

Date: Fri, 11 Feb 2000 10:12:40 EST  
From: JoshHoff@aol.com  
To: Phyllostac@aol.com  
Subject: netvort:parshas Terumah, 5760

I Think I Can  
By Rabbi Joshua (ably known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

This week's parsha, Terumah, presents us with God's command to build a tabernacle- a mishkan- as well as the details to be followed in constructing it and the various components it was to contain. Perhaps the most complicated of these components was the menorah, with its intricate series of branches, cups, apples And flowers. The midrash, in fact, tells us that Moshe had difficulty understanding the composition of the menorah, until God showed him its image in fire. The midrash continues that even after seeing that image, however, Moshe did not fashion the menorah himself. Rather, he threw the gold needed for it into the fire, and the fully constructed menorah emerged. What was it about the menorah that Moshe found so difficult to understand? If it was only the intricacy of its details, there were other features on the mishkan that were equally or more difficult to grasp. There must have been some other, more conceptual aspect of the menorah, beyond the mere detail that puzzled Moshe. What, then, was that conceptual difficulty? I would like to present three approaches in answer to this question.

Rav AvrahamYitzchak Kook, in an essay on this parsha that was published only a few years ago, commented on another feature of the mishkan which Moshe had difficulty understanding according to the rabbis, namely, he half shekel that each Jew had to contribute. Here, too, God showed Moshe a shekel made of fire so that he would understand the requirement. Rav Kook explained that the half-shekel contribution represented all the different members of the Jewish people coming together to form a corporate entity, a unique aspect of community that does not exist among other nations. While each member has his own separate personality and his own contribution to make to the mishkan, all of the Jewish people somehow coalesce to form an organic whole. It was this dual nature of the Jewish people that Moshe had difficulty understanding. He needed assistance from God, in Whom the nation's organic unity is grounded, to understand. Perhaps, then, the menorah carried a similar kind of symbolism. The menorah had to be made of one unified piece of gold, with all of its various features emerging from it. Thus, it symbolized the different members of the nation, each a personality in his own right, merging into the unified whole of klal Yisroel. Here, again, Moshe needed divine assistance to understand how this was to be accomplished.

Another popular system of symbolism posited in connection with the menorah is that of the interplay between the various branches worldly wisdom and the wisdom of the Torah. Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri, for example, advances this notion in his commentary to the book of Proverbs, as does Rabbi Bachya ibn Pekudah in his Chovos Halevavos. The central branch of the menorah represents the Torah, while the other six branches which emerge from it represent the different branches of worldly wisdom. The flames in these other lamps, say the rabbis, must turn toward the central shaft. In order for worldly wisdom to be used properly, it must be guided by the teachings and the spirit of the Torah. Perhaps, then, it was the challenge of achieving this kind of integration and synthesis that Moshe had difficulty with, and needed God's help to grasp.

The most intriguing explanation of Moshe's difficulty with understanding

the menorah is given by the Sefas Emes. He says that, in reality, it is impossible for anyone to completely understand the depths of any mitzvah, to fulfill, through his own efforts, all of its nuances. However, if one expresses his desire to fulfill the mitzvah properly, and exerts his maximum effort to do so, he will receive divine assistance to go beyond his natural abilities. In this way, we can understand why God showed Moshe a fiery menorah, and yet, in the end, Moshe himself did not fashion the menorah used in the mishkan. Rather, he took the piece of gold to be used and threw it into the fire, from which there emerged the finished product. Moshe was shown the menorah of fire so that he would have the desire to make it properly. Once he had that desire, God helped him along, even though he still was not able, on his own, to do the job. He did what he could-throwing the gold into the fire-and God did the rest. In this way, says the Sefas Emes, Moshe served as an example for every Jew in his mitzvah performance

It is interesting to note that Moshe owed his very life to the kind of process he went through in making the menorah. The Torah tells us, in parshas Shemos, that Moshe's mother placed him in a basket and sent him along the Nile, to save him from Pharaoh's murderous decree to kill all newborn Israelite males. Pharaoh's daughter saw the basket and sent out her hand to pick it up. Discovering a baby inside, she brought him to the royal palace and raised him there as her son. Based on a textual peculiarity, the rabbis say that, actually, her arm was not long enough to reach the basket, but, still, she reached for the basket, and, miraculously, she became 'the elongated woman.' Her arm stretched beyond its natural length and she was able to reach the basket. The obvious question, asked by the mussar masters, is, why did Pharaoh's daughter reach out for the basket if it was clear that she could not reach the basket? What was she thinking? They answer that a person always has to try, to do whatever he can in a given situation, even if, on the surface, it appears that he cannot accomplish what needs to be done. If he does all that is in his power to do, he will receive divine assistance to go beyond his capacity. Moshe's survival as an infant, then, came about through the operation of this principle, and he went on to use it in his leadership of the people, taking them, a nation of former slaves, beyond itself and bringing it to the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. The manner in which he constructed the menorah served to instruct them to continue using this principle to carry out God's will in their daily life.

[ Please note-Correction of last week's netvort. In last week's netvort, to parshas Mishpatim the second last sentence of the fourth paragraph should be corrected. The correct version is: The dispute between them is whether the principle that Jewish status depends on the mother is based on individual Jewish sanctity, which is the position of the Ramban, or on collective Jewish sanctity, which is the position of the French scholars. ] .