

Dear Chavraya,

A beautifully poignant exchange between Moses and God is read into this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'ha'alotcha*. Concerning how the menorah in the sanctuary is to be made, the text says, *v'zeh ma'aseh ha'menorah mikshah zahav/and this is the work of the menorah: hammered out of one piece of gold*. The word *v'zeh/and this* would appear to be superfluous, since it would be enough to simply refer to "the" work of the menorah. In our interpretive tradition, however, there is nothing superfluous in the Torah. A word whose purpose in the text eludes us is an opportunity, an invitation, to probe more deeply. *V'zeh/and this* comes to indicate that Moses is confused, unable to fathom how the menorah can be shaped in its entirety of one seamless piece of gold. And so God points the "divine finger," *k'viyachol/as if we can so speak*, a phrase the rabbis use when speaking anthropomorphically of God, as though to emphasize, "like this."

What is it, however, that Moses doesn't understand? Difficult as the artisanship might be to make the menorah of one piece of gold, tradition suggests that it was something even more difficult that Moses couldn't grasp. In its wholeness, the menorah of one piece of gold represents the unity of the Jewish people. Even so long ago that is what Moses couldn't understand, how to unite as one this fractured, cantankerous people. The menorah becomes a symbol of unity and hope, both in its construction and in its function. A seven-branched menorah, the light of six branches is to shine inward to illumine the seventh, a central stock that both supports the others and receives their light. It is like text on a page surrounded by commentary, diverse opinions all embracing a central source that is held in common and loved by all.

As it was difficult for Moses to comprehend, so it seems impossible to imagine such unity among the Jewish people in our own time. For the sake of perspective, it is helpful to remember the depth of conflict that Moses encountered, his life threatened on more than one occasion. The life of our people is endangered today by ideologies among us that spawn violence of word and deed, against other Jews as well as against non-Jews. The vision shown to Moses of a menorah fashioned from one piece of hammered gold is still the vision, God's finger pointing emphatically. The light of the menorah is fueled by perseverance and hope in the hearts of the artisans who labor faithfully in the spirit of the vision.

The *haftarah* for Shabbos *B'ha'alotcha*, which is also read on Chanukkah, both universalizes the vision and teaches the way to its fulfillment. Like Moses, the prophet Zecharia is shown the seven-branched menorah in all of its detail. Also confused, the prophet asks an angel of God, "What do these mean?" The angel answers with apparent exasperation, "Have you not understood what these mean?" The angel then explains the way of the menorah: *Lo v'chayil v'lo v'cho'ach ki im-b'ruchi amar hashem tzva'ot/Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit says the Holy One of Multitudes*. Amidst the militarism of nineteenth century Germany, perhaps anticipating a time when Jews would again be responsible for the use of power by a Jewish state, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch translated "not by might, nor by power, as "not by military force and not by physical strength," emphasizing the challenge of God's word to nations.

Addressed to the Jewish people and to all people, to individuals and to nations, it is time to understand the vision of the menorah as shown to Moses and to Zecharia. The menorah's message is in its making and in its form, which is the vision and the way, the wholeness of means and ends, one piece of hammered gold. It is time for the confusion to lift.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor