

Rabbi Shubert Spero is spiritual leader of the Young Israel of Cleveland and has written extensively on philosophical and theological topics.

## THE MENORAH: A STUDY IN ICONIC SYMBOLISM

### INTRODUCTION

One of the more interesting facts to emerge from the steady stream of archeological finds that continue to be unearthed in Israel and elsewhere is that throughout the period of the second Temple and up to the late Talmudic period, the most popular religious symbol for the Jew was the *Menorah*. It served as part of the furniture of the Synagogue as well as a decorative motif almost everywhere; on synagogue walls and floors, on tombs and on sarcophagi, on lamps and on coins and even incised on the wall of a private dwelling. The *Menorah* design is found executed in a rich variety of materials: stone, brass, clay, mosaic tiles and fresco. Indeed, in the remains of almost all of the 6, 7 and 8th Century synagogues that have recently been discovered in Israel, one of the common properties is the *Menorah* motif in the mosaic floor decorations. Symbolic of this preoccupation with the *Menorah* is the perspective offered by the thought that the period of the second Temple opens, in a sense, with the vision of one of the last of the prophets, Zechariah:<sup>1</sup>

I have seen and behold a *Menorah* all of gold with a bowl upon the top of it and its seven lamps therein.

Devotion to the *Menorah* reaches its climax with the Macabean victory of *Chanukah* with its celebration in lights and *Menorah*. It ends with the Roman destruction of the Temple

## *The Menorah: A Study In Iconic Symbolism*

marked by the arch of Titus in Rome whose most prominent figure is the large *Menorah* carried by the Judean captives.

The ubiquity of a religious symbol is, at least, in part, related to its meaningfulness and significance. Yet, in terms of its place in the Temple, the *Menorah* cannot be said to have had a central role. Nor can it be plausibly maintained that the *Menorah* became prominent because of a lack of other representational elements in Judaism. For we do find the *lulav*, the *Shofar* and the portals of the Holy of Holies represented, albeit in secondary roles. How, then, shall we understand the significance of the *Menorah* so as to explain its dramatic popularity during a millennium of Jewish life?

### I

It is interesting to note that the attitude towards certain images or iconic symbols in Judaism, closely parallels the peculiar development undergone by the ideas which these symbols represent. At the risk of oversimplification, let us begin by saying that the fundamental human problem to which Judaism addressed itself was: How can man attain both life (*chayim*) and knowledge (*da'at*)?

The terms in which this dilemma is presented is taken from the account in Genesis where we are told that once man sinfully chose the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he lost the opportunity to experience the fruit of the tree of life, and was driven from Eden. "Life" is defined as an organic interaction with nature, being at home in the universe, a condition in which primal man and woman might have been able to attain fulfillment and self-realization and feel "whole" within the natural sphere. This is supported by the idea that partaking of the fruit of the tree of life imparts immortality. Knowledge of good and evil, on the other hand, best describes the state in which modern man finds himself: a responsible, unitary self who has internalized the impulses for good and evil, is torn by inner conflict and is guilt-ridden with a growing sense of alienation and estrangement.<sup>2</sup>

The starting point of Judaism is that the way back to Eden

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

is irrevocably closed.<sup>3</sup> The old relationship to nature can never be regained. Modern, complex man with his intelligence and his pride and his struggle with good and evil must consciously reject an identity with the natural and go forward to find a new basis for his existence. This was the role and objective of the Torah. The concept of a Tree of Life as something rooted in nature and simply here to be experienced was rejected,<sup>4</sup> as it is written:

Thou shalt not plant thee an Ashera, any kind of tree, beside the altar of the Lord, thy God.

Because man is no longer at home in the natural world, he is in need of special guidance:<sup>5</sup> "I am a stranger on the earth; hide not Thy commandments from me." The Torah was now to be seen as replacing the Tree of Life.<sup>6</sup>

She (the wisdom of Torah) is a Tree of Life to them that take hold of her.

## II

The symbol which gives expression to the first stage of this complex set of ideas is the *lulav* and *etrog* which are observed on the Festival of *Sukkot*. Quite plainly, when it is all assembled what we have before us is in the form and substance of a tree: trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. While all of the elements are natural (branches of the palm, boughs of myrtle and willow and the citron fruit) the selection and combination are prescribed by the Torah and the new composition is cut off from nature. Yet the factor of "life" and the "living" character of the *lulav* ensemble remains halakhically crucial. Thus, a *lulav* that is thoroughly dried up is unfit for use based on the passage: "For the dead shall not praise Thee."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the numerical value (*gematriya*) of the Hebrew word "*lulav*" is 68 and is equivalent to the word *chayim* (68) — life. The symbolizandum of the *lulav* and *etrog* seems to be: Here is the tree of life offered by the Torah; elements of the natural selected and re-structured, which are indeed "alive." But they draw their "life"

### *The Menorah: A Study In Iconic Symbolism*

not from nature but from the Torah which is the "eternal life that He has planted within us."<sup>8</sup> The fruit of this artificial *lulav* tree is the *etrog* which according to some Rabbis was the original fruit (not an apple) of the tree of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Torah offers man what he lost at Eden: Life *and* knowledge.

### III

The *Menorah* may be seen as expressing the second stage in the development of Judaism's reinterpretation of the Life/Knowledge dilemma. As we contemplate the *Menorah*, as described in the Book of Exodus, we once again perceive before us the form of a tree: a central trunk, six branches and ornaments of almond blossoms and flowers.<sup>10</sup> This time, however, the linkage with nature is carried not by the substance but only by the highly stylized form. What has become prominent in the case of the *Menorah* is the element of unity. The *lulav* ensemble was characterized by the diversity of its components which were united simply by their being bound together or held together by the worshipper. The *Menorah* in the Temple, by contrast, had to be formed out of a single piece of metal, seamless, suggesting that the "life" provided by Torah is not a fragmented, disjointed affair but one harmonized and systematically inter-related by overriding values and an interpenetrating sanctity.<sup>11</sup>

The most dramatic emphasis of the *Menorah*, however, lies in what it suggests is the fruit of the Jewish tree of life—light, the universal symbol of knowledge. "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is a light and the way of life, are instruction and reproof." The point is that not merely is the light of Torah to be seen as a means or prescription leading man back to the natural but that natural existence itself, properly structured, can lead to the experience of light understood as acquaintance with the presence of God; as an experience of the total person in every area of life. Light, the *Da'at Hashem*, is the ultimate fruit of the Tree of Life.

The final consideration which endeared the *Menorah* symbol to the people of the Second Temple and Talmudic periods, was that the *Menorah's* actual production of illumination necessi-

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

tated a continual service by man in terms of providing fuel and cleaning of wicks. This corresponds closely to the historical role of the Rabbis in the development of the Oral Law which took place during this period. The fruit of the Tree of Life is not simply there to be plucked and enjoyed. The Torah is not simply a finished plan to be mechanically applied. It is a way of life and an intellectual discipline into which the Jew must enter with his total being and in interaction with the Torah, kindle a flame and contribute towards the production of light.<sup>12</sup>

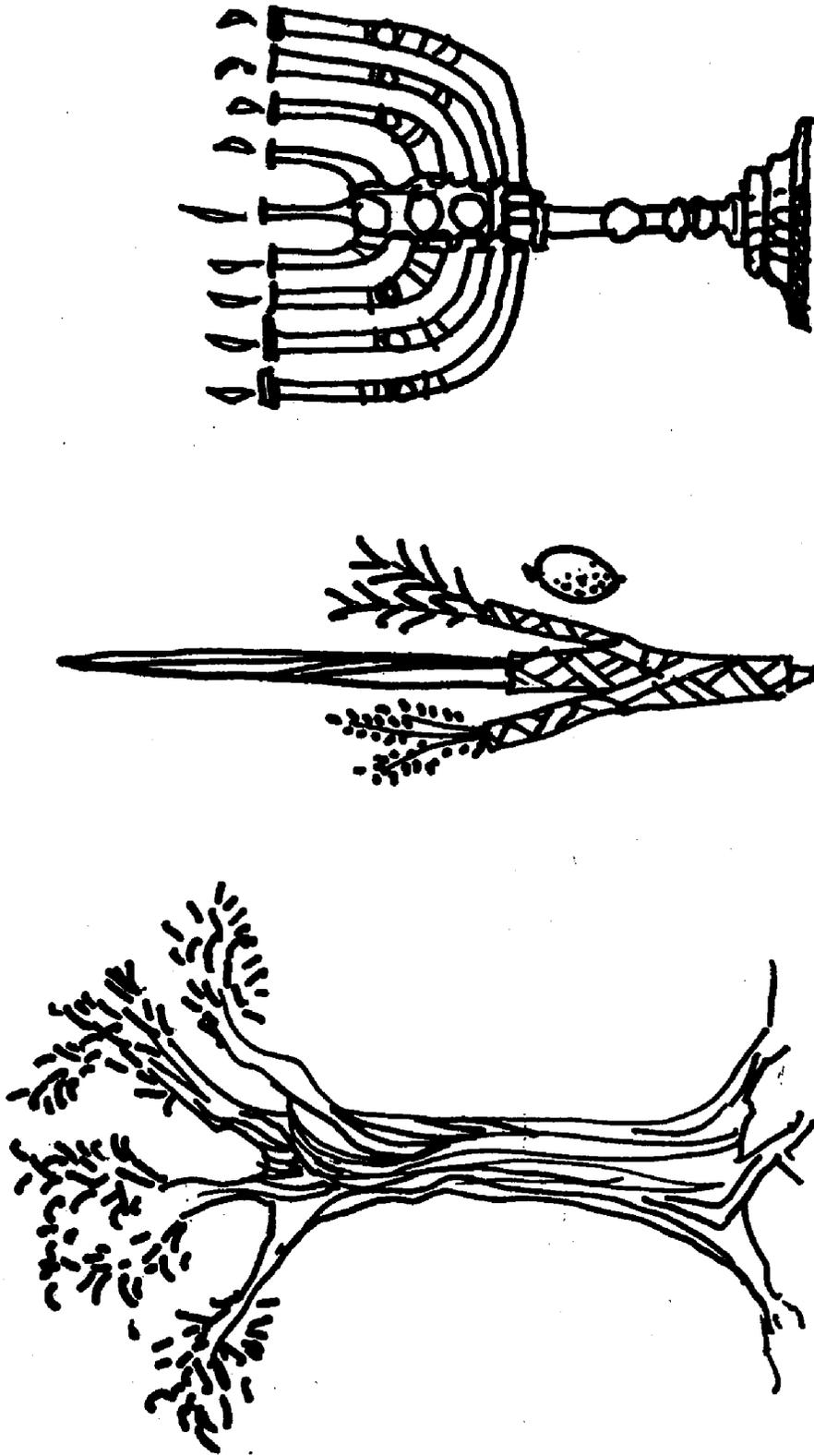
### CONCLUSION

The *Menorah* was rightfully looked upon as symbolizing the essential message of Judaism. It represented the way of overcoming man's estrangement from nature; of offering a way of combining knowledge and life, as symbolizing Judaism's vision of the Torah as Tree of Life. This emphasis of the *Menorah* upon light, upon *Da'at Hashem* as the fruit of human existence was particularly appropriate in a period in which the Jewish contribution to the development of the Oral Law reached its height.<sup>13</sup>

The essence of the aesthetic attitude is to contemplate an object for its own sake with a view to its presentational aspect, without thought of its practical uses or economic value. On *Chanukah*, we are asked to adopt an aesthetic posture and perceive the lights for their own sake and view the *Menorah* as an iconic symbol.<sup>14</sup>

We are not permitted to use them; only to view them in order that we may praise and glorify thy great Name (*al Hanisim prayer*).

*The Menorah: A Study In Iconic Symbolism*



THE TREE OF LIFE — EVOLUTION OF A SYMBOL

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

### NOTES

1. Zechariah 4:2.
2. A good summary account of the meaning of the "knowledge of good and evil" involved in the third chapter of Genesis is found in Kaufman's *The Religion of Israel* (University of Chicago Press 1960) abridged and translated by M. Greenberg, p. 293, which is close to the best insights found in the classical Jewish commentators.
3. This seems to be implied by the stationing of cherubim "To guard the way to the Tree of life" (Gen. 3:24).
4. Deuteronomy 16:21. There is an increasing amount of archaeological evidence that the tradition of a tree of life and even the concept of two trees seems to have existed among the pagan cultures of the Mesopotamian world. For example, in the palace of Mari dating from the second millennium B.C.E. there is a large mural painting (now on view in the Louvre) depicting the investiture of the King of Mari. On both sides of the central scene, two different trees are represented. One is a palm tree bearing bunches of dates towards which men are climbing while the other with stylized branches is guarded by three cherubim. (A. Parrot, "Mari" in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, edited by D. W. Thomas, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 139.)
5. Psalms 119:19.
6. Proverbs 3:18.
7. *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Sukkah* 3:1.
8. This might help to explain why the Mishneh explicitly prohibits a *Lulav* that is taken from an Ashera tree (*Sukkah* 29B).
9. View of Rabbi Abba of Acco in Gen. Rabba 15.
10. "Ancient Jewish sources, hint at a direct relationship between the *Menorah* and a specific plant. And not surprisingly there is a plant indigenous to Israel that bears an uncanny resemblance to the *Menorah*: The *moriah* — "sage" in English — a weed growing wild all over the land. Although it doesn't always have exactly seven branches, each *moriah* does have an even number of branches growing from a central branch." (David Breakstone, "The Green Archaeology," *Israel Magazine*, Vol. V, No. 11-12.)
11. It might be noted that the association we have made between the *Lulav* ensemble and the *Menorah* is not the only link that can be found between *Chanukah* and *Sukkot*. See Maccabees II, 10:6-9 where it is written: "And they celebrated it (*Chanukah*) for eight days with gladness like the *Sukkot* festival and recalled how a little while before, during the *Sukkot* festival they had been wandering in the wilderness, in the mountains and caverns like wild animals. So carrying wands wreathed with leaves and beautified branches and palm leaves too, they offered hymns of praise . . ."
12. See the interpretation of the Netziv of Vollozhin (*Ha'amek Davar*) on Ex. 27:20, where he develops an elaborate symbolism of the *Menorah* along the lines we have suggested here.

## *The Menorah: A Study In Iconic Symbolism*

13. Would it be going beyond the permissible limits of interpretation to suggest that the Christian practice during this season of placing lights on a complete, natural tree reflects their subconscious refusal to make a complete break with the pagan Ashera concept?

14. *Al Hanisim* prayer.