

Behaalotkha 5781

Blazing integrity

On Wednesday I met face to face with a student of Judaism for the first time. I've been working with her for a year now. It was too hot to sit outside and so we came into the Sanctuary, which offered itself to us as a shelter and a classroom. Together we studied its architecture, its decorations, the Torah scrolls.

The first thing she noticed was the light over the Ark, the *ner Tamid*. She associated it - correctly - with the Menorah that stood in the *kodesh*, the second zone of the Mishkan, the sanctuary in the desert. The Menorah, which had seven branches, stood opposite the table of showbread. The wall behind it was overlaid with gold, and so was the wall opposite. To stand in the *kodesh* with the Menorah lit must have been like standing in a hall of mirrors. And at the start of this week's parashah we learn that Aaron kept the Menorah alight always - so those dancing lights were never extinguished while the Mishkan was standing in one place.

The Menorah was unique in other ways, too. The Torah points out not once but twice that it was a *mikshah ahat*, an object hammered out from a single piece of gold. Everything about the Menorah is contiguous - its base, its branches, its cups and its petals. The only thing we never find out is how big it was - because its size will have depended on the particular skill and style of the artisan who made it. Every other object in the Mishkan is precisely measured and its measurements recorded for us, to be read over and over again every year. Only the dimensions of the Menorah remain a mystery.

What can we learn?

The Menorah has something to say to us about wholeness.

Creation was initially whole. Light is the first created thing, and for all of the first day of Creation it is not separated from the darkness. We forget that when we think of the world coming into being...Separation only occurs on the second day, when light and darkness, upper and lower waters, are drawn away from each other and boundaries - *havdalot* - are set, and wholeness gives place to difference.

Where there is integrity, there is light. That's why the psalm says: *or zarua latzadik*. If we believe that each of us is here for a purpose, to bring our light to the world, it becomes part of our task to clear away the barriers to our integrity. David Brooks talks about eulogy values - we know how whole people, people with integrity, people perhaps like those we remember this weekend - have a way of shining.

As the teacher and life coach Parker Palmer writes - "What seed was planted when you or I arrived on earth with our identities intact? How can we recall and reclaim those birthright gifts and potentials?"¹

But the symbol of a single candle would do to teach us that lesson. Why does it need a Menorah?

For that we need to turn to another teacher, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson. He writes:

*Each one of the seven lights [of a Menorah] shines in its own uniqueness. In fact, the only thing that can make a menorah treif (ritually impermissible) is if the lights are not all on the same level—precisely even—so that no two lights can be confused as one. So too, the Talmud instructs that no replicas of the Temple menorah can be made or displayed anymore. Perhaps this too is an assertion of the importance of each individual.*²

So the Menorah itself, the *mikshah ahat*, hints at wholeness. Lit, it becomes a blazing symbol of integrity: the integrity of creation, the integrity of each human soul, the integrity of each individual.

May each of us merit to be a *mikshah ahat* in the week ahead.

Shabbat shalom.

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-menorah-let-your-light-shine/>