

טעמו וראו

A taste of the
Rebbe's teachings

Parshat Tetzaveh

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Archaeology vs. Tradition

The Jewish people have traditions dating back thousands of years which outline the specific form and format of our traditions.

What if archeologists find contradictory evidence? Do we change our rituals or do we not?

Dedicated in honor of
our dear children and grandson

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A. The Headplate In Rome

Source 1 Exodus 28:36-38

You shall make a headplate of pure gold, and you shall engrave upon it, engraved like a signet ring, “Sacred to G-d.” You shall place it on a cord of turquoise wool, and it shall be next to the turban. It should be worn right near the front of the turban. It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and he shall bring forgiveness for errors in the sacred offerings that the children of Israel consecrate as holy gifts. It shall be always on his forehead to bring them favor before G-d.

וְעָשִׂיתָ צִיץ זָהָב טָהוֹר וּפְתַחְתָּ עָלָיו פְּתוּחֵי חֹתֶם קֹדֶשׁ לַה'. וְשָׂמֶתָ אֹתוֹ עַל פְּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת וְהָיָה עַל הַמְצַנְפֹת אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְצַנְפֹת יְהִיָּה. וְהָיָה עַל מִצַּח אֶהְרֹן וְנִשָּׂא אֶהְרֹן אֶת עוֹן הַקֹּדָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יִקְדִּישׁוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכָל מִתְנַת קֹדְשֵׁיהֶם וְהָיָה עַל מִצְחוֹ תָּמִיד לְרַצוֹן לָהֶם לְפָנַי ה'.

Source 2 Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 63b

It was taught: The headplate is like a smooth plate of gold; its width is two fingerbreadths, and it circles the forehead from ear to ear. It reads “Sacred to G-d” in two lines: Yud hey, G-d’s name, on the upper line, and kodesh lamed, “sacred to—” on the second, in deference to G-d’s name.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Yosi said: I saw it in Rome and it had “Sacred to G-d” written on one line.

וְהִתְנַיָּא: צִיץ כְּמִין טַס שֶׁל זָהָב, וְרוּחָב שְׁתֵּי אַצְבָּעוֹת, וּמוֹקֵף מֵאוֹזֵן לְאוֹזֵן, וְכָתוּב עָלָיו בְּשֵׁיטִין: “יוד הא” לְמַעַלָּה, וְ”קודש לָמֵד” לְמַטָּה.

וְאָמַר רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בְּרַבִּי יוֹסִי: אֲנִי רָאִיתִיו בְּרוּמֵי וְכָתוּב עָלָיו “קֹדֶשׁ לַה” בְּשֵׁיטָה אַחַת.



G-d
First Opinion: Sacred to

Rabbi Eliezer: Sacred to G-d



Source 3 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Temple Vessels 9:1

How is the headplate made? We make a plate of gold two fingerbreadths wide that extends over the forehead from one ear to the other, and upon it we write, “Sacred to G-d” in two lines: “Sacred to—” on the lower line and “G-d” on the upper one.

כיצד מעשה הציץ. עושה טס של
זָהָב רָחֵב רְחֵב שְׁתֵּי אֶצְבָּעוֹת וּמְקִיף מְאִזָּן
לְאִזָּן וְכוֹתֵב עָלָיו שְׁנֵי שִׁטִּין קֹדֶשׁ
לְה' קֹדֶשׁ מִלְמַטָּה לְה' מִלְמַעְלָה.

Source 4 Meiri, Beit Habechira on Tractate Shabbat 63b

Although one of the greatest sages testified that he saw it in Rome written with one line, the sages did not change their opinion, even in the face of eyewitness testimony.

ואף על פי שמגדולי החכמים העידו
אני ראיתיו ברומי וכתוב עליו קודש
לה' בשיטה אחת, לא הכחישו את
הידוע אצלם אף בעדות ראיה.

>> The Rebbe

Tradition Outweighs Testimony

This week's Torah portion states, "You shall make a headplate of pure gold, and you shall engrave upon it, engraved like a signet ring, 'Sacred to G-d.'"

The Talmud records a discussion about how the words "Sacred to G-d" were written.

"The headplate is like a plate of gold...and it contains two lines: The first line has G-d's name, and the second line read, 'Sacred to—'". (Rashi explains that G-d's name was placed on the upper line and the words "Sacred to" on the lower line so that no word would be placed above G-d's name). "Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Yosi said: I saw it in Rome and it had 'Sacred to G-d' written on one line."

Maimonides writes:

"Upon it we write 'Sacred to G-d' in two lines: 'Sacred to—' on the lower line and 'G-d' on the upper one. If the words were written on one line it was valid. There were times when they were written on one line."

The Me'iri writes: "Although one of the greatest sages testified that he saw it in Rome written with one line, the sages did not change their opinion, even in the face of eyewitness testimony."

In this debate about the writing on the headplate, we see something fascinating. Despite the testimony of Rabbi Eliezer, "I saw it in Rome, and 'Sacred to G-d' was written in one line," Maimonides rules according to the first opinion, that it should be written in two lines.

From the words of the Talmud itself, if we were to disregard the words of Maimonides, there would be room to believe that the sages changed their mind after Rabbi Eliezer's testimony, in light of the firsthand evidence that it had been written in one line. But Maimonides chose to follow their initial ruling, which demonstrates that they did not change their opinion after Rabbi Eliezer's testimony, and remained convinced that it is to be written with two lines.

This is also confirmed by the Me'iri, who wrote that “the sages did not change their opinion, even in the face of eyewitness testimony.”

The reason the sages rejected the evidence is because they had a tradition, passed down through the generations that “Sacred to G-d” was written in two lines. They were not swayed by the fact that an eyewitness, a prominent rabbi, claimed to have seen a headplate in Rome with one line, because it was likely not the headplate of the High Priest at all (as we will explain). They were certain, based on their tradition, that the High Priest’s headplate was written in two lines.

In other words: In the absence of a clear tradition about the style of the headplate, there would be room to accept eyewitness evidence to determine how it was written. But if our tradition tells us that “Sacred to G-d” was written in two lines, there is no room to reject it based on the testimony of an eyewitness; clearly, he did not see the headplate described in the Torah but rather a different headplate entirely. However, Rabbi Eliezer himself believed that it was written in one line, because he had not heard the above-mentioned tradition from his teachers.

The possibility that Rabbi Eliezer saw a different headplate is highly plausible. Being a golden adornment, it is very likely that other people fashioned similar ones as personal jewelry (that wouldn't transgress the prohibition to create a replica of the Temple); perhaps they wrote “Sacred to G-d” on one line, unlike the headplate of the Temple. It is also possible that even non-Jews fashioned headplates for their own deities [non-Jews valued the Temple and its vessels as well, as evident from the fact that Achashverosh himself made use of them at his feast], and why would anyone tell them how to fashion it?

B. The Menorah of Titus

Source 5 Exodus 25:31-32

Make a candelabra out of pure gold. It shall be formed by hammering it. Its base, stem, and decorative cups, spheres and flowers must be hammered out of a single piece of gold. Six branches extending from its sides, three branches on one side of the menorah and three branches on the other side.

וְעָשִׂיתָ מְנֹרֶת זָהָב טָהוֹר
מִקָּשָׁה תַעֲשֶׂה הַמְּנוֹרָה
יֶרֶכָה וְקִנָּה גְבִיעֵיהָ כְּפִתְרֵיהָ
וּפְרָחֶיהָ מִמָּנָה יִהְיוּ. וְשָׁשָׁה
קָנִים יֵצְאִים מִצְדֵיָהּ שְׁלֹשָׁה
קָנֵי מְנֹרָה מִצְדָּהּ הָאֶחָד
וְשְׁלֹשָׁה קָנֵי מְנֹרָה מִצְדָּהּ
הַשֵּׁנִי.

Rashi

Extending from its sides in each direction diagonally, spreading upwards until the full height of the candelabra, i.e. its center branch. They extend outward from the center branch, one above the other; the bottom one is the longest, the one above it is shorter and the top one is even shorter, because they match the height of the middle branch, the seventh, from which the six branches extended.

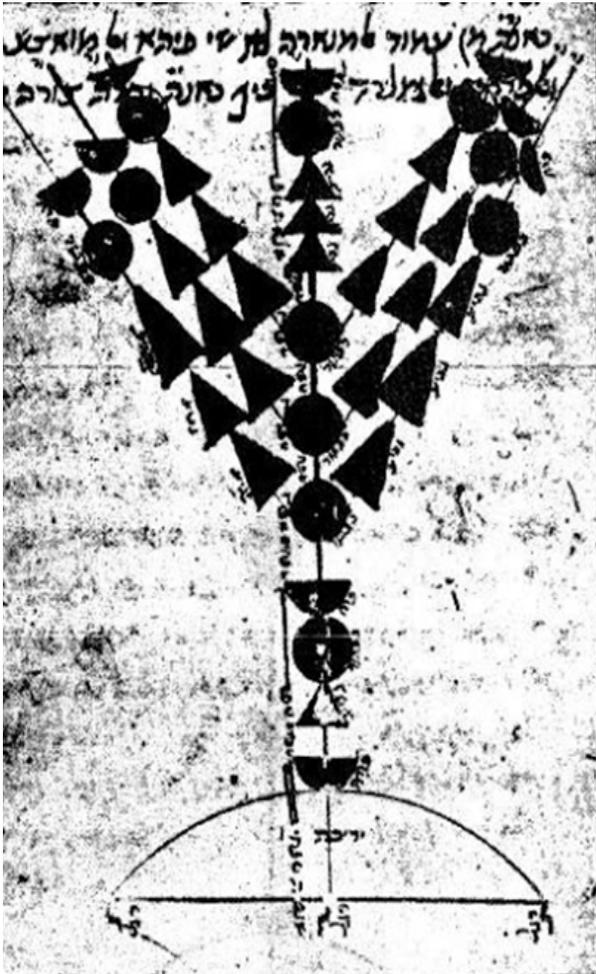
רש"י על הפסוק

יֵצְאִים מִצְדֵיָהּ. לְכָאן וּלְכָאן
בְּאֵלְכֶסֶסוֹ, נִמְשָׁכִים וְעוֹלִיזֵי עַד
כְּנֶגֶד גְּבוּהַּ שֶׁל מְנוֹרָה שֶׁהוּא
קָנָה הָאֶמְצָעִי, וְיוֹצְאִין מִתּוֹךְ
קָנָה הָאֶמְצָעִי זֶה לְמַעַלָּה
מִזֶּה, הַתַּחְתּוֹן אֶרֶךְ, וְשֶׁל
מַעַלָּה קָצֵר הַיְמָנִי, וְהַעֲלִיּוֹן
קָצֵר הַיְמָנִי, לְפִי שֶׁהֵיָה גְבוּהַ
רְאִישֵׁיהֶן שׁוֹה לְגְבוּהוֹ שֶׁל קָנָה
הָאֶמְצָעִי, הַשְּׁבִיעִי, שֶׁמִּמֶּנּוּ
יוֹצְאִים הַשְּׁשָׁה קָנִים

Source 6 Rabbi Avraham, the son of Maimonides

Six branches: They were six branches extending from the body of the menorah in a straight line, as my father depicted them, not in a half-circle as others maintain.

שֵׁשׁ קָנִים: הַקָּנִים כִּמוֹ עֲנָפִים
נִמְשָׁכִים מְגוּפָה שֶׁל מְנוֹרָה לְצַד
רְאִשָׁה בְיוֹשֵׁר, כִּמוֹ שֶׁצִּייר אוֹתָהּ
אבֵּא מֵרִי ז"ל, לֹא בְעֵיגוּל כִּמוֹ
שֶׁצִּייר אוֹתָהּ זוֹלָתוֹ.



Source 7 Talmud, Tractate Menachot 28b

Shmuel says in the name of a certain elder: The height of the menorah was eighteen handbreadths. The legs and the flowers were three handbreadths, and the next two handbreadths were bare.

אמר שמואל משמיה דסבא
גובהה של מנורה שמנה עשר
טפחים הרגלים והפרח ג'
טפחים וטפחיים חלק.

Source 8 Josippon, chapter 95

At this point, Joshua the son of High Priest Shabtai came to Titus, with two of the goldern menorahs that were in the Temple, with the golden tables that were in it as well...with the fine garments, the garments of the priesthood plated with gold and decorated with diamonds and precious stones, and he gave these all to Titus...

בעת ההיא, בא אל טיטוס יהושע
הכהן בן שבתאי הכהן הגדול,
ועמו שתי מנורות ממנורות הזהב
אשר היו במקדש, ועמו עוד כל
שלחנות הזהב אשר היו בו...
וגם בגדי השרד ובגדי הקודש
המצפים בזהב והמכותרים
ומעוטרים באבנים ויקרות, עם
רוב אבנים טובות, ויתן את כל
אלה לטיטוס...

>> The Rebbe

The Real Menorah Wasn't Round

Now, the words of the Me'iri (that eyewitnesses cannot override tradition) can apply to the features of the Menorah as well.

We've previously explained at length that the arms of the Menorah extended (not in a half circle but) in a straight, diagonal line, as evident from Maimonides' handwritten depiction. Maimonides' son too, Rabbi Avraham, notes that "six branches...extended from the body of the menorah upwards in a straight line, as my father depicted them, not in a half-circle as others maintain." Rashi concurs in his commentary on the Torah: he writes that the arms reached upwards diagonally, in a straight line.

This refutes those who say that the menorah had round arms, basing their opinion on the depiction on the Arch of Titus. They argue that the designer of the arch was an eyewitness who personally saw the menorah among the other vessels of the Temple brought to Rome. However, his depiction contradicts the writings of Maimonides and Rashi (who had received a tradition through the generations that the menorah's arms were straight). We obviously cannot rely on the arch more than on our own tradition. In the words of Me'iri, "The sages did not change their opinion, even in the face of eyewitness testimony."

This is especially true in light of the fact that many aspects of the menorah on the Arch of Titus contradict the descriptions in the Talmud (based on our tradition). For example, the Talmud clearly states that the menorah had legs, but the image on the Arch of Titus depicts no such thing.

Some have attempted to explain that being dragged around (from Jerusalem to Rome and during the victory procession itself) its legs fell off. That's indeed a nice explanation, but there are other differences as well, both in regard to the gold base of the menorah and with regard to the various illustrations (images of animals like a snake, the sun and moon, and so on) that are depicted on the menorah on the arch of Titus—which contradict the biblical command that forbids the engraving of celestial bodies.

Clearly, the image depicted on the Arch of Titus is not the menorah of the Temple, being that it contradicts our tradition. It is probably the depiction of a similar menorah. It is very likely that other individuals fashioned candelabras which somewhat resembled the Temple menorah, for purposes of decoration etc., but were obviously not identical to the menorah in every detail.

Proof of the matter (that there were many similar candelabras) can be brought from Josephus. To preface: Despite questions about Josephus's reliability (the Tzemach Tzedek does cite him, but that is not a confirmation of everything he writes), if he describes a situation with no apparent agenda in mind, we can consider it reliable.

Josephus describes how a priest brought Titus two golden menorahs.

Seemingly, the second Temple should have had only one! [King Solomon did fashion ten menorahs but they did not exist in the Second Temple] so clearly, the two menorahs brought to Titus were not the menorahs of the Temple but imitations.

There is also no reason to believe that they fooled Titus into believing that these were the Temple menorahs (because he too, was aware that the Jews were still conducting the Temple service which included the lighting of the menorah, so these were obviously not the Temple menorahs). This priest simply wanted to find favor in Titus' eyes, so he brought him beautiful and expensive candelabras that were imitations of the menorah in the Temple. As said—not to fool him into thinking that these were the menorahs of the Temple, but simply as an expensive bribe.

Returning to our discussion: Since we have a tradition about the shape of the Menorah (passed down by Maimonides and Rashi, who received it from their teachers), no eyewitness account can change that. In the words of Me'iri, "The sages did not change their opinion, even in the face of eyewitness testimony." If the arch contradicts our tradition, it is not the actual menorah of the Temple at all, rather a depiction of a different menorah.

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