

Who will Build the Menorah of Mashiach?

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עלו ההר והבאתם עץ ובנו הבית וארצה בו ואכבד אמר ד'
*Ascend the mountain, take wood and build the house,
and I will desire it and be honored by it; so G-d has spoken.*⁴¹

Zecharyah's cryptic vision

Our prophets were often couriers conveying Divine instructions, but they also played a broader role. From the days of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam, through the first generations of the second Beit HaMikdash, these great men and women heartened the despondent, engaged the disengaged, and rallied the scattered. In the final era of biblical prophecy, Ezra, Nechemiah, Chaggai, Zecharyah and Malachi were charged with inspiring a ragtag group of 42,000 refugees to restore Jewish community, re-establish a Jewish commonwealth, and rebuild the Beit HaMikdash.

Each Divine messenger played a unique part in this mission, and it was Zecharyah's role to be a seer of visions. Whether because of a decline in the level of prophecy⁴² or because of an opacity inherent in the distant events he foresaw,⁴³ the bulk of Zecharyah's canonized chapters consists of fertile images but sparse explanation. One of the best-known of these images is his vision in the third and fourth chapters of his *sefer*, part of which serves as our *haftorah* for the first Shabbat of Chanukah. The message was calibrated for the needs of Zecharyah's generation – but the sentiment it conveys is most relevant for our own day, as well:

Listen, Yehoshua, the High Priest: You and your colleagues who sit before you, men of wonders, for I will bring My servant, Tzemach. The stone I have placed before Yehoshua, there are seven eyes on the one stone. I will engrave its engraving - this is the word of G-d, Lord of multitudes - and I will remove the sin of that land in one day...

And he [a malach] said to me: What do you see? And I said: I have seen a menorah formed entirely of gold, with its bowl on its head and seven lamps upon it, seven and seven

שמע נא יהושע הכהן הגדול אתה ורעיך
הישבים לפניך כי אנשי מופת המה כי
הנני מביא את עבדי צמח: כי הנה האבן
אשר נתתי לפני יהושע על אבן אחת
שבעה עינים הנני מפתח פתחה נאם ד'
צבקות ומשתי את עון הארץ ההיא ביום
אחד:....
ויאמר אלי מה אתה ראה ו[י]אמר ראיתי
והנה מגורת זהב כלה וגלה על ראשה

⁴¹ Chaggai 1:8

⁴² Moreh haNevuchim 2:44; Ibn Ezra's introduction to Zecharyah

⁴³ Abarbanel to Zecharyah 1:8

channels to the lamps upon its head, and two olive trees upon it, one on the right of the bowl and one on its left...

And I declared and said to him: What are these two olive trees, to the right and left of the menorah? And I declared a second time, saying: What are the two olive branches beside the two spouts of gold, which empty the gold [i.e. oil] from themselves? ... And he said to me: These are the two sons of the oil who stand upon [i.e. to serve] the Master of the entire world.

Zechariah 3:8-9, 4:2-3, 4:11-14

ושבעה נרתיה עליה שבעה ושבעה
מוצקות לנרות אשר על ראשה: ושנים
זיתים עליה אחד מימין הגלה ואחד על
שמאלה: ...
ואען ואמר אליו מה שני הזיתים האלה
על ימין המנורה ועל שמאלה: ואען שנית
ואמר אליו מה שתי שבלי הזיתים אשר
ביד שני צנתרות הזהב המריקים מעליהם
הזהב: ... ויאמר אלה שני בני היצהר
העומדים על אדון כל הארץ:
זכריה ג:ח-ט, ד:ב-ג, ד:יא-יד

This vision begs an explanation. Who is Tzemach? What is the symbolism in a seven-eyed stone? What is the message of a menorah which is fed not by reservoirs atop its branches but by independent olive trees?

Zechariah's message: The future is in your hands

The answers to our first two questions depend upon which era Zechariah was addressing – his own day, or an ultimate messianic time. "Tzemach", meaning *growth*, refers to a leader whom G-d will aid and enlarge; this may refer to Zerubavel,⁴⁴ the Jewish political leader of Zechariah's day, or to a later Mashiach.⁴⁵ Similarly, the seven eyes refer to sevenfold growth of the glory of the second Beit HaMikdash⁴⁶ or of the third.⁴⁷

The olive trees which feed the menorah add a third dimension atop the growth and glory represented by Tzemach and the seven eyes. These trees represent our human contribution to that envisioned future.

Per Rashi,⁴⁸ these olive trees represent our righteousness, which generates the radiance of the second or third Beit haMikdash:

The two sons of the olive are the good nature, and the evil nature converted to good in the merit of Torah.

Rashi, Zechariah 4:14

שני בני היצהר. יצר טוב ויצר הרע מתהפך
לטוב בזכות התורה.
רש"י, זכריה ד:יד

Alternatively, the sages suggest that these trees which feed the menorah in tandem represent the joint and cooperative leadership of our kohanim and kings, again generating the radiance of the second or third Beit haMikdash:

'These are the two anointed ones that stand by the Master of the whole earth' - This refers to Aharon and Mashiach.

Avot d'Rabbi Natan 33

אלה שני בני היצהר העומדים על אדון
כל הארץ זה אהרן ומשיח
אבות דרבי נתן לג

⁴⁴ Rashi to Zechariah 3:8

⁴⁵ Abarbanel to Zechariah 3:8

⁴⁶ Rashi to Zechariah 3:9, and see Radak to 3:9 in the name of his father

⁴⁷ Abarbanel to Zechariah 3:9

⁴⁸ Perhaps building on Mishnah *Berachot* 9:5. Rashi's view of the timeline for the future of the yetzer hara as described in *Succah* 52a is unclear.

Whether one adopts the former explanation or the latter, Zechariah's menorah conveys a potent message: If you wish to achieve the growth of Tzemach and the glory of the seven-eyed stone, you must be the ones to fuel the menorah.⁴⁹

Is Zechariah speaking to us?

This message of a human-engineered redemption has been at the heart of much debate throughout Zionism's modern renaissance. Is Zechariah's summons addressed to us? Alternatively, are we meant to wait, as may be inferred from other prophetic passages?⁵⁰

Long before the rise of modern Zionism, though, this was a matter of debate. Rashi claimed that the third Beit HaMikdash would descend from Heaven:

The future Beit HaMikdash, which we anticipate, will be revealed and arrive from Heaven already built and perfected, as it is written, 'The Mikdash, G-d, Your hands established.'

Rashi Succah 41a s.v. Iy Nami

מקדש העתיד שאנו מצפין בנוי ומשוכלל
הוא יגלה ויבא משמים, שנאמר מקדש ד'
כווננו ידך.
רש"י מס' סוכה מא. ד"ה אי נמי

On the other hand, a passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi seemed to say that the Beit HaMikdash would be built even before Mashiach could arrive:

R' Acha said: This teaches that the Temple will be built before the throne of the house of David.

Talmud Yerushalmi Maaser Sheni 5:2

אמר רבי אחא זאת אומרת שבית המקדש עתיד
להיבנות קודם למלכות בית דוד
ירושלמי מעשר שני ה:ב

Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukaczinsky suggested a compromise view, which retains the drive for human action ordered by Zechariah's menorah while still honoring Rashi's vision:

Logically, the Temple will be built by human beings. Certainly, if the construction will precede the appearance of Davidic kings then it will be built by human beings. But even should we merit, speedily in our days, the appearance of a reigning king before construction of the Temple, it would still be logical for the Temple to be built by human hands, for the mitzvah of 'And build a house for Me' is fulfilled only if the Jews build it. Granted that Rashi and Tosafot wrote that in the future it will be built by Heaven... still, the initial action and construction will be via human beings, as Moshe initiated the erection of the mishkan when he stepped forward to put it up, and then it was erected as though on its own. The Tiferet Yisrael said further that Rashi and Tosafot meant that G-d would help, in a miraculous manner...

Ir haKodesh v'HaMikdash 5:1:4

מסתבר שעכ"פ יבנה ביהמ"ק ע"י בני
אדם. לא מיבעיא אם בנין ביהמ"ק יהי
קודם הופעת מלכי בית דוד שודאי יבנה
ע"י בני אדם, אלא אפ"ל לכשנזכה בב"א
להופעת מלך המשיל קודם בנין הבית
מסתבר ג"כ שיבנה בידי אדם דמצות
"ובנית לי בית" מתקיימת רק אם בני
ישראל בונים אותו. הגם שכתבו רש"י
ותוס' דלעתיד לבוא יבנה בידי שמים...
עכ"פ הגישה ותחלת הבנין תהא ע"י פעולת
האדם על דרך הקמת המשכן בידי מרע"ה
שהוא נגש להקים את המשכן והוקם כמו
מאליו. והתפארת ישראל בריש מס' מדות
אומר עוד יותר שכוונת רש"י ותוס' היא
שהקב"ה יסייעם בדרך נס...
עיר הקדש והמקדש ה:א:ד

⁴⁹ The menorah is a particularly worthy emblem of our contribution to the relationship between G-d and the Jews; consider *Shabbat 22b*, in which HaShem chose a menorah, fueled and kindled by human beings, as demonstration of His relationship with us.

⁵⁰ See *Yirmiyah 27:22*, *Ketuvot 111a* and *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:12*

In effect, if not in origin, the debate regarding the construction of the third Beit HaMikdash is identical to the debate regarding Zechariah's target audience. Perhaps the prophet was speaking to the Jews of his day, but our generation is not intended to provide this light on its own. On the other hand, perhaps Zechariah was speaking to us, and we are meant to fulfill this mission ourselves.

The answer of Chaggai and the Chashmonaim

In our prophetless era, we cannot resolve the question of Zechariah's intent on its most practical level; his words alone cannot justify storming Har HaBayit with spade and plumb line in hand. However, we may still apply the prophet's fundamental message, the importance of human initiative, in fulfilling other missions assigned to us by prophets long ago. Learning, teaching, giving, joining hands with other Jews, are eternal assignments which need not wait for a Zechariah.

We receive similar inspiration from a contemporary of Zechariah, the prophet Chaggai. Addressing the impoverished Jews of his and Zechariah's time, who had despaired of being able to build a glorious Beit HaMikdash, he instructed,⁵¹ "Ascend the mountain, take wood and build the house, and I will desire it and be honored by it; so G-d has spoken." Rather than worry about their sufficiency, they should build.

A later generation of leaders implemented Zechariah and Chaggai's endorsements of human initiative in their own circumstances. The Chashmonaim lacked great wealth, but they re-built their menorah with the materials they could muster:

It was made of iron spits, covered with tin. When they became wealthier they made it of silver. When they became still wealthier, they made it of gold.

Rosh HaShanah 24b

שפודין של ברזל היו, וחיפום בבעץ. העשירו -
עשאום של כסף, חזרו העשירו - עשאום של זהב.
ראש השנה כד:

May we build and fuel our own menorot in our own homes and in our own communities and across the Jewish world, whether of tin or silver or gold, and may these human actions bring about see the growth of Tzemach and the glory of the seven-eyed stone.

⁵¹ Chaggai 1:8