But what was the purpose of the Menorah? The Mishkan and Temples didn’t particularly need a seven-pronged candelabrum for lighting.

The Menorah, it seems, was important for its aesthetic and symbolic value. Its seven lamps have been interpreted as alluding to the traditional seven branches of wisdom. They have also been described as calling to mind the seven days of creation, with the central lamp symbolizing the Sabbath.

The Menorah was a beautiful object that drew the attention of the public. When people saw it, they felt sanctity; they internalized the spiritual light that emanated from it. In some way, the Menorah was identified with wisdom. The Talmud (Bava Batra 12a) cites the opinion of Rabbi Isaac who taught: “One who desires to become wise should incline to the south [when praying]…[since] the Menorah was on the southern side of [the Temple].”

In 1949, the newly established State of Israel adopted the Menorah flanked by olive branches as its national symbol. The Menorah not only recalled a powerful ancient symbol of Israel, but alluded to its role for all humanity. The prophet Isaiah (60:3) foresaw the day when “nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” The prophet Zecharia had a vision of a gold Menorah (4:3): “And there were two olive branches by it, one upon the right of the bowl, and the other upon the left side of it.” So the symbol of the State of Israel was a proud expression of Jewish history, tradition and prophetic vision. It reflected the hope that Israel would be a source of light for all nations. The olive branches were symbolic of Israel’s eternal desire for peace.

But there is also something deeper to be considered.

Jewish autonomy in the land of Israel came to an end with the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Thousands of Jews were murdered; thousands sold into slavery; thousands went into exile. The remaining Jews suffered under the heavy hand of Roman rule.

The Romans celebrated their defeat of Israel by erecting the Arch of Titus in Rome. The interior wall of the arch includes a vivid depiction of Romans carrying off treasures from Jerusalem…most notably the Menorah. For the past many centuries, every visitor to the Arch of Titus could see the Romans gloating over the plundered Menorah.

But little could Titus have imagined that the defeated Jews would one day regain sovereignty over their historic homeland. It took nearly 1900 years to happen…but it happened!

The Arch of Titus depicts the Menorah as it was taken from a defeated and humiliated Jewish People. Now, the founders of the modern State of Israel reclaimed the image of the Menorah as the State’s national symbol. The long exile has come to an end. The Jewish People have reclaimed their historic land…and in a profound way have reclaimed the Menorah that Rome had stolen so long ago.

Throughout history, the Menorah has been a source of spiritual, intellectual and emotional strength for the Jewish People. In our times, with the establishment of the State of Israel, the Menorah reminds us of the power of faith, persistence, and courage. Its light should never be taken for granted.

Am Yisrael Hai. Od Avinu Hai.