

# WHAT'S ON FIRST?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*On that day...each man will call to his friend beneath the vine and beneath the fig tree. Then the angel who was speaking to me returned and woke me, as a man is awakened from his sleep. He said to me, "What do you see?" I said, "I see...a menorah of gold...its seven lamps are upon it...There are two olive trees over it..." I spoke up and said to the angel who was speaking to me, saying, "What are these, my lord?" The angel...said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No..." He spoke up and said to me, saying, "This is the word of Hashem to Zerubavel, saying 'Not through an army and not through strength, but through my spirit...'"<sup>[2]</sup>*

Superficially, this episode is completely mystifying. Something is happening between the *navi* and the angel, but all we get to see is a menorah, a three-ingredient recipe for fruit salad, and a lesson about global politics.

We will have to taste those three fruits to understand what is happening. In order of appearance, they are grapes, figs and olives. We can see them as representing three human needs.

Grapes – or the wine they yield – make us happy, and symbolize joy, rejoicing and all pleasure.

Songs of joyful praise to Hashem are sung only over wine,<sup>[3]</sup> extending the symbol of joy even, *kivayachol*, to the realm of the Divine.

Figs represent abundance, plentitude of food. Figs used to sustain people, sometimes even substituting for cereal foods like grains. The gemara<sup>[4]</sup> criticizes those who could easily and inexpensively obtain figs. With their needs satisfied, what excuse did they have not to involve themselves in Torah study?

Olives are associated with honor. The Jewish people are compared to the olive tree: "Hashem has called you a flourishing olive tree, beautiful, with shapely fruit."<sup>[5]</sup> Oil floats atop other liquid, signifying prominence. With olive oil we honor Hashem's presence in the *beis hamikdosh*, radiating the light of the menorah.

We wait expectantly for two periods of utopian promise. The first is the messianic age. Rambam teaches us not to expect any changes in the natural order. People will be people, but they will not suffer from war or deprivation. The times of Moshiach will be blessed with a richness of material well-being, experienced in peace and satisfaction.

The world to come, on the other hand, is quite different. It is not a garden of earthly delights, but of even greater pleasure. Here, the soul delights in an existence that transcends physical limitation. The Jewish people will move to a new position of appreciation and prominence: "Nations will walk by your light, and kings by the brilliance of your shine."<sup>[6]</sup> The world to come will be blessed with a richness of honor shown to Hashem's people.

The *navi* Zechariah was given a glimpse of both of these periods, and the crucial difference between them. His vision begins with people calling to each other "on that day," meaning the time of the reign of Moshiach. They sit beneath vines and fig trees; they are still attached to earthly needs and pleasures. They relax in a surfeit of joy and abundance. When they speak of happiness, they quickly point to all the blessing around them.

Deeper, more insightful people, however, recognize that physical pleasure is transitory and devoid of eternal purpose and meaning. They long for something more. They achieve it in *olam habo*, in the world to come, to which the *navi* is now introduced. The angel returns. There is more, greater good than the vine and the fig tree. The angel must wake Zechariah from his sleep – his reverie of dreamy attention to physical well-being and pleasure. The *navi* now sees two olive trees – symbols of a very different kind of existence. The trees hint at the status of *Klal Yisrael* in a spiritual world, i.e. the honor that will be accorded them.

The angel presses on. "What do you see?" Zechariah answers that he sees a menorah, and next to it, the two olive trees. But he is not clear what they mean. This is not what the answer that the angel wants. He continues questioning Zechariah. "I know that you can identify the objects in your vision, but we have to do better than that. Do you not know what these are, what they signify?" In fact, Zechariah doesn't.

The *malach* is ready to put it all together. The olive trees represent not the material well-being of the vine and the fig tree, but something more important. They represent a time of universal recognition of the value of the spirit. "Not through an army and not through strength, but through my spirit." Man will give up his previous pursuits and value only the world of the spirit.

In such a world, the mission of the Jewish people will be valued at its true worth. And honor will flow to it like water.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh by R Yechezkel Libshitz, Miketz (2)(Chanuka)
2. Zechariah 3:10-4:6
3. Berachos 35A
4. Pesachim 58A
5. Yirmiyahu 11:17
6. Yeshaya 60:3