

The Function of the Temple Menora

by Rav Moshe Taragin

The gemara in Shabbat (22a) recounts that the Chanuka candles may not be used during the time they are lit. The gemara cites the example of counting money by the light of the Chanuka candles as being prohibited. Several different explanations are provided for this prohibition. The Ba'al Hama'or asserts that our lit menorot correspond to the menora of the Beit Ha-Mikdash (Temple). Just as the oil in the Mikdash (which belonged to hekdesch, Temple property) was not to be used for non-hekdesch purposes, so our own oil, which is endowed with similar kedusha, may not be benefited from. This halakha is among several which indicate a halakhic (rather than merely conceptual) association between the menora we light and the one lit in the Mikdash. In light of this linkage, this article will analyze the menora of the Mikdash.

Three unique aspects of the menora immediately capture our attention:

1. The menora was built as "miksha" – fashioned from solid gold rather than from assembled parts.
2. The menora was decorated in a highly ornate fashion. The six arms of the menora which extended from the center were adorned with goblets, flowers and knobs.
3. The menora had to be built from a specified weight of gold. In general, vessels were manufactured from as much material as was practically necessary. In the case of the menora, a predefined weight of gold (one kikar's worth) was employed.

Why was the menora selected for these unique halakhot? A possible clarification might be provided by a gemara in Menachot (28a). The gemara maintains that these elements were necessary only if the menora was carved from gold – as was ideally envisioned. If gold was not available and the menora was made from other materials, then these three criteria (miksha, ornaments and specified weight) were no longer necessary. If, indeed, these elements constitute fundamental components/characteristics of the menora, why can they be waived if the menora is not made of gold?

If we comprehend the unique role filled by the menora, then perhaps the meaning of this gemara will be clearer. Rashi and the Ramban engaged in a famous debate about the purpose of building a Mishkan (Tabernacle). According to the latter, Moshe was informed about building a Mishkan AFTER the "egel" (Golden Calf) episode.

According to this logic, had this tragedy not occurred, the Mishkan might not have been built. The primary purpose of the Mishkan was to facilitate the offering of sacrifices and the process of atonement. The Ramban disputes Rashi's position arguing that the command to build the Mishkan is recorded in Parashat Teruma BEFORE the egel occurred (Parashat Ki Tisa). Evidently, the notion of a house of God in which His Shekhina resides predates the egel. Similarly, the Mishkan's purpose transcends the specific needs of atonement. It is meant to house God's presence and incorporate the revelation at Har Sinai on a daily basis.

This question greatly impacts the role which the vessels of the Mikdash played. To Rashi, the vessels must primarily be seen as facilitating the various CEREMONIES of the Mishkan. To the Ramban, they should be seen in addition as the FURNITURE placed in this house to create the ambience of the House of God. To be sure, these roles do not have to be viewed as mutually exclusive. The Mikdash represents both the site for atonement ceremonies as well as a structure to house the Shekhina. Hence, the vessels served a dual function – to enable the Mikdash ceremonies as well as to adorn the House of God.

No vessel served this second function better than the menorah. Unlike other vessels, the menorah did not facilitate part of the formal Mikdash ceremony. According to some opinions, the lighting of the menorah could even be performed by non-kohanim. The same cannot be said about placing the lechem ha-panim (showbread) on the shulchan (table), burning the spices, or sprinkling the blood upon the altar. If any vessel embellished and enhanced the Mikdash, it was clearly the menorah. The Ramban himself (in his commentary to Beha'alotkha) writes that the menorah served to beautify the house of God. To summarize: in general, the vessels of the Mikdash not only allowed ceremonies to be performed but also lent the Mikdash the ambience of a palatial residence. Particularly the menorah, which was not primarily involved in formal 'Mikdash ceremony,' contributed to the beauty and majesty of the Mikdash.

We might return to the gemara in Menachot to better appreciate these dual roles. Indeed, the requirement of miksha, the addition of decorative enhancements to the arms of the menorah and the stipulation of minimum weight all serve to heighten the menorah's ornamental quality. These elements are only necessary, however, if the menorah is made of gold. In this case, the menorah indeed fulfills its role in enhancing the Mikdash. A menorah fashioned from silver, however, is merely a utilitarian one - to enable lighting, and is stripped of its ornamental function. In such an instance, no minimum weight is required, no decorative additions are necessary and it can be assembled from different parts.

SUMMARY:

We have isolated two roles latent within the menorah. Firstly, it functions as a candelabrum which facilitates the lighting ceremony. In addition, an ideal menorah is the ornamental heart of the Mikdash. If the menorah is made of less precious metals, it loses its second function and no longer demands 'decorative' requirements.

A second indication of the menorah functioning as Mikdash furniture and not just the enabler of Mikdash ceremony can be seen in a gemara in Chagiga (26b). The gemara recounts that the kohanim were especially vigilant about impure people not touching the menorah and the shulchan. If either of these vessels became impure, they would have to be removed from Mikdash for immersion. In such instance, the desired effect of 'tamid,' continuity, would be lost. The Torah (Shemot 25:30) employs the word 'tamid' to describe the functioning of the shulchan: the lechem ha-panim must ceaselessly rest on the shulchan. Interrupting this constancy to immerse an impure shulchan would nullify this condition. According to one position in the gemara, the same state is required of the menorah (based on a comparison to shulchan). Tosafot question this application – after all, the menorah was lit once a day and soon extinguished! How might we define the state of tamid in the case of the menorah? Tosafot themselves attribute the potential tamid factor of menorah to the "ner ma'aravi" which miraculously never extinguished. A different suggestion would view tamid of menorah beyond the actual lighting ceremony. The menorah constantly contributes to the ambience of the Mikdash even when not lit. Removing the menorah to immerse it would cancel the continuous aesthetic value of the menorah even if it would not cancel its practical lighting ceremony.

This perspective on the menorah might assist in resolving a difficult halakha regarding the actual nerot. "Nerot" is the term the gemara employs to refer to the small receptacles in which the oil was contained and lit. Must these receptacles be fashioned as miksha as well, or can these bays be manufactured separately and affixed to the actual menorah? These trays were an integral part of the menorah! How might we understand the position that does not require their being miksha? More startling is the gemara's (Menachot 88b) association of this question with a seemingly unrelated one. The gemara contends that the question of miksha would depend on whether these bays were forged out of the kikan weight of gold for the menorah. If they were also made from the kikan weight, then presumably miksha applied to them as well. If they were formed from additional gold beyond the kikan used for the actual menorah, then the miksha rule would be suspended as well. How might we comprehend the debate of miksha and kikan-inclusion regarding these carriers of oil? More so, what is responsible for the linkage between these two seemingly unrelated factors?

We might respond as follows. The gemara is debating whether these trays – which facilitated lighting the menorah - are also an integral part of the ornamental menorah. One might imagine the menorah serving as an aesthetic enhancer even without these

small trays; their role was purely functional. If indeed these trays were not incorporated in the menorah as an enhancer, then we would both suspend miksha and disassociate these parts from the kikar minimum. We have already proven that these requirements reflect the decorative menorah and not the utilitarian one (a non-gold menorah does not require miksha or kikar). We might draw similar conclusions about the trays of the menorah.

A similar deconstruction of the menorah can be suggested regarding the actual arms of the menorah. In truth, these arms are not necessary from a utilitarian standpoint. One can imagine building 'shelves' radiating from the central stem and technically allowing the lighting of seven candles. Might we assume that these 'arms' were part of the ornamental menorah and not the lighting menorah? This question is raised by the gemara in Menachot (28a). The gemara suggests that just as flowers and goblets are only necessary if the menorah is made from gold, similarly 'arms' should only be required if the menorah was fashioned from gold. A menorah made from other metals should not require arms. There could conceivably be other ways to create seven distinct 'lights.' The gemara rejects this notion and one might have expected the reasoning to be as follows: a menorah without ornaments or without miksha is still a structurally valid menorah for lighting. The absence of these elements eliminates the decorative effect. If the menorah is not made from gold, a non-decorative menorah is acceptable. By contrast, a menorah without arms is not merely a non-decorative menorah which may still facilitate lighting. It bears no resemblance to the basic structure of menorah and cannot even be considered a lighting menorah. Unlike miksha, kikar and arm ornaments, the arms themselves are a basic and elementary part of any menorah.

Interestingly enough, the gemara's actual response seems to fall short of this expected answer. It responds that a menorah without arms is a menorah "pamut." Rashi interprets the word "pamut" as "menorah ketana" – a small menorah. Are we to infer from this interpretation that a menorah without arms is still considered a halakhic menorah, albeit a small one which is invalid for the Mikdash? Is a menorah without arms still considered a menorah? Why must we use a "menorah gedola" (large menorah) in the Mikdash? Especially when the menorah is made of non-gold substances, why can't it be a miniature one?

May we merit the redemption of Yerushalayim, the rebuilding of the Mikdash, and the rekindling of the menorah zahav in the heikhal.