

Tetzaveh: May we Put Up a Seven Branched Menorah In Shul? **by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh**

We are all familiar with the expression Mikdash Me-at applying to our shuls and batai midrashim. Jewish law is very clear about the respect and reverence that we are to feel for our holy places. The Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim in Chapter 151 codifies for us the ways we are to show this reverence for our holy places. One example is that we are not to be lightheaded in the shul or use it for shelter and shade. Being that these institutions are the closest things we have the Bais Hamikdash, the concept of reverence for the Bais Hamikdash is transferred to our shuls. However, in order that we not be misled into thinking the place that we daven is THE Bais Hamikdash, there are a number of laws that discuss how we may not fashion our shuls in a way that copies the Bais Hamikdash or any of its furnishings. One specific law, codified in the Rambam Hilchos Bais Habchirah 7:10 and Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 141:8, is that we may not make a metal menorah of seven branches like the menorah in the Bais Hamikdash. Actually, this law applies to a menorah anywhere but it is most often in Shuls we see these menorahs. So what exactly is the prohibition and is there a legitimate way to get around it?

One source for these laws is a discussion in the Gemara Rosh Hashana²⁴ about making anything that is in the form of what is in the heavens. The Torah states in Shemos 20, 'You shall not make with me' which is understood by our mesorah to mean we are not permitted to make anything that resembles any of Hashem's servants such as the sun moon, stars or angels. The Gemara concludes that the prohibition is specifically for anything that we can copy such as making a building similar to the Bais Hamikdash or to make furniture similar to any furnishing in the Bais Hamikdash. This is based on the fact that the heavenly Bais Hamikdash is placed directly on top on the site of the earthly one. So a seven branched menorah is one of the items which we may not copy.

Interestingly, the Rambam and the Minchas Chinuch indicate that making a seven branched menorah is an infraction of the positive command to have fear of the holy places [Vayikra 19:30 and 16:2]. Regardless of the specific violation, however, it is forbidden to make a seven branched menorah of gold or any metal.

Some later halachic authorities have given justification for our practice of placing even seven branched menorah shaped lamps in our shules. The Responsa of Rabbeinu Chaim Hacoen writes that if the menorah is hanging and not placed on a base, it is not like the menorah in the Bais Hamikdash which had a base. The Responsa of Sheilas Shalom permits making a menorah of seven branches provided they all come from one branch unlike the menorah of the Bais Hamikdash

which had one central branch and three branches coming out of each side. Some of the later authorities permit electric menorahs because an electric menorah has not receptacle for oil which makes it unlike the menorah of the Bais Hamikdash. [My Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"l did not hold to any of these leniencies and when asked, he would not allow a seven-branched Menorah in a shul.] Also other materials such as clay or stone present no violation. This is certainly true of a menorah in a picture or embroidered

We see from the above that there is a clear violation to make a seven branched menorah. Whether it is the prohibition of copying the heavenly Bais Hamikdash or simply having reverence for the holy places, we see that both the heavenly and earthly Bais Hamikdash have a special holiness that we may not even attempt to replicate. Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, Zt"l, points out in one of his talks on Parshas Terumah that it is so important for us to realize this holiness of Hashem's house. Yet, how does this reconcile with our belief that Hashem is everywhere? He quotes the Even Ezra who explains this issue with the following parable. When we observe something, it is really our sensory organs such as eyes and ears that perceive it more than the rest of our bodies. Because these organs are more open and discerning they are more aware of the surroundings. But our entire bodies are still affected in one way or another. While Hashem's glory and holiness is everywhere, our earthiness prevents us from realizing it fully. There were select times in history such as at the parting of the Yam Suf that we all lost our earthliness and reached a level of prophecy like Yechezkel. Times such as those, however, were the exception to our human state. On the other hand, in a place such as the Bais Hamikdash the earthiness is always removed. Therefore, Hashem's, holiness is brought into the world in a more revealed way. Rav Yechezkel concludes from this that while we always have to watch our behavior, we have to be so much more careful of our behavior in shul or a bais midrash, quoting Chazal about how one's behavior in the a king's palace is always different from when one is in private. I would like to humbly add that even as we are in shul and davening, while it is true that we are more so in the 'king's throne room', nevertheless, we should not be totally carried away and think that that the shul is the highest level of holiness reachable. As stated above, the fact that we cannot design a shul and its furnishings to copy the Bais Hamikdash should remind us that we still have to yearn for more. Perhaps when we daven and hopefully are having a very hallowed and uplifting experience communicating with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, we should also be aware that we are truly yearning for the ultimate 'house of prayer.' So when we come to passages asking Hashem to rebuild the Bais Hamikdash, we should keep in mind that we want our davening experience to uplift us so that all of the Jewish people can be reunited and davening in the third Bais Hamikdash where his glory and holiness will be revealed to the entire world. May it be rebuilt speedily in our time. Amen.