

# Reflecting on the Menorah's Reflection

The beloved song *Maoz Tzur*, which is traditionally chanted each night of Chanukah, is filled with allusions and figurative language.

One intriguing example is the unusual word used to describe the miracle of Chanukah:

ומנותר קנקנים נעשה נס לשושנים.  
From the remaining **jugs** — a miracle was made for Shoshanim [roses] (a reference to the Jewish people).

Why did the *paytan* (author) choose the word *kankanim* to describe the jug of pure oil? Why not use the more familiar term *pach* (or in the plural, *pachim*), which is the term used in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 21b)?

We will soon discover that the word *kankan* contains a unique meaning that reveals an essential theme of Chanukah.<sup>1</sup>

The word *kankan* may be most familiar to us from the mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (4:20) — “*Al tistakel bekankan*” — Don’t look at the jug...

This phrase in the mishna is generally understood to teach us that we should not judge others by simply looking at their exterior. However, the mystical tradition suggests a deeper layer of understanding embedded in this mishnaic phrase. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari Hakadosh, interprets these words to mean that we must not look only at the outer shell of our physical world, we must look beyond the “*kankan*” and strive to uncover God’s presence. The Jew must see beyond the veil that often obscures



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the Divine.<sup>2</sup> The Ari Hakadosh then unexpectedly connects this phrase in our mishna with a particular phrase in the Torah (Exodus 34:7): ונקה לא ינקה, a term taken from the 13 attributes of mercy.<sup>3</sup>

What did the Ari Hakadosh have in mind? Rabbi Dovid Moskovitz of Transylvania in his *Gelilei Zahav, Miketz*, remarkably elucidates the Ari’s seeming non sequitur.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that the *Ari Hakadosh* had the following intent: When we realign the letters of words ונקה and ינה, they spell two words: י-ה-ו-ה and קנקן. In other words, God is to be found behind the *kankan*; behind the contour of the vessel lies its true content.

ונקה ינקה  
י-ה-ו-ה קנקן

The *Ari Hakadosh* is teaching us that *ve’nake lo yenake* alludes to God’s eternal promise of loyalty to His people — that He is present even when obscured. Similarly, the mishna in *Avot* is a call to each of us to be aware of God’s providential care even at times when His presence is concealed.<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Moskovitz interprets the phrase *ve’nake lo yenake* based on a parallel phrase in Jeremiah (30:11): “I will bring destruction to all the nations but to you the Jewish People” — “*Venake lo anakekah*.” Rashi explains this to mean: “To wipe you out, I will surely never wipe you out.” As such, *ve’nake lo yenake* can be translated as, “*To wipe you out, you will not be wiped out!*” Even in the unfortunate circumstance when guilty of sin, the Jewish people will always endure.

When the master *paytan* penned his beloved *Maoz Tzur* poem for Chanukah, he deliberately chose the term *kankan*. This unique term contains a double meaning: In the simple sense, the word *kankan* refers to the miraculous jug of oil used to light the Menorah. But a second layer of meaning suggests the sublime spiritual notion that God is always present even in darkness and pain.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, zt”l, in *Days of Deliverance* pp. 176-179, shared a profound insight regarding the Menorah, which strikingly parallels this theme alluded to within the word *kankan*. The Rav takes note of the Torah verses that describe the Menorah lighting in the Mishkan. Surprisingly, the laws governing lighting the Menorah are stated hand in hand with the offering of the *ketoret*, incense:

והקטיר עליו אהרן קטרות סמים בבקר בבקר  
בהיטיבו את הנרות יקטירנה. ובהעלת אהרן  
את הנרות בין הערבים יקטירנה קטרות תמיד  
לפני ה' לדורותיכם.

*Aaron shall burn the incense thereon; every morning, when he dresses the lamps, shall he make it burn, And when Aaron lights the lamps at dusk shall he make it burn, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.*  
**Exodus 30:7-8**

The incense was burned on the Altar, which created a clouded room. Were we to picture this scene in our mind's eye we can begin to imagine how the lights of the Menorah would be obscured by the smoke of the *ketoret*. Apparently, the lights of the Menorah were not bright lights — instead, they were hidden.<sup>7</sup> In the words of the Rav, “The sanctuary is not illuminated because of an impenetrable pillar of incense vapor. One perceives the light but does not enjoy it.”

With poetic beauty, the Rav compared the light of the Menorah to a star in the night sky: “The distant star does not shed light; it does not resolve enigmas or clear up mysteries. However, it does tell one story: namely, that there is a light behind the vast and awesome cosmic drama.”

The Rav is proposing a unique perspective regarding the inner meaning of the Menorah. The Menorah should not be viewed as a bright light or a symbol of clear providence or Divine intervention. On the contrary, the Menorah represents merely the “twinkle from a star above,” the light of God when it is dimmed and difficult to discern. In such times a Jew is responsible to search out God and strive to locate His presence; to be aware of His guiding hand even when it is not apparent.

Taking this interpretation to heart, the miracle of Chanukah, which centered around the Menorah, is most fitting. The Rav taught that “the festival of Chanukah commemorates an era of *hester panim*, God's hiddenness ... No prophet promised a reward, no vision inspired them, no message gave them solace. It was an act of faith par excellence. This is their message to the generations: ‘Do not believe that our people is abandoned of God’” (2 Macc. 7:6).

The Maccabean revolt was an act of bravery and determination. Amazingly, an elderly Jew together with his faithful sons found the courage to fight. They awakened a spirit within the nation that inspired the bold return to Jerusalem and to the Holy Temple. They lifted their hearts and ennobled their spirits knowing that they were not alone in their battle to survive; they turned to their Father in Heaven and they held fast to this deep faith every step of the way.

On the darkest nights of the year, the Jew places the menorah lights in the window. Little lights flicker from our homes spreading a message to the world. Namely, when we see beyond the *kankan*, when we lift the outer veil, suddenly the letters יה-וה appear. In truth, all along the way, even during the most painful and bleakest moments, God was there with us.

## Endnotes

1 For a running commentary on the *Maoz Tzur* see *The Light That Unites*, (OU Press 2017).

2 This idea is a major theme in kabbalistic and chassidic literature. A well-known example can be found throughout the writings of the *Sfat Emet* on the Torah where he uses the term *nekuda hapenimit* in his

commentary to convey this concept.

3 Rashi notes the comment of Chazal that He will clear those who repent (*ve'nake*) but not those who don't repent (*lo yenake*). The Rishonim offer a variety of opinions identifying the 13 attributes of mercy. See, for example, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik's treatment of this matter in *Yeled Sha'ashuim* pages 530-555.

4 Printed in the year 5695 (1935). Interestingly, the book opens with approbations from both Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, then the Chief Rabbi of Israel and Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld. Rabbi Moskovitz's idea is cited by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg in *Shabbat be' Shabato* in *gilyon* 1654.

5 It is worth noting that the author of this mishnaic teaching, “*al tistakel be'kankan*,” is none other than Rabbi Meir who is the master of finding the inner goodness. See Rav Yehuda Amital's *Jewish Values In a Changing World* (page 112), where he writes, “Rabbi Meir was characterized by the ability to find the positive roots of all phenomena, ‘In Rabbi Meir's Torah they found it written: “And behold, it was very (*me'od*) good.” ( Bereishit 1:31) - and behold, death (*mavet*) is good: ( Bereishit Raba 9:5).” Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook zt”l noted that this Mishna (*Avot* 4:20) opens with a saying from Rav Elisha ben Avuya and is then offset with Rabbi Meir. The Talmud says of Rabbi Meir that when eating a pomegranate, “he ate its core and discarded its shell.” (*Chagigah* 15b) [*Sefer Sichat Avot* on Pirkei Avot pg. 246.]

6 The actual author and dating of the *Maoz Tzur* is not clear. It is theorized that it was written in 12th or 13th-century Ashkenaz. The Ari Hakadosh lived in the 1500's. This being the case, we are suggesting here in this piece that the author of the *Maoz Tzur* was steeped in this tradition and offered this teaching even prior to the time of the Ari Hakadosh.

7 One may even argue that the actual positioning of the words in these verses place the Menorah “observed” on the inside and the incense on the outside.