

THE TEMPLE MENORAH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Since Chanuka is the holiday that celebrates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Hasmoneans after the Syruian Greeks had defiled it and placed pagan gods within its precincts, I am interested in discussing the menorah - the great seven-branched candleabra of the Temple - that was the centerpiece of the Chanuka miracle and commemoration. The original menorah that stood in the Tabernacle of Moshe and was later enshrined in Shlomo's First Temple was lost when the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnetzar. That menorah was made of pure gold, miraculously fashioned from one solid block of that precious metal. This original menorah, together with the Ark of the Covenant and the tablets of stone from Sinai upon which the Ten Commandments appeared, all were "swallowed" in the ground and have never yet been discovered. Thus when Ezra led the return to Israel after the seventy-year Babylonian exile ended, he found no menorah to install in the newly built, albeit very modestly so, Second Temple. A golden menorah was nevertheless created, this time without miracles, and duly installed in the Temple. When the Syrian Greeks began their campaign to destroy Judaism and Jewish life, this menorah was used for pagan purposes and thus rendered unfit for Jewish Temple service. Another opinion is that the menorah was confiscated by the Syrian Greeks and melted down for its valuable gold. In any event, when the Hasmoneans came to rededicate the temple they had no menorah to light in service of God.

We are taught in the Talmud that the Hasmoneans constructed a makeshift menorah from iron spits. This was the menorah that was the subject of the Chanuka miracle of the small bottle of pure oil fit only for one day's use miraculously burning for eight days until new pure oil was prepared. This miraculous menorah was pretty shabby compared to the golden menorah that preceded it. But since it was the product of the blood and sacrifice of the Hasmoneans and their struggle for the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and holiness to the Temple and the country, it was nevertheless blessed with miracles and Divine favor.

As the Hasmonean kings (they ruled for 103 years) prospered and became stronger and wealthier, they saw to it that the Temple was renewed and refurbished. Though their efforts nowhere matched those of Herod who rebuilt the Temple completely and ostentatiously during the time of his reign one hundred years before its eventual destruction by the Romans, the Hasmonean Temple had a stature and subdued grandeur of its own. One of the items that was replaced by the Hasmoneans was the menorah of metal spits, and now in its stead was a new menorah made of gold. There is

opinion that the metal menorah was kept on display on the Temple grounds as a sort of museum piece in memory of the Chanuka miracle. In any event, it was this latter golden menorah that was destroyed or taken into captivity by the Romans when they sacked and burned the Temple in 70 CE. There are those who maintain that Herod, imitating King Solomon who manufactured a number of menorot for use and display in the First Temple, had many golden menorot installed on the grounds of the Temple and that the replica of the menorah that appears on the Arch of Titus in Rome is of one of Herod's menorot but not of the great Temple menorah itself.

There is a difference of opinion in the rabbinic commentaries regarding the shape of the menorah in the Temple. There are those who are of the opinion that the six branches of the menorah that emanated from the main stem were curved in a semi-circular fashion. This would correspond to the rendition of the menorah as it appears on the relief atop the Arch of Titus. However, as mentioned above, there is no certainty that the menorah shown on the Arch of Titus is the actual menorah that resided inside of the building of the Temple itself. Rambam (Maimonides) is of the opinion that the six branches of the menorah protruded from the center stem at an acute angle of forty-five degrees. There is a third opinion that the six branches came out from the stem of the menorah at a ninety degree angle and then faced upwards again at another ninety degree turn. This latter form of the menorah is currently used as the symbol of the State of Israel.

Chanuka represents past glories and miracles. But it also represents current opportunities and the ability of the Jewish people to renew itself against all odds. May we all be cheered and warmed by the lights of Chanuka and the faith of Israel that it so aptly represents.

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