

# Beha'alotcha: Menorah, Rambam & Raavad

- Nisson Shulman.

Why does it say "Yairu shivat hanerot" when there are six branches opposite the seventh? Shouldn't it have said "Yairu sheshet hanerot"? The central light representing Torah is to be mixed in all the lights representing all the wisdoms of the world. The great debate about how we are to regard the wisdom and science of the world. Ramban and Raivad, Samson Raphael Hirsch and the threats in his day. The issues of Torah im derech erez.

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The symbol of the State of Israel is the seven-branched candelabra which stood in the Holy Temple, and which we read about today in the Torah. Let us examine this Menorah and what it represents.

Menorah stands for knowledge, and that idiom is present in other languages too. For instance we say enlightenment, and we mean an intellectual enlightenment. The Menorah in the Temple was not there for the light it gave. God doesn't need our light. He is the light of the world. To our sages, the Menorah represented the light of learning that we are granted by the Almighty. It stands for man's soul, and its awareness of His Maker.

In today's Sidrah we read, *el mul pnei hamenorah yairu shivat hanerot*. The seven candles shall be lit opposite the central one. The sages ask: But there were only seven branches altogether, counting the central branch? Shouldn't it have said *yairu sheshet hanerot*, "The six candles shall burn facing the central seventh"? They answer: these candles symbolize all wisdom of the world. But no branch of science or wisdom has any reality without God's inspiration and blessing. If the Torah is God's creation, is not the world as well? If so, then all wisdom for which we search is really a way of knowing the ways of God. And every branch of learning symbolized by the six candles takes its validity as well as its truth from the central light, symbolizing God's Torah, the *or panecha*, the light of the Lord's countenance. Well, then, in each of the other six branches of wisdom must burn something of the truth of Torah. That seventh, central light must burn in each of the other six. So say our sages.

On the basis of this and according to the interpretation of this, is based one of the most important intellectual issues, which Jews faced through the ages. How are we to regard the wisdom of the world? Our sages saw in the Bereshit verse, that man was placed in this world *leavda uleshamra*, to work it and to tend it, a commandment to advance with the advance of science... to serve this world by conquering floods, harnessing rivers, building bridges, exploring the secrets of science and the messages of every atom in this world. This is an important way in which man serves God.

Maimonides described it as follows: "When a person sees the infinite wisdom with which God made this world, and the infinite goodness of our Creator, as well as His might and majesty evident in every blade of grass in this universe, immediately man is seized with an intense desire to know the Creator and to identify with Him. As King David said, "My soul thirsts for God like

a thirsty deer for water.” Jews were therefore excellent physicians, scientists, and mathematicians – scholars in every field. Nevertheless, there were objections. The issue was not Jewish science and Jewish philosophy, but rather non-Jewish philosophy.

Was that also a fit subject for study? By Maimonides time the lines had been drawn. The issue crystallized in the time of Maimonides and his contemporary, the Raiva”d, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Pasquiers. Symbolically, the lines seemed to be drawn about the laws of the Menorah. According to Maimonides, a non-priest could also light the Menorah, and a priest would then place it in its proper place. Raivad, on the other hand, declared that only a priest could light it. At first glance you might think the discussion is about an insignificant detail. What does it matter who can light the Menorah? How theoretical, non-practical, since in order for a non-priest to light the menorah it would have to be brought out of the sanctuary to him, and this is a practical impossibility! But it is not theoretical at all. The discussion was really an expression of a great debate which raged in those days and continued for two hundred years! It applied to the entire attitude of Judaism to secular learning, and Maimonides and Raivad were the chief antagonists in this debate. Maimonides did not hesitate to find truth wherever it was hidden, even including the philosophy of Aristotle. In this regard he followed the teachings of Rabbi Meir in the Talmud who, when asked how he could remain a faithful disciple of Elisha ben Avuya, even after that sage became a turncoat to the Romans, replied: “I found a pomegranate; I ate the fruit, and threw away the shell”. To Maimonides, the source of wisdom can be from anywhere. Anyone could light the menorah.

The character of the flame, however, depended on the way the Kohen tended it. It was to be purified; the bad removed, the good kept. Raivad, on the other hand, rejected all philosophies that weren't Jewish. The Torah, according to him, must be kept pure, and no outside thought that might be contaminated with paganism was to be admitted. Only the Kohen could light the menorah.

The law is decided according to the view of Maimonides. Torah can be applied to any school of wisdom, and that wisdom is thereby purified. All the branches are to be *el mul pnei hamenorah*.

There were many who thought they could discredit the Torah by showing its ideas were taken from outside sources. So: at one time critics tried to discredit the Sabbath by proving it was known before Moses. But only our Sabbath has the Jewish character described as Angels of peace, angels of the Almighty. They tried to discredit the book of Vayikra and the Holy Temple service by comparing it to the pagan sacrificial rites of other nations. But what a difference between pagan rites and Vayikra. They tried to discredit Noah by citing the "epic" poems such as the poem of Gilgamesh, a pagan thing, immoral and indecent. What a difference between that and the pure light of morality and justice the torah sheds on the story of a flood come to wash away corruption whose only survivor is the *tzadik bedorotav*, the righteous man, saving himself and the other species on earth, rebuilding a world destroyed by its own evil, in the foundations of goodness and man walking before God.

The controversy that raged in Maimonides' time subsided in later years. The philosophy of Rambam was vindicated. But the debate was renewed in Germany 150 years ago. At that time, the threat was not from the right, but from the left; not from those who opposed secular

knowledge, but from those who opposed Torah. The so-called enlightenment had shattered the walls of the Ghetto. Jews rushed out of the ghettos into the world and drank in all the wisdom and beauty of surrounding cultures. And there was wisdom and beauty there. But they also drank the filth and the dross. There was no Kohen to purify and tend the new knowledge according to the spirit of the Torah, and to separate pure from impure. Reform claimed that the Torah was man-made, therefore outmoded; could not and should not be made to cope with the new knowledge and philosophy. The new secular knowledge, based on the philosophy of the Renaissance, was really a spiritual revolution aimed against medieval Christianity and its otherworldliness. It substituted natural man for spiritual man. It separated secular from religious life. All knowledge, it said, was now autonomous, having nothing to do with religion. Man must either live in two worlds, or give up his religion altogether.

Old rabbis who saw the danger to Judaism tried to hold on to the Ghetto civilization so that the Torah would not be discarded. Samson Raphael Hirsch saw the danger of humanism, and at the same time saw that holding on to the ghetto was just as dangerous. He was not afraid to meet the new civilization. Like Maimonides, he knew Judaism could rise above the new civilization. More: that by the light of Judaism the new ways of thinking will begin to find better nobler meaning and come closer to the truth. So he took for his life's work the proclamation of the sovereignty of Torah within any given civilization.

He says, about this week's portion, that the Menorah symbolized his entire philosophy. Wisdom, understanding, all knowledge, science, social and political philosophy, must be guided and governed by yirat Hashem, reverence for God. "Only thus will the spirit of God rest upon us and elevate the spirit of man." This is symbolized by the six arms representing wisdom projecting from the center arm, representing Torah, turned towards it and the Holy of Holies.

Now, previous attempts by German Jewish intellectuals to meet the new civilization had met with dismal failure. Geiger and Reform was the road to assimilation. All Mendelssohn's children converted to Christianity. "The German Jewish Society of Culture" in Berlin, whose aim was to make German Jews fit for "higher social life," ended with every one of its officers undergoing baptism. The entire Jewry was discouraged and in disarray.

Then came Hirsch, and by his writings teaching and personality, electrified the Jewish world. He knew the philosophies of the time. He could make people understand that Humanism without the ideal of God destroys itself. Instead of elevation, it debases man and makes him no better than an animal. It must lead to cruelty, tyranny and dictatorship.

He knew and could teach that Capitalism was not in conflict with Judaism, but that it is contrary to the Torah to idolize money and to regard the protection of property above the protection of life.

He knew and could teach that science was not the ultimate source of truth, but that the Jewish attitude must be positive towards science. We need not be afraid of it. Only shallow science breaks away from God. True science makes us more faithful as we become more knowing; so that the estrangement from science to be found in the Ghetto was not natural for the Jew. The Golden Age of Spain bears witness to this.

Samson Raphael Hirsch won his battle in many German Jewish communities. He succeeded in rearing, not only in his own community, but also far beyond it, a highly educated new generation of loyal, devoted, Torah true Jews, deeply convinced of the Divine origin of the written and the oral Torah, and well equipped with the intellectual tools of knowledge; and therefore ready to live, fight and die for the great cause of their lives: Judaism and Torah. Hirsch's influence is even stronger today than during his time. For it has spread to Israel and to the shores of America. And his writings are indispensable to every Jew's library of our heritage.

Even so, the great debate is not stilled. Today too, there are voices raised against secular education. But this time, it is not the content of the secular education which is the chief objection, but rather the attitude with which many teach it, and the atmosphere of assimilation which prevails in most colleges and universities. Thank God, therefore, for the opportunity to educate our children in a Jewish school. Thank God for the freedom to bring such a philosophy to our people of the future; and to seek in every way we can excellence in teaching the religious and secular values at the same time, in as integrated a mode as possible.

And thank God for writings like those left to us by Samson Raphael Hirsch that enables young Jewish college and University students who are familiar with them, to meet the thoughts with which they are daily challenged in their classes.

Thank God for the great men, Maimonides, Samson Raphael Hirsch, who have shown the way. And thank God that so many of our schools today have as their philosophy to a greater and lesser degree, the philosophy of S.R.H., torah im derech erez in the tradition of S.R.H., and before him Maimonides. Elu vaelu divrei Elokim hayyim. Raivad also made a tremendous contribution to Jewish scholarship. I am convinced so shall those who study only Jewish learning. But apparently history has indicated that Judaism is strongest which enables a man to apply Torah to the civilization in which he lives. As S.R.H. described it, Torah im derech erez, "Torah, hand in hand with modern civilization". Or as the Torah reading so aptly describes it: el mul pnei hamenorah yairu shivat hanerot.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)