

**Seven Branches of the Menorah**  
Kabbalistic Meditation on Psalm 67

Dovid Sears

## **Seven Branches of the Menorah**

The traditional lack of iconography in Judaism reflects its aversion toward idolatry and anything that might lead to idolatry. The cornerstone of Judaism is that God is a simple Oneness, transcending all form and limitation. However, there is a kabbalistic tradition by which various Divine Names serve as legitimate objects of contemplation. These mandala-like constructions represent esoteric concepts, providing spiritual roadmaps for the Jewish mystic. They include the arcane pictures found in medieval kabbalistic texts, and the extremely complex arrays of Divine Names that make up the prayer books for kabbalistic initiates, such as that of the holy Rabbi Shalom Sharabi (known as the "RaSHaSH," 1702-1777).

Many common prayer books include what is probably the most familiar and accessible mystical diagram.<sup>i</sup> It depicts the seven verses of Psalm 67 arranged like the seven-branched Menorah in the Holy Temple. Contemplating this Menorah is meant to put one into the proper frame of mind for prayer – although some use it immediately following the silent *Amidah* / Standing Prayer, as a way of "coming down" from the high point of the service.<sup>ii</sup> It also serves as a focusing device to free one from mental distractions, and purifies the mind of all evil thoughts.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, several sources state that reciting the verses of Psalm 67 in the form of the Menorah has a spiritual effect similar to lighting the Menorah in the Holy Temple.<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, it drives away one's inner darkness and mitigates all harsh judgments.

The Menorah is a fitting symbol for such purposes in that it points to the divine core of existence. As Reb Noson writes:

The Menorah was absolutely one, all of a piece, because truth is one. Although ornamented with numerous buds, flowers, and cups, the entire object was formed from a single piece of gold. By analogy, from the core of truth emerge the Torah and commandments, as well as all 'worlds,' both spiritual and physical, which possess colors and variations beyond number; nevertheless, in their source, all things are

absolutely one . . . The Menorah was one because the diversity of existence is one. This is the essence of truth, which is one.<sup>v</sup>

Just as the Menorah stood in the sanctuary of the Holy Temple, so we find it "standing" in the beginning of *Shacharit* (the morning prayer service) in the form of the seven verses of Psalm 67. (Perhaps this is because the prayer service recapitulates the Temple service.)<sup>vi</sup> My teacher, Rav Elazar Mordechai Kenig of Tzefat, *shlita*, once mentioned that it is a tradition of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples to arrange the verses so that they are read from right to left. Others read them in the reverse order.<sup>vii</sup> However, whatever custom one follows, the first verse corresponds to the *sefirah* of *Chesed* and the last verse to *Malkhut*. This depiction of the *sefirot* as branches of the Menorah indicates the mystery of which the *Tikkunei Zohar* speaks:

Master of the Universe . . . There is none who can know You at all! Without You, there is no unity in the higher or lower realms, and You are known as the Cause of All and Master of All. Each *sefirah* has a distinct Name, and by it the angels are similarly called. You, however, have no knowable Name, for You permeate all Names and You are the perfection of them all. When You remove Yourself from them, all Names remain as a body without a soul. You are wise, but not with a knowable attribute of wisdom (*Chokhmah*); You are understanding, but without a knowable attribute of understanding (*Binah*)...<sup>viii</sup>

The *Tikkunei Zohar* goes on to enumerate all of the *sefirot*, concluding that their multiplicity is apparent only from the standpoint of creation – but, in truth, God permeates the *sefirot* and, at the same time, transcends the *sefirot* absolutely. By meditating upon the Psalm 67 Menorah, this may be vividly sensed.

Moreover, we should continue to be aware of this paradox as we go about the business of everyday life: that everything we experience is unique in its individual character – and simultaneously an expression of the Divine Oneness. Thus, the light shining through the dining room window borrows its radiance from the Menorah.

The light shining through the leaves of the trees borrows its radiance from the Menorah.

### **Kavanah / Intention**

The most basic practice is simply to read the seven verses of Psalm 67 in the form of the Menorah, contemplating their meaning as described above. One should gaze at the words and read them slowly and thoughtfully. When one does so independently of the prayer service, one may contemplate the Menorah in silence.

Beginning with the words "*Elokim yechanenu . . .* May God favor us," the seven verses form the seven branches of the Menorah, which correspond to the seven lower *sefirot* and the seven days of creation. (The correlation between the *sefirot* and verses is shown in the chart below.) One should bear these correspondences in mind while reading or contemplating the words of the psalm. It is also beneficial to gaze upon the form as a whole, to see how the words of the Menorah make up one unit.

Together, the seven verses represent the perception of "oneness in multiplicity" that the Menorah in the Holy Temple radiated to the world. Thus, Psalm 67 speaks of divine illumination extending to all Israel, and from Israel to all humanity. While reciting the psalm, it is fitting to silently pray that this light be revealed anew, driving away all spiritual darkness. Indeed, the kabbalists state that doing so redeems the world.

**Psalm 67**

For the conductor, a psalm with instrumental music, a song:

*Chesed / Lovingkindness:*

1. May God favor us and bless us;  
may He cause His countenance to shine with us, *selah*.

*Gevurah / Might:*

2. So that Your way become known on earth;  
among all nations, Your deliverance.

*Tiferet / Harmony:*

3. Peoples will acknowledge You, O God;  
peoples will acknowledge You, all of them.

*Netzach / Victory:*

4. Nations will rejoice and sing,  
for You will judge the peoples fairly  
and guide the nations on earth, *selah*

*Hod / Splendor:*

5. Peoples will acknowledge You, O God;  
peoples will acknowledge You, all of them.

*Yesod / Foundation:*

6. The earth will have yielded its produce.  
May God, our God, bless us.

*Malkhut / Kingship:*

7. May God bless us,  
and may all ends of the earth revere Him.

Psalm 67 with verses numbered according to branches of Menorah and seven *sefirot*

## Counting the Days From Passover to Shavu'ot

Beginning on the second evening of Passover, we are commanded to count the days until *Shavu'ot* / Festival of Weeks, in commemoration of the *'omer*, or measure of newly harvested grain that was offered in the Holy Temple.<sup>ix</sup> This seven-week period also represents the step-by-step ascent from the Forty-Ninth Level of Impurity to which the Israelites had fallen in Egypt, to the Fiftieth Gate of Holiness, represented by the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. All present at this world-transforming event attained prophecy, and returned to the spiritual level of Adam prior to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>x</sup> We recall – and to an extent, relive – this experience during this seven-week period every year. In Judaism, this is the roadmap of the spiritual journey of every individual, as well.

The Counting of the 'Omer is usually done in the synagogue after the evening service (although one may count privately if one cannot attend the communal service). The kabbalistic rite that accompanies this mitzvah includes the recitation of several prayers, including Psalm 67 and the mystical prayer known in Hebrew as "*Ana Bi-ko'ach*," composed by the first century Talmudic sage, Rabbi Nechunia ben ha-Kana. This prayer consists of seven verses based on an acrostic of seven Divine Names, which add up to the Forty-Two Letter Name designated for spiritual ascent from one level to the next. (See chart.) The *Ana Bi-koach* prayer is also recited during the sacrificial passages in the morning prayer service, and following the seven psalms that introduce the Sabbath evening service.

After counting the day of the 'Omer, one may wish to contemplate Psalm 67 in the form of the Menorah, bearing in mind some or all of the following additional *kavanot* (intentions):

- Psalm 67 contains forty-nine words, corresponding to the forty-nine days between Passover and *Shavuot*. Some have the custom to meditate upon the word in the psalm that matches one day of this period every evening after counting the 'Omer, so that one finishes the last verse on the night before *Shavu'ot*. This word is usually found underneath the count for each day in most prayer books. The fiftieth day,

corresponding to the Fiftieth Gate of *Binah* / Understanding, is *Shavu'ot*. There is no corresponding word for the "Fiftieth Gate" because it represents the transcendent level.

- The middle verse ("*Yismichu vi-ye-ranenu le-umim . . . Nations will rejoice and sing*") contains forty-nine letters, also corresponding to the forty-nine days of the 'Omer period. Some pause to meditate upon the appropriate letter from this verse, in addition to the corresponding word from the psalm, while reciting it after counting the 'Omer. Most prayer books indicate which letter to contemplate under the daily count, as well.

- There are a total of 216 letters in this psalm. This corresponds to the number of letters in the Great Name of Seventy-Two Words (which are actually triplets of letters), concealed in the three verses of Exodus 14:19-21.<sup>xi</sup> This Name plays a key role in the attainment of prophecy.<sup>xii</sup>

- The first letter of each of the seven verses form the acrostic *alef-lamed-yod, yod-yod-alef-yod*. This combination of letters also bears the numerical value of seventy-two, which corresponds to the Divine Name YHVH in the expansion known as 'AB:

$$\begin{aligned}
 yod &= yod (10)-vav (6)-dalet (4) = 20 \\
 heh &= heh (5)-yod (10) = 15 \\
 vav &= vav (6)-yod (10)-vav (6) = 22 \\
 heh &= heh (5)-yod (10) = 15 \\
 &Total = 72
 \end{aligned}$$

This Name is bound up with *Atzilut* / Emanation, the highest of the Four Worlds, and the *sefirah* of *Chokhmah*.

- The final letters of the three verses on the left side of the central shaft are *heh* (5), *khof* (20), *mem* (40). They total 65, which is the *gematria* of the Divine Name A-D-N-

Y, alluding to God's Kingship, and of the word "*heichal*," referring to the inner sanctum of the Holy Temple in which the golden Menorah was placed. Therefore, some diagrams include these words beside the Menorah.

- The middle verse begins with the letter *yod* and ends with the letter *heh*. Together, they spell the Divine Name Y-A-H, corresponding to the union of the *sefirot* of *Chokhmah* / Wisdom and *Binah* / Understanding. Archetypally, *yod* represents the masculine principle and *heh* represents the feminine principle. Thus, the Divine Name Y-A-H expresses the essential harmony of the universe in its supernal root.

- If one adds up the sum of the final letters of the six branches to the right and left of the Menorah (201), plus the *yod-heh* (15) of the central shaft, the result is 216. This corresponds to the 216 letters of the Great Name of Seventy-Two Words and the 216 letters of this psalm, as mentioned above. Thus, the middle verse contains in miniature the entire psalm.

- *Gevurah* / Might also has the *gematria* of 216. As we have stated, the acrostic formed by the initial letters of the seven verses bear the *gematria* of 72. This is the *gematria* of *Chesed* / Loving-kindness. Therefore, the Menorah reflects the balance of these two opposite forces.

Ana bi-Ko'ach / We Implore You

Prayer of Rabbi Nechunia ben ha-Kana with encrypted Divine Names.

אב"ג ית"ץ  
קר"ע שפ"ן  
ע"ד יכ"ש  
בס"ר צת"ג  
חק"ב פנ"ע  
יג"ל פו"ק  
שק"ו צי"ח

אָנָּא, בְּכַח גְּדֻלַּת יְמִינְךָ, תַּתִּיר צְרוּרָה.  
קִבֵּל רַחֲמֵי עֲפֻךְ, שְׁנַבְנוּ, טַהַרְנוּ, נוֹרָא.  
נָא גְבוּר, הוֹרְשֵׁי יְחוּדְךָ, כְּבִבְתַּת שְׁמֵרָם.  
בְּרַכֵּם, טַהַרְם, רַחֲמֵי צְדָקָתְךָ, תְּמִיד גְּמֻלָּם.  
תְּסִין קְרוֹשׁ, בְּרוּב טוֹבְךָ, נְהַל עֲדָתְךָ.  
יְחִיד, גְּאֵה, לְעַפְךָ פְּנֵה, זוֹכְרֵי קְדוּשָׁתְךָ.  
שׁוֹעֲתָנוּ קִבֵּל, וּשְׁמַע צַעֲקוֹתָנוּ, יוֹדַע תַּעֲלָמוֹת.  
בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלָכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

**Ana bi-Ko'ach / We Implore You**

*English translation with corresponding sefirot*

We implore: by the power of Your right hand, release the captive. (*Chesed*)

Accept the prayer of Your people; strengthen us, purify us, O Awesome One.

(*Gevurah*)

We beseech, O Mighty One: guard as the apple of Your eye those who seek Your Oneness. (*Tiferet*)

Bless them, cleanse them, bestow upon them forever Your merciful righteousness.

(*Netzach*)

Powerful Holy One, in Your abounding goodness guide your congregation. (*Hod*)

Uniquely Exalted One, turn to Your people who are mindful of Your holiness. (*Yesod*)

Accept our supplication and hear our cry, You Who knows secret thoughts. (*Malkhut*)

*Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever.*<sup>1</sup>

This declaration is not part of the prayer, but is included an expression of respect for God's Name, even in encrypted form

Although less common, the *Ana Bi-Ko'ach* prayer is sometimes arranged in the form of a Menorah and placed before the prayer leader's stand in the synagogue. (Such a design may be found in Congregation Netzach Yisrael, the synagogue of the Bostoner Rebbe of New York.) Since it, too, represents the seven lower *sefirot*, the *Ana bi-Ko'ach* prayer and the Forty-Two Letter Divine Name that it conceals may be understood as corresponding to the seven branches of the Menorah. The kabbalists relate the Forty-Two Letter Name to the mystery of creation. Thus, contemplating it puts one in touch with the very "genetic code" of the universe.

*Kavanot* / intentions such as these are not meant as substitutes for other forms of meditation and contemplation, which include *yichudim* (unifications), and various practices that are called *hitbodedut* (seclusion), or *hitbonenut* (contemplation). Nevertheless, *kavanot* infuse an additional dimension of meaning into *mitzvot* and other religious practices. In this manner, the three aspects of thought, speech, and action combine to form a complete vessel, fit to receive and transmit light.

However, Rabbi Nachman cautioned that the most important *kavanah* is sincerity. I once attended a lecture on the counting of the 'Omer given by the Moroccan kabbalist, Chakham Nisim Peretz. When after the evening prayer the Chakham recited the blessing for counting the 'Omer, he closed his eyes and quietly sang a melody without words while visualizing the appropriate combination of Divine Names, as specified by Rabbi Chaim Vital in the *Sha'ar ha-Kavanot* (Gate of Meditations). His singing was contemplative, but full of heart, full of simple devotion. For Chakham Peretz, there was nothing mechanical about the *kavanot*!

One of the qualities that Rabbi Nachman praised to the heights is *temimut* – simplicity. The cultivation (or preservation) of *temimut* pervades the Rebbe's works, but one of the best examples is found in his "Tale of the Simpleton and the Sophisticate." Even after the Simpleton has been catapulted from the status of an impoverished shoemaker who makes crooked shoes to that of a royal minister esteemed by both the King and the populace, he remains the same unselfconscious, straightforward fellow. Like the Menorah, he is "made of one piece." This suggests that like the hero of the Rebbe's story, whatever our learning or other

accomplishments, we must never let go of our innate simplicity. This applies to all areas of our lives, including spiritual practice.

After having presented this rather involved meditation, we must remind the reader that Rabbi Nachman was extremely cautionary about using kabbalistic *kavanot*.<sup>xiii</sup> Not everyone is capable of engaging in the *kavanot*, nor is everyone meant to do so. Whatever our level of knowledge and spiritual development, whether we are kabbalists or "plain Jews," we should carry out our devotions with awareness of what we are saying and doing, binding concentration of the heart to our words and actions.<sup>xiv</sup> This is the simple and true way to connect to God.

---

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For example, the popular Sefardic *Siddur Tefilat Yesharim* arranged by Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad presents this Menorah facing the "Baruch she-amar" prayer. Among the editions of the *Siddur ha-ARI*, in the 1972 reprint of the *Siddur Kol Ya'akov* (Slavita 1804) it appears immediately following the Author's Introduction, while in the 18th century ms. *Siddur ha-ARI* of Rabbi Avraham Shimshon of Rashkov (facsimile ed. Bnei Brak 1995), it follows the passage of *Ketoret*. It is also discussed in Rabbi Eliezer of Vermisa, *Sefer Yiras E-I*; Rabbi Shlomo Luria, *Menorat Zahav Tahor*; Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta and Medzhibuzh, *Seder Ketoret*, 5b, et al. A kabbalistic explanation of Psalm 67 in the form of the Menorah was written by Chasidic master Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Stretin, *Sefer Kan Tzippor*. The Menorah is often combined with the Divine Name YHVH and placed above the reader's stand in the synagogue as a reminder to keep one's thoughts focused on God. This is known as a "Sheviti," short for the verse, "Sheviti Hashem le-negdi tamid . . . I have placed God before me constantly" (Psalms 16:8).

<sup>ii</sup> Some are accustomed to silently meditate upon Psalm 67 in the form of the Menorah prior to departing on a journey, and subsequently to recite the psalm seven times while traveling in order to invoke heavenly protection and success; see the recent edition of *Sha'arei Zion* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, n.d., reprint of Premysl ed. with additions) by sixteenth century kabbalist Rabbi Natan Nat'a Ashkenazi (Hanover), p. 416. The editor of *Sha'arei Zion* cites this custom in the name of Rabbi Elijah Hakohen of Izmir, *Shevet Mussar*, chap. 31, and *Sefer Pitchei 'Olam*, 16; also see Rabbi Ya'akov Chaim Sofer, *Kaf ha-Chaim*, 36, and Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (CHIDA), *Sefer Kaf Achat*, 26. CHIDA mentions the custom of reciting the Psalm 67 Menorah handwritten on parchment following the *Amidah* prayer. My teacher, Rabbi El'azar Mordechai Kenig, once told me that it is beneficial to read both the Psalm 67 Menorah and "Ana bi-Ko'ach" at some point during each meal, in order to facilitate the elevation of the "holy sparks" in the food. This was the custom of his father, Rabbi Gedaliah Aharon Kenig, of blessed memory.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik Halevy of Zorowitz, *Yesod Yitzchak al Hilchot Milah* (Pshemyshl: 1910), 35b. The author mentions that it is customary for the *mohel* to recite Psalm 67 in order to spiritually prepare himself before performing the mitzvah of circumcision. He also cites a kabbalistic tradition that reciting this psalm hastens the Redemption.

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Eliezer of Vermisa ("Ba'al ha-Roke'ach"), *Sefer Yirat E-I*, as cited in "Sod Lamenatze'ach bi-Tzurat ha-Menorah" (Beis Stretin, 2001).

<sup>v</sup> *Likkutei Halakhot, Hil. Beheimah vi-Chayah Tehorah* 4:30.

<sup>vi</sup> TB *Berakhot* 26b; *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Tefillah* 1:5.

---

<sup>vii</sup> In support of this view, Rabbi Yitzchak Eisik of Stretin, idem, cites *Levushei Mikhlol* 18:56, adding that this is consistent with the view of the ARI that the Menorah in the Holy Temple was lit from left to right.

<sup>viii</sup> *Tikkunei Zohar, Hakdamah ("Patach Eliyahu")*.

<sup>ix</sup> Leviticus 23:15-16; also see *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Mitzvah 161. The detailed laws of counting the days of the 'Omer are found in *Shulchan 'Arukh, Orach Chaim* 489. There is a dispute among the *Rishonim* (medieval authorities) as to whether the mitzvah of counting the 'Omer in these times, when the Holy Temple is not standing, is of scriptural or rabbinic origin; see *Be'ur Halakhah, Orach Chaim* 489, s.v. *lispor ha-'omer*. The volume of an 'omer is roughly equivalent to two quarts.

<sup>x</sup> TB *Shabbat* 146a; *Zohar* I, 63b, 126b; *ibid.* II, 94a, 173b; *ibid.* III, 162b.

<sup>xi</sup> Rashi on TB *Sukkah* 45a, as well as *Tosefot*, ad loc. *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 13:3; Genesis Rabbah 44:22; Leviticus Rabbah 23:2; Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:8; *Bahir* 94, 107, 110; *Tosefot Yom Tov* discusses this Divine Name in his commentary on the Mishnah, *Sukkah* 4:45. For further study, see Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (Jason Aronson, 1995), pp. 93-106, 128-129, based on Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, *Chayei 'Olam Habah* (Barzani ed., Jerusalem 2001) pp. 42-51; Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, chap. 1, et passim.

<sup>xii</sup> See Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible* (Jason Aronson 1995), pp. 41, 76, 141.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Sichot ha-RaN* 75.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Likkutei MoHaRaN* I, 49; *Sichot ha-RaN* 66, 75; et al.

