

The Design of the Menorah

From the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

The Shape of the Branches of the Menorah

The *menorah* is very frequently employed as a Jewish symbol. Nevertheless, the authenticity of the design with which the *menorah* is usually depicted is a matter of question. For there are several inconsistencies between the designs generally employed and the description of this article in the traditional sources. The branches of the *Menorah* are one such example.

Generally, these branches are depicted as semi-circular or oblong in shape. Nevertheless, *Rashi* in his commentary to the Torah,¹ explicitly writes that the branches “extended upward in a diagonal.” Indeed, the very Hebrew word which the *Torah* uses to describe the branches, *ohbe*, implies a straight line.²

What is the Rambam’s view?

Part of the confusion concerning the shape of the branches of the *menorah* stems from the fact that the *Rambam* makes no definite statement regarding this issue, neither in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, nor in his *Mishneh Torah*. For that reason, several commentaries³ were led to the conclusion that he also agrees that the branches were semi-circular.

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. The *Rambam* does not describe the shape of the branches of the *menorah*, because it is unnecessary. In both his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and his *Mishneh Torah*,⁴ he adds drawings in which he depicts the *menorah*. And in both instances, he shows the branches as extending diagonally, in straight lines. Unfortunately, at the time the *Rambam* wrote these works, printing presses had not been invented. It was not until several centuries after his passing that his texts were printed, and in these printings, his original drawings were omitted.⁵



A Depiction of the Menorah Based on the Rambam’s Own Drawings

Equally clear evidence of the *Rambam*’s perspective can be gleaned from the commentary to the Torah written by his son, Rabbeinu Avraham. When describing the manner in which the *menorah* was fashioned,⁶ Rabbeinu Avraham states: “The six branches... extended upward from the center shaft of the *menorah* in a straight line, as depicted by my father, and not in a semi-circle as depicted by others.”

The Position of the Goblets

Another of the points of difference between the *Rambam*’s conception of the *menorah* as reflected in the above-mentioned diagrams, and the commonly accepted design of the *menorah*, is the position of the goblets. To explain: There were 22 goblets in the *menorah*.⁷ The *Rambam* describes them⁸ as “Alexandrian chalices with wide mouths and narrow bases.” In his drawings of the *menorah*, he depicts them as having been positioned upside down,⁹ while the general conception is that they are standing upright.

The Source for the Misconceptions

How did these misconceptions arise? The source for the commonly accepted drawings of the *menorah* is its depiction on the arch of Titus in Rome. When Titus returned from the conquest of Jerusalem, he had an arch constructed in honor of his victorious army, and on that arch appears a relief which includes a depiction of the *menorah*.

The design on that arch is obviously an artist's interpretation, and not an exact replica of the *menorah* of the *Beis HaMikdash*. This is reflected by the fact that certain elements of the *menorah* are omitted in this depiction. For example, the *menorah* had feet extending from its base,¹⁰ and the *menorah* on the Arch of Titus has no feet. Similarly, the depiction contains additions, for on its shaft is the form of a sea-dragon, one of the false deities worshiped by the Romans.¹¹ Accordingly, it cannot be relied on as an accurate source regarding the design of the *menorah*, particularly in regard to points where it contradicts the views of our people's leading Torah authorities.

Herein, lies another significant point: As mentioned, the *menorah* is often employed as a Jewish symbol. This is indeed appropriate, for our Sages teach¹² that the *menorah* is "testimony to all the inhabitants of the world that the Divine Presence rests within Israel." How unfitting is it that instead of drawing that symbol according to its conception by Torah sages, the conception from the arch which proudly states "Judea is vanquished" is used instead!

The Outpouring of Divine Light

To return to the design of the *menorah*, one might ask: why are the goblets indeed positioned upside down? The resolution of this question is connected with the function of the *menorah* within the *Beis HaMikdash*. Our Sages explain¹³ that the purpose of the *menorah* was not to illuminate the Sanctuary, but rather to spread its light throughout the entire world. For this purpose, the windows of the *Beis HaMikdash* were constructed in a unique manner, wide on the outside, narrow on the inside,¹⁴ clearly indicating that their purpose was for the light of the *Beis HaMikdash* to shine outward.

A similar concept applies in regard to a goblet.¹⁵ It possesses two functions: to receive and to pour. Turning a goblet upside down indicates an emphasis on spreading influence to others. To apply these concepts to the goblets of the *menorah* — their overturned position reflects the purpose of the *menorah* within the *Beis HaMikdash*, not to receive and contain G-dly light, but to spread that light throughout the world at large.

An overturned cup is associated with happiness.¹⁶ This also relates to the *Beis HaMikdash* which served as the source of happiness and joy for the Jewish people. May we soon experience the ultimate happiness, when we, together with the entire Jewish people, return to *Eretz Yisrael*, to Jerusalem, and to the *Beis HaMikdash*. And may this take place in the immediate future.

Adapted from *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. XXI, *Parshas Terumah*; Vol. XXVI, *Parshas Tetzaveh*

FOOTNOTES

1. *Terumah* 25:32.
2. See *Shmos* 2:3, which describes the small ark, which carried Moshe, as being hidden "among the bulrushes near the riverbank." Although there is some debate about the particular species intended, all the commentaries agree that the reference is to reeds which grow upward in straight lines.
3. See the *Maaseh Chosheiv*.
4. These original drawings have been published recently by *Rav Kapach*, based on ancient manuscript copies of both texts.

5. The irony of this is compounded by the fact that drawings were added in subsequent printings of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*. These drawings, however, were not copies of the drawings originally made by the *Rambam*, but rather original works, produced for this printing. The texts with these drawings have been reprinted very frequently and are included in the standard printed texts of the *Talmud*. In regard to the branches of the *menorah* — and similarly, in regard to certain other drawings throughout the work — the drawings in these texts run contrary to the *Rambam's* own work.
6. In his commentary to *Terumah*, *loc. cit.*
7. *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* 3:3.
8. *Ibid.*:9.
9. In his *Commentary on the Mishnah* (*Middos* 3:7), the *Rambam* does state that his diagram of the *menorah* is not to be considered as an exact replica, but rather as a depiction of the general concept. This is obviously the case, for he draws the goblets as triangles although it appears that they were coneshaped. A cone is more difficult to draw than a triangle and it appears that the *Rambam* considered the more simple form as sufficient. In regard to the position of the goblets, by contrast, it is unlikely that his depiction of them as having been positioned upside down is an imprecision. For it would have been just as easy to depict them as positioned upright.
10. *Menachos* 28b, *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* 3:2.
11. See *Avodah Zorah* 42b.
12. *Menachos* 86b.
13. *Ibid.*
14. See *I Melachim* 6:4, as explained in *Menachos*, *op. cit.*
15. See the commentary of *Rabbeinu Bachaye* to *Terumah* 25:31, *Toras HaOleh*, and other sources which offer similar interpretations.
16. See the *sichos* of the night of Simchas Torah, 5748.

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