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UNBENDING TRUTH


THE REAL MENORAH

Exploring the authentic shape of the Menorah's
branches—as illuminated by the Rebbe.

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AMH

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Scan this code to hear a discussion with the author on this topic on the Among Chassidim podcast by Derher.

The Great Spectacle

The streets of Rome were overflowing. The entire city turned out to watch the celebratory parade. The Judean revolt had finally been suppressed. Rome had triumphed again.

Emperor Vespasian and his son, General Titus, appeared crowned with laurels, greeted with thunderous cheers. Soldiers marched festively in silks and gold. Jewish slaves were led in chains, followed by massive artistic renditions of the images of war.

Finally, came the spoils of the Beis Hamikdash itself.

Josephus Flavius, a Jew standing in the crowd, describes what he saw in careful detail—a sight later etched for generations on the infamous Arch of Titus:

“The candelabrum, also made of pure gold—this candelabrum differed from the design of those candelabra we made use of. From the base rose the trunk in the middle, and from it extended thin branches, shaped like a three-pronged fork. At the top of each branch was a copper lamp. And the number of the branches was seven, in honor of the Jewish seven-day week.”¹

Is he describing the Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash? Did the Menorah make it to Rome? Is the depiction on the Arch of Titus accurate? Finally, does it even matter?

Get it Straight

At Shabbos farbrengens during the Three Weeks, the Rebbe would often dedicate *sichos* to *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah*.

On Shabbos Matos-Masei 5742, the Rebbe turned his attention to the Menorah. After a lengthy discussion regarding another aspect of its construction, the Rebbe



briefly addressed the question of its shape.

“There are those,” the Rebbe remarked, “who depict the Menorah with round branches and a wide metal base instead of legs. This image appears on the coins of Eretz Yisroel and in similar places. Many Chanukah Menorahs are made this way as well, and even the Menorah in 770 has rounded branches!”²

Which was it—curved or straight?



ARCH OF TITUS.



DEPICTION OF THE MENORAH AS IT IS CARRIED AWAY, ETCHED ALONG THE INSIDE OF THE ARCH.



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The Rebbe pointed out that the Kapach edition of the Rambam’s *Pirush Hamishnayos* included a sketch of the Menorah in the Rambam’s own holy handwriting (!), clearly showing straight branches. Contrarily, the most prominent example of a rounded Menorah was displayed on the Arch of Titus—built specifically to glorify the destruction of Beis Hamikdash.

And yet everyone makes rounded Menorahs!

In the weeks that followed, the Rebbe returned to the subject several times.³ Some had pointed out that the rounded-branch Menorah was not only found on the Arch of Titus—it appeared in Torah sources as well. Most notably, in the *Maaseh Choshev* and *Chochmas HaMishkan*, both authored by saintly kabbalists of earlier generations.

The Rebbe explained that those opinions rested on the assumption that the Rambam himself had understood the Menorah’s branches to be curved. At the time, the Rambam’s handwritten sketch had not yet been known—but now that the *ksav yad* has been publicized, the Rebbe said, “*batel hayesod, batel kol habinyan*—once the foundation is gone, the entire

structure falls.”

The Rebbe further noted that the idea of curved branches was difficult to reconcile with the Torah’s own wording. The branches of the Menorah are called *kaneh*—a reed—and reeds are by nature straight. Nowhere in Torah does the term carry a rounded connotation. Rashi indeed calls them *alachson*—diagonal. Why, then, would we assume that the Menorah’s branches were anything but straight?

Arch Rivals

As the summer continued, the topic faded. Soon, Tishrei had passed, and a few bochurim in 770 suddenly realized—Chanukah was approaching, and nothing had been done about 770’s Menorah! Rabbi Chaim Nisselevitch and Rabbi Zalman Scharf—bochurim in 770 at the time—decided to take matters into their own hands.

“The official 770 Menorah belonged to Reb Hirshel Chitrik,” Rabbi Nisselevitch related to *A Chassidisher Derher*. “So I visited him at his home



THE FOLLOWING DAY, THE INTRICATE GOLD-PLATED MENORAH, COMMISSIONED BY THE BOCHURIM, ARRIVED AT 770 AND WAS USED THE SAME EVENING. IN THIS PHOTO, FROM THE EIGHTH NIGHT OF CHANUKAH 5743, THE ORIGINAL SHAMASH HOLDER CAN BE SEEN, ALONG WITH THE TALLER CANDLE USED FOR THE SHAMASH.



IN THIS PHOTO FROM 5747, THE NEWER SHAMASH HOLDER IS SEEN, FASHIONED FOR THE MENORAH, SIGNIFICANTLY TALLER THAN THE OTHER BRANCHES.

on President Street and asked whether he was planning to fashion a new one. His answer was no.”

Hearing that, the bochurim resolved to commission a new Menorah themselves. However, bochurim in 770—especially Israelis—often felt like they didn’t have enough authority to alter things in the Rebbe’s *daled amos*. They also knew that the Rebbe was quick to strike down new projects if he suspected even a hint of *machlokes*. So they decide to proceed in absolute secrecy. They would simply change the facts on the ground.

“Reb Hirshel Pekkar was a skilled silversmith with a shop in Manhattan. He told us that a solid gold Menorah was financially out of the question, but he could make one from copper and coat it in gold. The cost: three thousand dollars.

“As Israeli bochurim in 770, we didn’t have two pennies to rub together. But I thought of Rabbi Mordechai Nagel, a Crown Heights businessman with a keen interest in the Rebbe’s *inyanim*. He even dressed similarly to the Rebbe, with the same style hat. Surely he would be interested in sponsoring a ‘Rebbe’s Menorah.’ We met him—again, in secret—and he immediately agreed to cover the entire cost.”

There was only one step left: How would the Menorah look? The bochurim delved into the *halachos* of the Menorah, carefully sketching what they felt would be the closest replica of the Beis Hamikdash Menorah. Soon, all details were figured out, except for one aspect:

“We weren’t sure how to space the cups and other designs on the branches; should they be clustered near the top, or spread along the branch?”

Rabbi Nisselevitch desperately wanted to know the Rebbe’s view on the topic, but writing directly to the Rebbe was obviously out of the question, so he came up with a solution:

“I disguised my questions as an innocent inquiry in the *Kovetz Ha’aros*. I hoped the Rebbe would respond—but unfortunately, my ploy didn’t work, and we were forced to make our own decision.”

Chanukah was already nearing when Reb Hirshel Pekkar got to work, and it soon became clear that he wouldn’t finish on time.

“We saw that it was simply a problem of manpower, so we decided to jump in and help. Every day we traveled to his workshop in Manhattan and worked with him around the clock. Chanukah began, and we were still at work. But we didn’t let up—and on the fifth day, we were finally ready. The Menorah was finished.”

The Rebbe's Gaze

That day was Erev Rosh Chodesh. As the Rebbe was at the Ohel, the new Menorah arrived in 770. The *shamash* Reb Asher Sasonkin had taken apart the old Menorah and stored it away. That evening, the Rebbe arrived for Mincha.

“As usual, Reb Asher Sasonkin lit the Menorah,” writes Rabbi Uri Holtzman in his Yoman. “In the middle of *Haneiros Halalu*, the Rebbe gazed intently at the Menorah, clearly scrutinizing some detail. A moment later, he turned to Rabbi Leibel Groner and instructed that the shamash be removed.”

The new Menorah's shamash was at the same level as that of the other candles, but protruding outwards. Later the next day, when Rabbi Groner asked the Rebbe about the directive, the Rebbe explained that there had been seven candles (six plus the shamash) on the Menorah [i.e., it was similar to the Beis Hamikdash Menorah]. Therefore, the shamash should be raised higher. The Rebbe added to Rabbi Groner that overall, the new Menorah was very good.

The shamash was soon changed to its current form, and everyone was pleased. Rabbi Nisselevitch related that he was still very nervous when Shabbos came; that's when the *balebatim*—among them, Rabbi Chitrik—would show up. Perhaps they would be indignant that the bochurim had taken matters into their own hands. However, his fears were unfounded; everyone was happy with the beautiful new Menorah—most importantly, the Rebbe himself.

“Rabbi Groner told us that the Rebbe was very pleased,” says Rabbi Nisselevitch, “and for us, that was more than enough.”

The Straight Path

Later that year, as Parshas Terumah approached, the editors of *Likkutei Sichos* prepared a *likkut* on the Menorah. The main *sicha* centered on the cups in the Rambam's sketch, but an addendum of several pages included the *sichos* from the summer about the shape of the branches.

There was something new as well. In the *sichos*, the Rebbe had not issued a formal *hora'ah* regarding the design of Menorahs in general. Here, however, the message was explicit:

“It is proper...that all those who draw images of

the Menorah (for the purpose of illustrating how the Menorah of the Mishkan and the Beis Hamikdash appeared) should depict its branches as diagonal, in accordance with the view of Rashi...and the Rambam...”

In a footnote, the Rebbe added, “This being the case, there is reason to say that Chanukah Menorahs should have straight branches as well.”⁴

Perhaps the publication of the *likkut* brought the issue back to the forefront, because at the very next farbrengen, on Parshas Tetzaveh, the Rebbe again raised the issue.⁵

This time, the Rebbe focused on the *tzitz* of the Kohen Gadol. The Gemara records a fascinating dispute over how the *tzitz* was fashioned. Rabbi Eliezer testified, “I saw the *tzitz* in Rome—and it was different,” while the Chachomim insisted otherwise.⁶ Incredibly, the Rambam rules according to the Chachomim, not Rabbi Eliezer.

Why not? Wasn't Rabbi Eliezer an eyewitness to the actual *tzitz*?

The Rebbe's explanation was a foundational concept in his approach:

The Rebbe quoted the Me'iri's sharp words: “*The Chachomim did not change what they knew to be true, even with an eyewitness.*”⁷ An eyewitness does not change the truth. Who knows what Rabbi Eliezer actually saw in Rome? Was it truly the *tzitz* of the Beis HaMikdash? Was it perhaps a replica, or made



A COIN MINTED BY MATISYAHU ANTIGNOS.



DEPICTION OF A MENORAH UNCOVERED IN THE HOME OF KOHANIM, JUST NEAR THE BEIS HAMIKDASH.



THE REAL MENORAH

UNBENDING TRUTH

in a different context?

No inanimate object or image has any bearing on our *mesorah*. Archeology or even testimonies are by nature unreliable—we cannot know their origins or even whether we understand them correctly.

So it is with the Menorah. Yes, the Arch of Titus in Rome bears the image of a candelabrum, but there is no certainty about its origins. One thing, however, is certain: the Torah calls the branches *kaneh*—and the Rambam himself drew them as straight.

Bending Back the Record

Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine, the famed Chabad researcher, was a bibliographer at the National Library of Israel. When the Rebbe began speaking about the Rambam's Menorah, he wondered whether additional manuscripts might contain similar sketches.

He began searching through the Rambam's writings in manuscript form, and he made a discovery.

Today, it is well known that in *Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* the Rambam included several renderings, introduced with the words “*vezu hi tzurasa—this is its image.*” But in the classic printed editions of the *Mishneh Torah*, these sketches were omitted along with the introductory words, leaving no hint that any drawings had ever existed.

Yet in manuscript after manuscript, Rabbi Mondshine uncovered sketches of the Menorah. Though not in the Rambam's own handwriting, they were very credible copies. One particular manuscript was copied from a version that bore the Rambam's own signature, attesting to its accuracy.⁸

One detail immediately stood out. In the Rambam's sketch in *Pirush Hamishnayos*, the ornaments on the Menorah's branches are drawn scattered along the length of the branch (apparently due to a lack of space). In these newly discovered renderings, however, they are carefully clustered near the top. The renderings are perfectly proportionate.

Perhaps this difference relates to another: in *Pirush Hamishnayos*, the Rambam explicitly noted that the drawing was not exact, serving only to indicate the general placement of the knobs, flowers, and cups. In the *Mishneh Torah*, however, no such disclaimer appears. There, the Rambam simply states: “*This is its image.*”

Rabbi Mondshine published his discoveries in *Kfar Chabad Magazine* almost exactly a year after the *sicha* about the *tzitz*, for Terumah 5744. Providentially, the next week's *likkut*—Tetzaveh 5744—discussed the *tzitz*, with an



THE LETTER FROM TZACH IN ERETZ YISROEL TO THE BANK OF ISRAEL REGARDING MINTING A SPECIAL COIN FOR CHANUKAH GELT.

entire section devoted to the Menorah. Rabbi Mondshine merited that the Rebbe added his discovery into the *sicha* shortly before publication: “*He’irani chacham echad*, a certain scholar pointed out to me that it was recently publicized that this also appears in the manuscript of the *Yad HaChazakah*.... See further details and renderings in *Kfar Chabad magazine*, *Parshas Terumah 5744*.”⁹

Room to Bend?

During this same period, Tzachi in Eretz Yisrael was in discussion with the Bank of Israel to issue a special celebratory coin which would be distributed on Chanukah from the Rebbe to IDF soldiers. One suggestion was for it to contain an image of the Menorah, and another option was to have the image of the *Luchos*.

The Rebbe's response was very informative:

The Rebbe wrote that if there was a possibility that rounded *Luchos* would be included, the option shouldn't even be discussed. There was no room for compromise, because it contradicted a clear Gemara. Regarding the Menorah, however, “*try* to make it in accordance with the Rambam. But since several *gedolei yisrael* (even in his own time) disagreed—this can be compromised.”¹⁰

Regardless, the Rebbe's view of the matter was very clear.

A round Menorah evokes memories of an arch built to humiliate the Jewish people. But a straight Menorah reminds a Jew of his role to be a “light unto the nations.” It's the Menorah which is עדות הוא לכל באי עולם שהשכינה ביה, a testament to all peoples of the world that the *shechina* dwells among the Jewish people.”¹¹

The choice is obvious.

The Menorah Polemic

The Torah Arguments

*Much ink has been spilled on the topic of the Menorah's branches, with many articles being written to support either side. Here are a few pointers from those discussions.*¹²

THE WORD KANIM:

Kaneh means “reed,” and is used to denote a rod or shaft. Nowhere does Torah indicate that it refers to anything other than a straight stem. Some suggest that the word emphasizes not straightness but hollowness,¹³ but this explanation cannot apply to the Menorah, which was *miksha*—hammered from a single block of gold, and therefore solid.

THE WORD ALACHSON:

Rashi writes that the branches were *alachson*—diagonal. Some argue it could mean rounded, but there is no such indication in Rashi. In two other instances in Torah, he uses the word to describe the Jordan River's *alachson* descent from west to east into the Kinneret, and Eretz Yisroel's southern border's *alachson* descent from the bottom tip of the Dead Sea into the Negev desert. Both could be translated as diagonal.¹⁴

AN ASMACHTA:

The words of the Torah describing how

the branches emerged from the middle are: “וכפתור תחת שני הקנים ממנה,” that a bulb was *below* the two branches. Had the branches been round, emerging sideways from the bulb, the word באמצע (in between)—not תחת (under)—would have been more accurate.

THE RAMBAM'S DRAWING:

In his *Pirush Hamishnayos*, the Rambam drew the Menorah with straight branches, and the most reliable surviving manuscripts indicate that he did the same in *Mishneh Torah*.

Some point to his disclaimer: “The purpose...is not for you to know the exact form of the goblet—for I have already explained that to you—but rather for you to recognize the number of cups, knobs, and flowers...”¹⁵ Yet this disclaimer clearly refers only to the details of the ornaments, which he already described differently in the text (and makes no disclaimer at all in *Mishneh Torah*). The Rambam immediately concludes: “*Vezuhi tzuras kol zeh*—this is its general form.” Did the Rambam believe the branches were round, yet still (a) use the term *kanim*, (b) sketch them as straight lines, and (c) never suggest otherwise?

Perhaps circles are simply harder to draw, or take up more space? In the very same sketch, he rendered a perfectly rounded base for the Menorah, and in the manuscripts of *Mishneh Torah*, there is plenty of space—and yet they are straight as well.



THE REAL MENORAH

UNBENDING TRUTH

RABBI AVRAHAM, THE RAMBAM'S SON:

He writes: “The branches extended like branches from the body of the Menorah toward its top, in a straight line, as *Abba Mari z”l* drew them—not curved, as others have depicted them.”¹⁶ Reb Avraham also writes in his commentary that the base was round—a detail found only in the Rambam’s sketch. Clearly, Reb Avraham sees every detail as exact.

THE DISSENTING VIEW:

Famously, the Ibn Ezra writes “ונכון הוא להיות טעם” יערוך בעבור היות הנרות כחצי עגול, the word *yaaroch* is appropriate [in the *possuk*] because the lights were in a half circle.”¹⁷ Rather than round branches, this seems to mean that the tops of the branches formed a half circle (in a form that would be *possul* for Chanukah). A similar concept is found in Sifri Zuta, which says that the branches were חוזרין חלילה כמין עטרה, seeming to imply that the branches surrounded the central branch—clearly not the classic view.¹⁸

THE PLANETS:

Midrashic (and historical) sources explain that the Menorah’s seven lights symbolize the planets known as *shatza”m chancha”l*, with the central branch representing the sun.¹⁹ This interpretation is quoted by several Rishonim as well. Some have argued that such descriptions suggest the Menorah’s branches were round.

However, those sources consistently speak of the *neir*, not the *kaneh* (Rabbeinu Bachya, for example, cites this explanation for the *neiros*, while giving a separate explanation for the *kanim*).²⁰ Should this be referring to the *kanim*, the central branch would presumably also be round, which it obviously is not.

The Historical Arguments

As explained above, historical arguments are irrelevant when set against a Torah tradition. Questions arising from archaeological discoveries or the Arch

of Titus have no real bearing on this discussion. They are presented just to broaden the discussion.

DID THE MENORAH COME TO ROME?

Very likely. The Gemara relates that Titus fashioned the *paroches* into a sack and used it to collect all the *keilim* of the Beis Hamikdash.²¹ Avos D’Rabbi Nasan says that the Menorah is still in Rome.²² Similarly, the *Sifrei Zuta* records that Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai saw the Menorah during his visit to Rome.²³

However, Yosifun says that more than one Menorah was brought to Rome.²⁴ This is entirely logical; the Beis Hamikdash surely contained many candelabra. If so, any Roman depiction becomes suspect—there is no certainty that it represents *the* Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash at all.

THE ARCH OF TITUS:

The round Menorah on the Arch of Titus has a large pedestal base—rather than the three legs required by Halacha—adorned with idolatrous images. Some suggested the Menorah was damaged on its journey to Rome and that this new base was later affixed. But if we accept that the Menorah was altered, the entire depiction becomes unreliable.

JOSEPHUS:

The historian describes the Menorah in the parade, saying that “this candelabrum differed from the design of those candelabras we made use of.” At first glance, this seems to mean that the Menorah was just not an ordinary candelabrum, but interestingly, a newer translation from the original Greek changes it slightly: “The candlestick... though its construction was *now changed* from that which we made use of.”²⁵ This might mean that the Menorah in the parade was actually *not* the Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash, or that it had been altered. He also says that the lamps were made of copper, not gold.

ARCHEOLOGY:

Many archaeological findings portray the Menorah with rounded branches (though a minority show it straight), with some depictions originating from *kohanim*. A coin with a round Menorah was minted by Matisyahu Antigonus, the

final Chashmonai king, himself a kohen. Another depiction of a rounded Menorah was uncovered in a home of *kohanim* located just near the Beis Hamikdash. It seems difficult to argue that these individuals did not know what the Menorah actually looked like.

However, it is noteworthy that none of these portrayals align with the Torah's requirements. The Menorah found in the *kohanim's* home, for example, features bulbs and ornaments along the entire structure—details that are halachically inaccurate (like many other discoveries of those times).

One of two things is possible:

One could argue that, since the Tzedokim were a dominating force in the final period of the Second Beis Hamikdash, the portrayals of the Menorah—and perhaps the actual shape of the Menorah itself—may have reflected their sensibilities. Rounded candelabra were common motifs in Roman architecture of the time. (Interestingly, the non-golden Menorah used right after the Chanukah victory was

made from שפודין של ברזל—clearly denoting straight branches²⁶).

One could also argue the opposite—that the Menorah was straight, but the Yidden of the time preferred not to depict it accurately, as a *chumra* of the halacha that one should not recreate the *Keilim* of the Beis Hamikdash.

GOLDMAKING:

Some argue that since gold is a soft metal, it cannot support long, straight extensions without bending. Others disagree.²⁷ This is beyond the author's expertise.

Perhaps we can suggest that this very challenge is what the Midrash and Rashi refer to when they describe Moshe's difficulty in constructing the Menorah: "Moshe was struggling; Hashem said to him, 'Throw the gold into the fire, and it will form on its own.'²⁸

This may also suggest that the Menorah in the Second Beis Hamikdash perhaps had curved branches, simply because the original was too difficult to replicate. This would resolve the images that emerge from archeology.

1. Translated from the Hebrew, *The War on the Jews* Book 7, Chapter 5.

2. Toras Menachem 5742 vol. 4, p. 1917.

3. The following section is from Devarim 5742. Toras Menachem 5742 vol. 4, p. 1962. The Rebbe continued in Re'eh, Ibid., p. 2073.

4. Likkutei Sichos vol. 21, p. 168 & fn. 44.

5. Toras Menachem 5743 vol. 2, p. 1051.

6. Shabbos 63b.

7. Ibid.

8. Oxford 602.

9. Likkutei Sichos vol. 26, p. 201 ft.

15. The earlier *sicha* on the Menorah, when later printed in Likkutei Sichos vol. 21, likewise included similar footnotes, in Footnotes 11* and 40*.

10. Hiskashrus issue 18, p. 11.

11. Menachos 86b.

12. See Rabbi Nochum Greenwald's articles in Or Yisrael issues 18 & 22. *El Mul Pnei HaMenorah* by Rabbi Peretz Blau, and 'Knei HaMenorah' in Heichal Menachem vol. 1, p. 270. Special thanks to Rabbi Shmuel Super.

13. *B'orcha Nir'eh Or* 5764.

14. Rashi on Bamidbar 34:4 "V'Yatza Chatzar Adar" & 34:11 "Yam Kineres Kedma." See also Yechezkel 47:1 "El Pesach Habayis," Kiddushin 72a "Amar Abaye," and Eruvin 100a "D'damu."

15. Menachos 7:3.

16. In his commentary on Parshas Terumah.

17. Tetzaveh 27:21.

18. Beginning of Parshas B'haalosecha.

19. Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus,

Mercury and the Moon (all visible to the naked eye). See Baraisa D'Maseches Midos M. 6, Yalkut beginning of B'haalosecha. Targum Yonasan, Shemos 39:37. Yalkut Shimoni Pekudei remez 419. Yerushalmi Chagiga 3:8.

20. Shemos 25:31.

21. Gittin 56b.

22. 41:12.

23. 8:2:1.

24. Chapter 95.

25. Translation by William Whiston.

26. Rosh Hashanah 24b.

27. <https://asif.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/%D7%91%D7%93%D7%9323-%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%A82-%D7%9E%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%93%D7%A8.pdf>.

28. Shemos 25:31.

