Menorah and Incense in the Twilight Zone

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In 1959, a TV series premiered that treated its viewers to fantastical and often frightening stories with a moral at their heart. The show began with the producer, Rod Serling, intoning in an eerie voice:

> There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man...It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call *The Twilight Zone*.

Serling was right to emphasize twilight as a symbol of mystery, for it is the very joining of light and shadow, darkness and luminance, that captures one of the most mysterious moments in the Sanctuary, and one of the greatest disagreements between Athens and Jerusalem.

This week, we will examine two of the most important objects in the Tabernacle and Temple. The first is the Menorah, the golden candelabra lit every day in the Sanctuary. Here is its biblical description:

> *And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made: its shaft, and its branches, its bowls, its knobs, and its flowers, shall be of the same.*
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> *And six branches shall come out of the sides of it; three branches of the candlestick out of the one side, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side:*
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> *Three bowls made like unto almond blossoms, with a knob and a flower in one branch; and three bowls made like almond blossoms in the other branch, with a knob and a flower: so in the six branches that come out of the candlestick.*
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> *And in the candlesticks shall be four bowls made like unto almond blossoms, with their knobs and their flowers.* (Exodus 25:31-34)

Unlike the more modern menorahs utilized for commemorating the miracles of Hanukkah, which feature eight branches emerging from a central shaft, here in the original Menorah there are three branches on each side—for a total of seven. Note the decorations: flowers, almond blossoms, all adorning branches. These are botanical and agricultural items.

Describing the modern menorah, Theodore Herzl once suggested something striking, a theory equally applicable to the original candelabra of the Tabernacle:

> When had the primitive structure of this candelabrum first been devised? Obviously, its form had originally been derived from that of a tree: The sturdy stem in the center; four branches to the right and four to the left, each below the other, each pair on the same level, yet all reaching the same height...With what mystery had this simple artistic form, taken from nature, been endowed by successive generations?

This is Herzl's theory. The candelabra is meant to embody botany. Could it be? It could indeed, and Herzl's hunch was confirmed by Ephraim Hareuveini and his wife, Hannah. They were botanists who emigrated to the Holy Land in the early days of the Jewish settlement, and they were obsessed with identifying the biblical plants of the Bible.

They also sought a plant among Israeli soil that could have served as the botanical equivalent of the Menorah, because they were convinced that when the Menorah was first created, it was meant to serve as an artistic

embodiment of a tree. And so they walked around the Holy Land looking at specimens and discovered the *salvia* plant, and one form of it native to Israel, known by the technical term *salvia palaestina*, which looks exactly like a menorah, with branches that extend akin to the candelabra.

The Menorah, then, perhaps portrays a luminous tree. But what sort of tree is this? Here the number seven is instructive. The Book of Proverbs tells us of wisdom hewing her home with seven pillars; medieval commentators spoke of seven branches of knowledge; they therefore assumed that this candelabra is an embodiment of enlightenment; adorned with flowers and buds it becomes, essentially, a tree of knowledge. But if partaking of the tree of knowledge in Eden was a sinful attempt on the part of man to devise his own moral code, here, the Menorah in the *sanctum* signifies instead the inherent capacity of man to righteously seek knowledge, and even to achieve intellectual greatness.

And yet, for all that Judaism is a faith deeply devoted to the human mind and its cultivation, it also simultaneously stresses the dangers of intellectual arrogance. Perhaps the most famous episode of *The Twilight Zone*, ranked by *TV Guide* as the eleventh greatest television episode of all time, portrays an alien race known as the Kanamits who land on Earth, insisting that their sole motive is to help humanity. Indeed, the Kanamits cure disease, end the Cold War and cause the deserts to bloom. Wondering whether the Kanamits are truly sincere, a government official named Michael Chambers gets a hold of a Kanamit book and employs a cryptographer to translate it. After much effort, he is able to translate its title page. The book is called *To Serve Man*. Assured now that the Kanamits seek only to serve and help humanity, Chambers agrees to accompany the Kanamits to their home planet. As he boards the ship, the cryptographer rushes toward him and shouts: "Mr. Chambers, don't get on that ship! The rest of the book, *To Serve Man*, it's a cookbook!" It is too late. Chambers is taken into the ship, and it departs toward his doom. Rod Serling concludes the episode by saying:

> The recollections of one Michael Chambers, or more simply stated, the evolution of man, the cycle of going from dust to dessert, the metamorphosis from being the ruler of a planet to an ingredient in someone's soup. It's tonight bill of fare, on *The Twilight Zone*.

The moral of the anecdote is clear: Chambers read *To Serve Man* in arrogance. He interpreted the title the way he did, because he was so certain of his own importance, of the fact that anything in the universe—even the most mysterious and otherworldly—existed to serve him. Yet ultimately, this belief only ended up proving his own lowliness.

Judaism believes that only in eschewing arrogance and recognizing our own limitations can true intellectual attainments be acquired. As Proverbs puts it: "*The beginning of wisdom is awe of the Lord.*"

Professor Leon Kass, who taught the Greek classics for many years before also teaching seminars on the Hebrew Bible, was asked to describe the difference in worldviews between these two incredibly influential intellectual traditions.

As part of his answer, Kass reflected on the uniqueness of humility as a Hebraic virtue:

> The peak of the Aristotelian ethical virtue is the great-souled man, the man of consummate nobility and goodness who goes in the city as if he were a god.

Kass further notes that Aristotle several times says of the great-souled man, "He wonders at nothing because nothing is great to him."

Kass points out that the reverent awe for Aristotle is something the young have, but is not an admirable virtue in a mature man. From a biblical perspective, the Greek approach leaves man without a fear of Heaven, which for the Bible is necessary to act as a restraint on some of our worst impulses.

A similar point was made by the great Talmud scholar, thinker, and teacher, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, in a Hanukkah lecture. The comprehensible nature

of creation, Rabbi Lichtenstein argued, was central to Greek achievements, but this also led to their deification of man. Judaism, said Rabbi Lichtenstein, also emphasizes the intellectual capacity of humankind, but simultaneously stresses that only in understanding our limitations, in grasping that the universe is filled with mysteries that we cannot explain, and that at the heart of these mysteries lies God, can man truly become great. Similarly, Menachem Begin was asked in prison by the Soviets how he reconciled faith with human intelligence, and he responded to his interrogator:

> Faith does not stand in contradiction to intelligence; but man, in his intelligence, understands that there are things he cannot fathom by rationality, and so he believes in a Higher Power.

It is with this in mind that we can move from the Menorah to another cultic object in the Tabernacle:

> *And thou shalt make an altar to burn incense upon: of acacia wood shalt thou make it.*
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> *A cubit shall be the length thereof, and a cubit the breadth thereof; four square shall it be; and two cubits shalt be the height thereof; the horns thereof shall be the same.* (Exodus 30:1-2)

This is the Altar of Incense, or in Hebrew, the *Mizbach HaKetoret*, which stood near the Menorah in the Tabernacle. Incense would be poured upon the altar's coals, and the sweet-smelling smoke would rise, create a cloud, and suffuse the Sanctuary. It marked a moment of mystery, of communion with the Divine. But here is what is initially surprising: Exodus explicitly states in the same chapter that this ritual of the incense is joined with another sacred rite:

> *And Aaron shall burn theron incense of sweet spices; every morning when he prepareth the lamps, he shall burn it.*
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> *And when Aaron lighteth the lamps at dusk, he shall burn it, a perpetual incense before the Lord through the generations.* (Exodus 30:7-8)

The lamps refer to the Menorah. Thus, the Menorah and Incense Altar are kindled as one. Light emanates from the Menorah and is immediately surrounded by sweet-smelling smoke. This seems aesthetically counterintuitive. The candelabra's very purpose is to illuminate; incense produces the opposite effect. Smoke obscures the light, limiting its luminance. As Rabbi Lichtenstein said:

> [T]he Torah teaches us that the incense always accompanies the lighting of the menora. These are related not only in terms of time, but also on a much deeper and more fundamental level.
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> The incense introduces a note of mystery: smoke wafts from it and rises, transcendental clouds hover over it and shroud the surroundings in a numinous haze. This is the antithesis of the clarity of light. Incense belongs not to our rational and logical world, but rather to the world of mysticism, outside our understanding and beyond our grasp.

That is exactly the point. Through the Menorah, we emphasize knowledge and intellect; through the incense, we emphasize intellect's limitations. Faith, as Begin said, comes in part from knowing what we cannot understand. Or as Rabbi Lichtenstein further puts it,

> The Greek world strives to be one of pure light, but our world is different: the menora is vital, but it is dialectically balanced by the incense. On the one hand, we of course esteem understanding and intellect, order and logic; on the other hand, we value an awareness of the mysteries of the universe and the mysteries within man, and first and foremost an awareness of the hidden God. We always see the light of the menora through the perspective of the smoke of the incense.

As menorah and incense are joined, light merges with darkness, and a sort of "twilight zone" is formed

within the Tabernacle. Twilight, as a rabbinic friend and aficionado of *The Twilight Zone* once pointed out to me, is itself a mix of both day and night. Therein lies its mysterious nature. It is a mix of sun and shadow, light and night; it is both late and early, evening and afternoon. The truth is those of us who have experienced the truly mystical moment that is the twilight's last gleaming know that when the unique hues caused by the mixture of day and night suffuse the horizon, we can sense the glory at the heart of creation. We realize then that there is someone larger than ourselves behind this world, and that the world is not here merely to serve man, but for a higher purpose.

The importance of joining intellect and faith was once understood. If one wishes to see the Hebraic impact on America, one can look to the way that Hebrew words for light, symbolizing knowledge, are joined with biblical symbolism on the seals of many early American universities. Today, the joining of education with humble biblical belief is not always appreciated, but it is still, at times, given eloquent expression. When the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, spoke at the U.S. Capitol for a Holocaust memorial ceremony, he reflected on the enormity of the evil that was perpetrated, and then he added:

> The one message I want to convey today is that you will have missed the most frightening aspect of it all, if you do not appreciate that it happened in one of the most educated, most progressive, most cultured countries in the world.
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> The Germany of the late 1920s and early 1930s was a world leader in most fields of art, science, and intellect.

He then further reflected that:

> This aspect of the matter is perhaps so prominent in my mind because I am undergoing, currently, the task of selecting a college for the youngest of my children—or perhaps more accurately, trying to help her select it. How much stock we place in education, intellect, cultural refinement!
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> And how much of our substance we are prepared to expend to give our children the very best opportunity to acquire education, intellect, cultural refinement! Yet those qualities are of only secondary importance—to our children, and to the society that their generation will create. I am reminded of words written by John Henry Newman long before the Holocaust could ever be imagined.
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> "Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility..."

Justice Scalia's words speak to our own subject: Menorah and incense, light and mystery, human intellect joined with humble faith. This is what Judaism has always embraced. Our people has long celebrated intellectual excellence, but it has also emphasized that Jewish history is so miraculous that not even the brilliant can truly comprehend it. Fittingly, in the Old City of Jerusalem, the tradition is not to light the Hannukah menorah when it is fully dark, but rather to start right after sundown, when the flames glow dimly in the dusk, the light and shadows working together in tandem to magnify the magic and mystery of that sacred city, as for a moment, the Tabernacle itself is seemingly brought back to life, the incense and the Menorah reimagined, when Jews in Jerusalem kindle candles—in the "twilight zone."

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik, referencing Leon Kass, cites the Greeks as a paradigmatic example of a civilization that prized intellect, but was insensitive to transcendence. What does this contrast between intellectual achievement and spiritual awareness teach us about the true nature of the conflict at the heart of Hanukkah?

2. In quoting Justice Scalia's speech, Rabbi Soloveichik appears to be drawing a connection between the notion of Divine mystery and the cultivation of virtue. How can awareness of God's transcendence help lead one to an ethical life?