

THE MENORAH PSALM

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PSALM 67

- 1 *For the Leader; with string music. A Psalm, a Song.*
- 2 *God be gracious unto us, and bless us; May He cause His face to shine towards us; Selah*
- 3 *That Thy way may be known upon earth, Thy salvation among all nations.*
- 4 *Let the peoples give thanks unto Thee, O God; Let the peoples give thanks unto Thee, all of them.*
- 5 *O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; For Thou wilt judge the peoples with equity, And lead the nations upon earth. Selah*
- 6 *Let the peoples give thanks unto Thee, O God; Let the peoples give thanks unto Thee, all of them.*
- 7 *The earth hath yielded her increase; May God, our own God, bless us.*
- 8 *May God bless us; And let all the ends of the earth fear Him.*

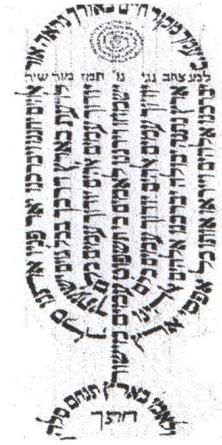
In the Judaica collection of the Israel Museum there are several objects which display as one of their decorative elements a representation of a seven-branched menorah with the text of Psalm 67 laid out along its stem and branches.¹ [See figure next page]. This is not unusual. Reproductions of the text of Psalm 67 in the form of a menorah were already popular in the 15th century and appear in prayer books and amulets of the 18th and 19th centuries.² The purpose of this paper will be to explore the connection between Psalm 67 and the menorah.³

The following is found in an early Hasidic work:

The Holy One blessed be He, revealed this Psalm [67] to King David engraved on a golden plate in the form of a menorah which was also shown to Moses. King David carried the Emblem of Psalm 67 in the form of a menorah on his Shield [*magen david*] into battle.⁴

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Gershom Scholem mentions that this tradition was already reported by Isaac Arama in 1470 and appeared in Prague in 1580 in a booklet called *The Golden Menorah*.⁵



I wish to suggest that Psalm 67 was associated with the menorah (indeed, sometimes called the Menorah Psalm) because of certain structural similarities and allusions between the textual layout of the Psalm and the shape of the menorah.⁶ Furthermore, the mystical power imputed to it is to be ascribed to the special interpretation given to this Psalm by the Zohar, the main work of the Kabbalah.

As we examine this Psalm we notice that, excluding the superscription, the composition consists of seven substantive verses corresponding to the seven branches of the menorah. Furthermore, the total number of Hebrew words in these seven verses adds up to 49. And Rashi on Exodus 25:35 states that the total number of decorative elements on the menorah as described in the Torah, its "bowls, knobs and flowers," total 42, and when we add the "seven" branches, we arrive at the number 49. More remarkable, however, is the fact that if one counts the number of words in each verse in their given sequence, we get the following symmetrical arrangement: 7, 6, 6, 11, 6, 6, 7. Now, if we take these numbers to represent units of length and we plot them out

along a menorah design, we see that the proportion is an almost perfect match (see Figure 1).

The arms of the menorah on either side are equal in length. The inside arms, being shorter, are six apiece, while the outside branch, being longer, is seven for each arm. The fourth or stem constituting the spine of the menorah is the longest, with the most words: eleven.

But is there anything in the text itself which might suggest a connection with the menorah? Perhaps a clue is to be found in the latter part of the opening verse . . . *may He cause His face to shine* [ya-air] *towards us* [itanu] (67:2). The Hebrew word *itanu* literally means "**with** us." This could mean that we are praying for the Divine Light to illuminate us, within, so that we ourselves might radiate that light outward. This very same thought is suggested by another verse in Psalms: *For Thou dost light my lamp* (Ps. 18:29). Man's "lamp" may be interpreted as those aspects of his personality which once sanctified by "contact" with God can radiate spiritual inspiration to others. This might be the meaning of *The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord* (Prov. 20:27). But is this not the very symbolism of the menorah; that man may serve God by radiating light and thus become *a lamp of the Lord*?

However, the source for the attribution of mystical power to this Psalm is, I believe, to be found in the interpretation given it in the Zohar in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rabbi Shimon bar-Yochai:

R. Eleazar meditated on the words of the Psalm: *God be merciful unto us* (Ps. 67). Said he: "King David rose and praised and thanked the Holy King. He was studying the Torah at the moment when the north wind rose and touched the strings of his harp, so that it made music. Now, what was the song of the harp? See now. When the Holy One moves towards the chariots and the hosts to give nourishment to all those supernal beings, all are filled with joy and song. They begin their hymning with the words: *God be Merciful unto us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us*. And the harp, when it is played upon by that wind, sings: *Let all peoples praise Thee, O God; let all the peoples praise Thee*. As for David, when he was awakened and the Holy Spirit moved him, he sang: *Then shall the earth yield her increase, and God, even our God, shall bless us; God shall bless us, and all the ends of the earth shall fear him*. This he sang so as to draw down the goodness of the Holy One from above to the earth below. Later David arranged all these songs into one Psalm, *The song of the harp* [Shir Haneginot]."⁷

I would suggest that what stimulated the Zohar to apply such an unusual interpretation to Psalm 67 was the anomalous nature of its superscription. Unlike most of the other Psalms, this one is presented anonymously, with no mention of its composer or the occasion which prompted its composition. Thus, with a bit of homiletic license, we could read the heading as saying not that this is "a Psalm, a song to be played **with** string music [*baneginot*]" but rather, as the Zohar concludes, David called it the song **of the** string-music [*shir ha'neginot*]; that is, it was actually sung by the **harp itself**.

The source for a "singing harp" was found by the Zohar in an aggadic treatment of the following verse in one of the Psalms of David.

At midnight I rise to give thanks unto Thee for Thy righteous ordinances (Ps. 119:62). "How did David know when it was midnight? A harp hung above his head and, when midnight approached, a north wind began to blow so that the harp began to play by itself. Immediately, David arose and studied Torah until dawn."⁸

And so the notion of a harp emitting music at the touch of the wind was already a part of the aggadic world of David. How natural, then, when confronted by the curious heading of Psalm 67, to make the connection and see here the words that accompanied the music of the mysterious harp: *by the string-music, a Psalm, a song* (67:1)

According to the Zohar, the seven verses of this Psalm represent the poetic expression of the interaction between four entities: The supernal beings, the north wind, the harp, and David, as they all respond to the approach of the Divine Presence. The supernal beings sing verse 2; the wind contributes verse 3, the harp, verse 4 and presumably verses 5 and 6, while David concludes with verses 7 and 8.

Since the Psalm is called the "song of the harp," special attention should be given to the verses attributed to the harp. These, it will be noticed, all call upon the nations and peoples of the world to give thanks to the Lord in joy. This, according to the Zohar, "signifies that when the heathen nations acknowledge the Holy One, His glory is consummated above and below."

It is now clear that the tradition reported above, that this Psalm was **revealed** to David and not composed by him in the usual manner and therefore not attributed to him, is based upon the Zohar. However, as we have seen, the text in the Zohar makes no mention of a menorah. From where, therefore, comes the idea that the Psalm "was revealed to David engraved **in the form**

of a menorah"? The answer lies in the words which follow: ". . . as was also shown to Moses." Here a connection was made with another aggada based on God's command to Moses to construct for the Tabernacle a menorah out of pure gold. After describing the form and dimensions, Moses is told: *'And see and make them after their pattern which is shown to you on the mountain'* (Ex. 25:40).

The rabbis comment: "This tells us that Moses had difficulty in constructing the menorah until the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him a menorah of fire."⁹ Evidently, Moses' problem was in visualizing the form of the menorah. Once we are aware of the structural similarities between Psalm 67 and the menorah and of the Divine tendency to instruct in terms of words, how appropriate then to conflate the two traditions and have God show Moses a proper design by revealing Psalm 67 laid-out in the shape of a menorah.

We have thus discovered another similarity between Psalm 67 and the shape of the menorah; both, according to independent sources, were Divinely revealed: Psalm 67 to David and the shape of the menorah to Moses. How natural to combine both traditions so that both Moses and David are thought of as seeing the same vision: the text of Psalm 67 formed in the shape of the menorah. Moses gains by learning a new and spiritually powerful Psalm. David gains by adopting the aesthetically-moving menorah design-bearing Psalm 67 as the emblem for his battle shield.

According to the Kabbalah, the Divine origins of this Psalm have permanently endowed its verses with exceptional powers. Having once been uttered by supernal beings in response to the proximity of the Divine Presence and by David in response to the Holy Spirit, these verses may continue to effect practical changes, if uttered with the proper thought and intent. We may, therefore, appreciate the special liturgical use to which Psalm 67 was put. In the Ashkenazic tradition, Psalm 67 (together with Psalm 144) is recited immediately before the evening [*ma'ariv*] prayers at the conclusion of the Sabbath. As he returns to the usually hostile workaday world, the Jew seeks assurance of the Divine Presence by invoking a sacred text that emanates from the supernal world.¹⁰ Also in art, the realm of the symbolic, when portraying the menorah on the Holy Ark or on amulets, there is a desire to enhance its mystical power by arming it with Psalm 67.

It is in the deepest sense of the transactional and dynamic nature of the Divine-human encounter that we can best understand the connection between

Psalm 67 and the menorah. From the very beginning, the rabbis, in studying the menorah, were struck by the strange spectacle of man serving God by the lighting of lamps in the presence of the Divine who is the source of all light.¹¹ But here again they soon perceived the reciprocal nature of man responding to God Who responds to man. Man prepares the wick and the oil but God supplies the fire. Yet, to keep the light aglow, man must tend the wick and constantly replenish the oil.

The harp sings because it is vibrated by the wind, which moves in response to the presence of God. And when the religious soul hears the ethereal music of the spheres, it joins in the singing and, out of its own experience, composes a "new song" of gratitude and adoration, so that man himself becomes a "lamp of the Lord" radiating light and kindness and driving away ignorance and selfishness. "And this draws the goodness of the Holy One to the earth below."¹²

NOTES

1. See, for example, the picture in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 5, p. 1035, figure 4.
2. See I. Shachar, "The Jewish Tradition in Art," *Israel Museum Journal*, October, 1991, pp. 246, 272.
3. It is reported that in a 14th-century Kabbalistic manuscript (Vatican Mss. No. 214), Psalm 67 is said to signify the menorah, although we are not told why. See Ephraim Gottlieb, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 11, p. 1368.
4. Meyer Blumenfeld, *Sha'ar Hamelech - the Gate of the King*, Vol. III, p. 130 (New York: Artscroll, 1976) Hebrew.
5. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971) pp. 268-270.
6. See M. Ben Uri, "The Menorah of Exodus 25" in *Beth Mikra*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (July-September 1973). Indeed, it is claimed that already in the Pentateuch, in those passages which contain a description of an object in terms of design or dimensions a correspondence can be found between the number and formation of verses and words in the text and the features of the object that is being described. Thus, it is pointed out that in Exodus 25, the command to construct the seven-branched menorah is given in seven verses, the word "menorah" appears seven times in these seven verses, the word *sheva* [seven] appears in the seventh verse, and the fourth or middle verse (Ex. 25:34) is precisely the text that describes the middle or central stem of the menorah.
7. *Zohar*, vol. III; Exodus: Jethro, p. 211 translation (London: Soncino, 1933).
8. Berachot 3b
9. Rashi on Exodus 25:40.
10. In the tradition of the *Edot haMizrah* (Sefardim), Psalm 67 is recited immediately after the *amida* prayer of the daily Afternoon [*mincha*] service. Sometimes, the Psalm is accompanied by a picture of the words of the Psalm embedded in the arms of the menorah with the suggestion that the Psalm be read off the picture! (See: Siddur *Mincha Ve'arvit le Sfarim*, pp. 57, 58).
11. See Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 15:4.

12. Near some representations of the Menorah Psalm (as in the doors of the Krakow Synagogue now in the Israel Museum) you may find the following individual letters: ה,כ,מ,ה,מ,ל,צ. A hermeneutical kabbalistic explanation has been offered using the numerical equivalence of the letters. These letters are the terminal ones of each Hebrew verse in Psalm 67 starting from the end. Grouping them as follows, we discern a message: צומ = 136 = קול = "the voice of"; 'ה = traditionally stands for the name of God [Hashem] in as much as it constitutes two of the four lettered name of God; מכה = 65 = אדני = "my Lord". Putting it all together we get: "The voice of Hashem my Lord" which for some people confirms the intrinsic mystical power of the Psalm.