

And you shall make a lampstand of pure gold;  
 of hammered workmanship shall the lampstand be made;  
 its shaft, and its branches, its bowls, its bulbs, & its flowers, shall be of the same.  
 And six branches shall come from its sides; three branches of the lampstand from the one side,  
 and three branches of the lampstand from the other side;  
 Three bowls made like almonds, with a bulb and a flower in one branch; and three bowls  
 made like almonds in the other branch, with a bulb and a flower;  
 so for the six branches that come from the lampstand.  
 And in the lampstand shall be four bowls made in the shape of almonds,  
 with their bulbs and their flowers.  
 And there shall be a bulb under two branches of the same,  
 and a bulb under two branches of the same, and a bulb under two branches of the same,  
 according to the six branches that proceed from the lampstand.  
 Their bulbs and their branches shall be of the same;  
 it shall all be one hammered work of pure gold.  
 And you shall make for it seven lamps; and they shall light its lamps,  
 that they may give light opposite it.  
 And its tongs, and its trays, shall be of pure gold.  
 Of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all these utensils.  
 And see that you make them after their pattern,  
 which was shown to you in the mount.

ועשית מנורת זהב טהור מקשה העלשה המנורה  
 ירכה וקנה גביעיה כפתריה ופרוזה מובנה ירחי  
 ושיעיה קנים ילאים מנורה שלשעיה קני מנורה מנורה  
 האוזה ושלשעיה קני מנורה מנורה העלוי שלשעיה  
 גמלים משיקדים בקנה האוזה כפתר ופרוזה  
 ושלשעיה גמלים משיקדים בקנה האוזה כפתר  
 ופרוזה בן שלשעיה הקנים הילאים בן המנורה  
 ובמנורה ארבעה גמלים משיקדים כפתריה ופרוזה  
 וכפתר תוזת עני הקנים מובנה וכפתר תוזת עני  
 הקנים מובנה וכפתר תוזת עני הקנים מובנה שלשעיה  
 הקנים הילאים בן המנורה כפתריהם וקנתם מובנה יהיו  
 כלה מקשה אחת זהב טהור ועשית את לרתיה שבעיה  
 והעלשה את לרתיה והאיר על עבר פליה ומנורה  
 ומנורתיה זהב טהור ככר זהב טהור ילשית אתה אתה  
 כל הכלים האלה וראה ועלשה בתבניתם אשר אתה  
 מראה בהר

EXODUS 25 : 31-40

## A SERMON ON THE HOLY 7-BRANCHED MENORAH, IN TWO PARTS

### *Exodus 25:31-40*

I

Today's portion *Terumah* shows God engaging as Divine Architect and Interior Designer as he instructs Moses in the construction of the mobile Tabernacle and the Holy Sanctuary within. Using precision measurements and fastidious attention to detail, as well as care for materials, colours, and positioning, we see God as a sophisticated Creative Artist. This represents the civilizing counterpart to God the Organic Creator. In *Breishit*, God creates the Manifest Universe and ever higher forms of Life, using the Word and Light... Here in Exodus, the power invested in highly symbolic objects and spaces adds a dimension of divine creativity with which we can more immediately relate. For in this inanimate realm we are indispensable partners, dedicated co-creators of a Sacred Place.

But from the modern perspective, a question naturally arises.

What is the purpose of this attempt to contain the Infinite, *HaMakom*?

We can of course view all this building activity in symbolic terms, imagining an Inner Temple as a soulful reflection. But in a more historical vein we could say that the construction of the Tabernacle serves three key purposes. As an enterprise far more complex than the impromptu altars erected by the patriarchs, the building of the Tabernacle reflects the advance of Judaism from a loose tribal allegiance to a fledgling national entity with a detailed set of laws, both religious and civil. *Terumah*, today's portion, thus logically follows last week's portion *Mishpatim*, where much of the Mosaic code is unveiled. Secondly, we can see that the construction of a House of God is a reassuring interim step between idol worship and the abstract monotheism which has evolved through our history. Finally, we find here the ultimate embodiment of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, literally, the adornment of the commandment. *Hiddur Mitzvah* allows us to express our dedication to the Divine by beautifying the space we pray in and the ritual objects with which we worship. Not only do we mirror the splendor of Creation by this concrete beautifying process, reinforcing Judaism's affirmation of this material world in which we live. By making things beautiful we establish an atmosphere which makes it more conducive for us to make our dialogue with the Holy One flowing and effective.

Beauty both reflects the exquisite underpinnings of our World and lifts and inspires us. Additionally, the often lengthy journey from concept to blueprint to final crafted object requires us to develop extensive knowledge of materials and processes, as well as difficult skills such as hand-eye coordination, cooperation, patience and commitment. These qualities bring out many of the best capabilities of human beings, mirroring attributes of the Divine. *Hiddur Mitzvah* and the sacred arts parallel the dedication and close attention to detail required for our spiritual practice as well.

Now nowhere is this kind of attention to detail given than in the instructions regarding the fashioning of the Menorah, the Holy Candelabrum of Seven Perpetually Lit Lights. Later in the main body of the sermon, I will attempt to examine these details, looking at the Menorah's complex structure, its material and its purpose, as well as other biblical and midrashic associations. I aim to reveal why the menorah, apart perhaps from the Torah itself, deserves to be appreciated as the quintessential Judaic symbol. This despite something of a present-day tarnish. For although it appears not infrequently as the seal of the state of Israel and in other contexts, nowadays, we seem to see less and less of the 7-branched Menorah. This must be partly due to its usage belonging to our bygone Temple cult, as opposed to any daily or festival ritual\*. Indeed, rather sadly, the chanukiyah of the wonderful but minor holiday of Chanukah has largely superseded it.

Many of us might be thinking at this point that the Star of David, seen in countless books, artwork, flags and synagogues, should hold the honor of being the most important Jewish symbol. However, the fact is that the Magen David is never mentioned anywhere in the bible or talmud and apart from sporadic appearances in the late Middle Ages, only began to be widely adopted in modern times, beginning around the 19th century. It developed increasing popularity as Jews of the Enlightenment and Reform movement sought to adopt a distinctive symbol that had none of the Menorah's associations to the central Temple. Though occasionally mentioned in some early Kabbalistic literature, it is only recently that the hexagram of two interlocking equilateral triangles has received significant metaphysical interpretation, by sages such as Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber etcetera.

The secrets of the Menorah and its penetrating lights await....

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\* In fact, due to its ordained uniqueness and holy significance, there has been a prohibition against making metal replicas of the menorah (and the other sanctuary items) for private or non-Temple communal use (and especially not in gold). Consequently, we never see it in its proper glory.



## II

As promised, we will now take a close look at the Holy 7-branched Menorah of the inner Sanctuary, which, in contrast to the Star of David is described extensively and repeatedly in Torah and Talmud. We'll explore its characteristics more or less in the order in which they appear in today's compact excerpt. As we examine the verses, symbolic associations naturally spring forth, some of which I will make explicit and some of which I trust will resonate with you by implication.

וְעָשִׂיתָ מְנֹרֶת זָהָב טָהוֹר

*“And you will make a lampstand of pure gold.”*


Along with many of the other items in the tabernacle, the menorah is made of that most precious of minerals, whose properties make it so valuable. Consider the symbolism of the following: Gold is a noble metal, similar to the color of candle-flame; its chemical symbol is Au, from Aurora, or dawn. An indestructible material, it is virtually immune to the corrosive effects of air, water and oxygen, never tarnishing or rusting. It is also an excellent electrical conductor and the most ductile and malleable of all metals: a single ounce of gold can be stretched into a wire 5 miles long or hammered into a 100 square-foot sheet. Moreover, gold conducts thermal energy brilliantly and reflects heat better than any other material. No wonder we say, as did the alchemists, good as gold.

Unlike the other sacred objects, as the phrase **טָהוֹר זָהָב** *pure gold*

and the rest of the passage indicates, the menorah is, in its entirety, made of solid gold and of one single piece. This emphasizes its special purity and, despite having many parts, its unified integrity. Moreover, it's the only item whose weight is specified, a rather hefty talent of gold, while its height is described in the Talmud as 18 handbreadths, or around the height of an average man.

We come to the next phrase **מִקְשָׁה תֵּיעָשָׂה**

*“of hammered workmanship shall it be made.”*

This shows us that as well as being of solid gold, the Menorah is to be fashioned quite specifically. Sculptural objects can be created in two distinct ways, either additive or subtractive. In the additive method, we can append a bit of clay here and there or weld separate material parts together. Here, however, a subtractive  process is commanded, whereby we take a single block and sculpt down, taking away in order to arrive at an essence, such as Michelangelo unveiling a Moses or a David in a chunk of marble. Here is a painstaking process of perfecting. It begins by coarsely hewing out unwanted material. Then, with ever-increasing refinement, it ends in a smoothing of the surface, till it shines in polished glory. This serves as an inspiring metaphor for the way we must shape life's difficult lessons, hammering out negative traits while we refine our understanding, until we can shine with holy Wholeness, both individually and collectively. As the word **מְקַשֵּׁה** implies, whose root is the same as *Kasheh*, that is, *hard* or *difficult*, we must shed spiritual blood, sweat and tears in our pursuit of purification and knowledge.

We move on to the next phrase, which summarizes the menorah's several parts, *its shaft, and its branches, its bowls, its bulbs, and its flowers, shall be of the same.*

This reinforces the instruction to start with a unified whole, which, in contrast to something with welded-on bits and pieces, can remain virtually unbreakable.

Next comes the description of the Menorah's essential structure:

*And six branches shall come from its sides; three branches of the lampstand from the one side, and three branches of the lampstand from the other side;*

Several aspects of the Menorah are here revealed: a symmetrical, well-balanced shape comes into view, composed of a central shaft with three branches emanating on both sides of it, symbolizing the three-fold nature of divinity, with the aspect of Equilibrium in the middle, Mercy on the right and Justice on the left. Moreover, we have a total of seven branches (with six on the sides plus the trunk), this being made explicit later in verse 37, which also states the Menorah's purpose of lighting the Sanctuary's interior:

*37. And you shall make for it seven lamps; and they shall light its lamps, that they may give light...*

Seven of course represents a satisfying completeness, as seen in the 7 days of creation, the 7 colours of the spectrum, the 7 musical notes, the 7 chakras, and the 7 days of the week, with Shabbat by the way better seen as an apex in the middle, rather than the end, of the week. Finally, with the introduction of the phrase **קִנֵּי מְנֹרֶה** that is, *branches of the lampstand*, we can begin to surmise that this beautiful shape is at least reminiscent of a tree, a fact I shall soon make the major focus.

But for now let us proceed on to the next three verses in a purposefully rapid succession.

*33. Three bowls made like almonds, with a bulb and a flower in one branch; and three bowls made like almonds in the other branch, with a bulb and a flower; so for the six branches that come from the lampstand.*

*34. And in the lampstand shall be four bowls made in the shape of almonds, with their bulbs and their flowers.*

*35. And there shall be a bulb under two branches of the same, and a bulb under two branches of the same, and a bulb under two branches of the same, according to the six branches that proceed from the lampstand.*

Yes, well that's as clear as mud. But don't feel badly if you didn't understand that. There are several midrashim which indicate that Moses was rather baffled as well. In fact the final verse of the passage implies that these verbal instructions were supplemented by a visual blueprint shown to Moses on a kind of mystical plane.

**וְרֵאָה וְעָשָׂה בְּתַבְנֵיתָם אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מֵרָאָה בְּהַר:**

*And see that you make them after their pattern, which was shown to you in the mount.*

Even then, midrashic legend tells us that Moses and the artist Bezalel felt sufficiently confused that they had to call for God's assistance, for they understood that the menorah's design needed to be exactly implemented. In response, God had them throw the talent of gold into the fire and there fashioned the wondrous candelabrum Himself. However, this legend seems rather fanciful when we read later in Exodus 37, which essentially duplicates what is written in Exodus 25:

*17. And he (Bezalel) made the lampstand of pure gold; of hammered workmanship made he the lampstand; its shaft, and its branch, its bowls, its bulbs, and its flowers...*

This assures us that the Menorah had indeed been fashioned in strict accord with its intended pattern.

But returning to the confusing middle verses in question, with their complex arrangement of bulbs, bowls and flowers, the important point is that the repeated botanical imagery makes it clear that the Menorah's branches are not merely abstract tributaries. They are branches of an organic tree. More specifically, since all these more minor decorations are described as **מִשְׁקָדִים** like **שְׁקָדִיהָ** the Menorah is a golden representation of the almond tree, a most wonderfully emblematic species. As we know from Tu B'Shevat, the almond tree is the first tree to blossom in the Holy Land, its canopy of white flowers heralding the spring. This natural symbol of purity and hope also boasts a nut which is incredibly nutritious, vitamin-rich and anti-carcinogenic, the nut's shape resembling exotic eyelids, lively leaves and candle-flames. This connection of the Menorah to the venerable Almond Tree gains further associations in parshat Korach in Numbers 17:23

*Behold, the rod of Aaron... had budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.*

This miraculous sign links to the Menorah in two ways: first, the miracle confirmed Aaron's worthiness as High Priest to receive the privilege of lighting the Holy Menorah as described in Numbers 8.

*3. And Aaron did so; he lighted its lamps to give light in front of the lampstand...*

*4. And the workmanship of the lampstand was of hammered gold... according to the pattern which the Lord had shown Moses...*

Secondly, the rod's rapid growth in three phases of bud, blossom and fruit corresponds to the three decorative elements on the Menorah's branches.

Thus we see that the Menorah is not only a glowing Tree of Light but represents a growing Tree of Life as well. This linkage leads us to many fruitful associations: for example, the midrash that there is a glowing almond tree at the foot of Jacob's ladder is certainly suggestive, as is the thought that the Menorah, representing God's immanent presence, is a kind of refined Burning Bush. The vision of Zecariah (chapter 4) is also worth quoting in this context, demonstrating the ultimate primacy of the spiritual dimension.



1. *And the angel ... said to me, What do you see? And I said, I have looked, and behold a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl upon its top, and seven lamps on it...*
3. *And there are two olive trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon its left...*
4. *And I answered the angel, saying, What are these, my lord?*
5. *Then the angel answered ... This is the word of the Lord.. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.*

Now, if we harken back to the very beginning chapters of Torah, this spiritual import becomes even more pronounced. For the Menorah points to the possibility of returning from our exile from Eden, for in a sense with the design and implementation of the Menorah, the Tree of Life has been reinstated. Here, as we recall the most primal era, it is appropriate to make the connection between Light and Life. The universe begins with an explosion of light, as science tells us, while *Breishit* testifies that the first act of Creation occurred with the words, *Let there be Light*. As the most fundamental form of energy, Light feeds the plants upon which all higher forms of life depend, while our bodies are composed of elements spun from the great factories of Light, the stars. In fact, Light has always been associated with Life, in contrast to the darkness and dim obscurity of Death, while candleflames help us to recall souls' connections even beyond the grave. Furthermore, Light has always served as a visible symbol of Spiritual Life and Purity: seeing the Light, reaching Enlightenment, achieving a Lightness of Being etc. We can then combine the metaphor of Light with the metaphor of the Tree, which represents Life's rich Diversity within a web of steadfast Unity, its roots in the material Earth and its Crown in the Spiritual Sky. Thus the Tree of Light which is also the Tree of Life becomes a towering Vision of timeless Power.

However, we might be tempted here to feel quite bereft, when we consider that in the absence of the Temple cult, the Menorah, which seemed to promise a return from exile, is no longer lit. While the Ner Tamid in our synagogues to some extent stands in for the inactive Menorah, it fails to inspire with the same degree of glory.

But hope is at hand, if we feel inclined to a mystical solution, which, for myself at least as a practicing kabbalist, leads to the most startling and satisfying revelation of all.

First I want to show you some pictures which parallel Moses' apparent confusion regarding the Menorah's construction. These pictures show rather different conceptions of the Golden Candelabrum. Most of us will envision the Menorah as a lampstand with curved branches on a solid hexagonal base, as it was depicted on the Arch of Titus, after his legions decimated Jerusalem and the second Temple in the year 70 (*Figure A*). Some scholars have argued that this provides historical proof of the Menorah's ancient form. Others, such as Maimonides and Rashi, dismiss the imperial arrogance of the Romans and conceive the Menorah as having straight, diagonal branches, with its almond-tree decorations less widely distributed (*Figure B*).

Now I want to unveil a different kind of Tree of Life. Here is the comprehensive metaphysical symbol used by Kabbalists for many centuries, usually called the Tree of Life, and shaped like a tree, as you can see (*Figure C*). It represents the foundation of the ultimate mystical scheme, a divine blueprint of both the broad Macrocosm and our inner microcosms. What is remarkable is that if we unfold this mystical tree, we can see it can transform into the Holy Menorah (*Figure D*). The famous 10 sefirot, or divine attributes, which describe the descent of Spirit into Matter, are translated onto the 6 branches, 3 on either side, with 4 sefirot going down the lampstand's central shaft. The shaft includes one so-called non-Sefirah and the final one, *Malchut, the Kingdom*, which is situated at the lampstand's base. This correspondence is made even more complete when we count the almond-tree decorations: 3 on each of the 6 branches and 4 on the central shaft make for a total of 22, which as well as being the number of the letters of the Holy Hebrew Aleph-Bet, is also the number of kabbalistic pathways between the 10 sefirot (*Figure E*). In addition, the Menorah's position in the South of the Sanctuary further confirms the equation between these two Trees of Life,

for kabbalistically the South represents the element of Fire and the dimension of Spirit. In fact, the Menorah itself is often equated with the Oral Torah, and the ongoing exploration of Divine Revelation. Rest assured that what I have unveiled here requires a lifetime of searching and study to unravel, if not generations worth.

*Eitz Chayyim Hee LaMachazikim Bah*: it is a Tree of Life to those who hold it fast, whether it be Adam Kadmon's primal Tree in Eden, or the Golden Tree of Light in the Sanctuary, or the Great Abstract Tree of Kabbalah on the page and in our Minds, all beneath the glow of *Ein Sof Aur*, which is limitless Light. And which Tree of Life truly came first we will never know.

I wish to end now by remembering the beginning. This week's portion is *Terumah*, which means, *Contribution*. Thus, though the Menorah came into existence by Divine Design, through Moses' prophetic guidance and under Bezalel's crafty eye, the raw material comes from the toil and generosity of the people, the people who form the many branches of the One Tree.

Now that we have no central sanctuary and therefore no common lighting of the Holy Menorah, instead of the (olive) oil for the lamps, we must bring peace and understanding. Instead of gold, we bring the crucible of our struggle for greater awareness, truth and love. Instead of a single High Priest who lights the wicks in semi-obscurity, we, as a nation of priests, bring the light of justice and compassion wherever we go. And instead of pining for bygone artefacts of worship, we can meditate on the mystical Tree of Life, an incomparable gift. So we seek endlessly to unveil the Light which is already given, the Light which is Life, here and now and Forever.

Shabbat Shalom!

*Let's take a moment now to reflect on the soulful beauty of the living Light...*

*L P Navon*

*12 February 2005*

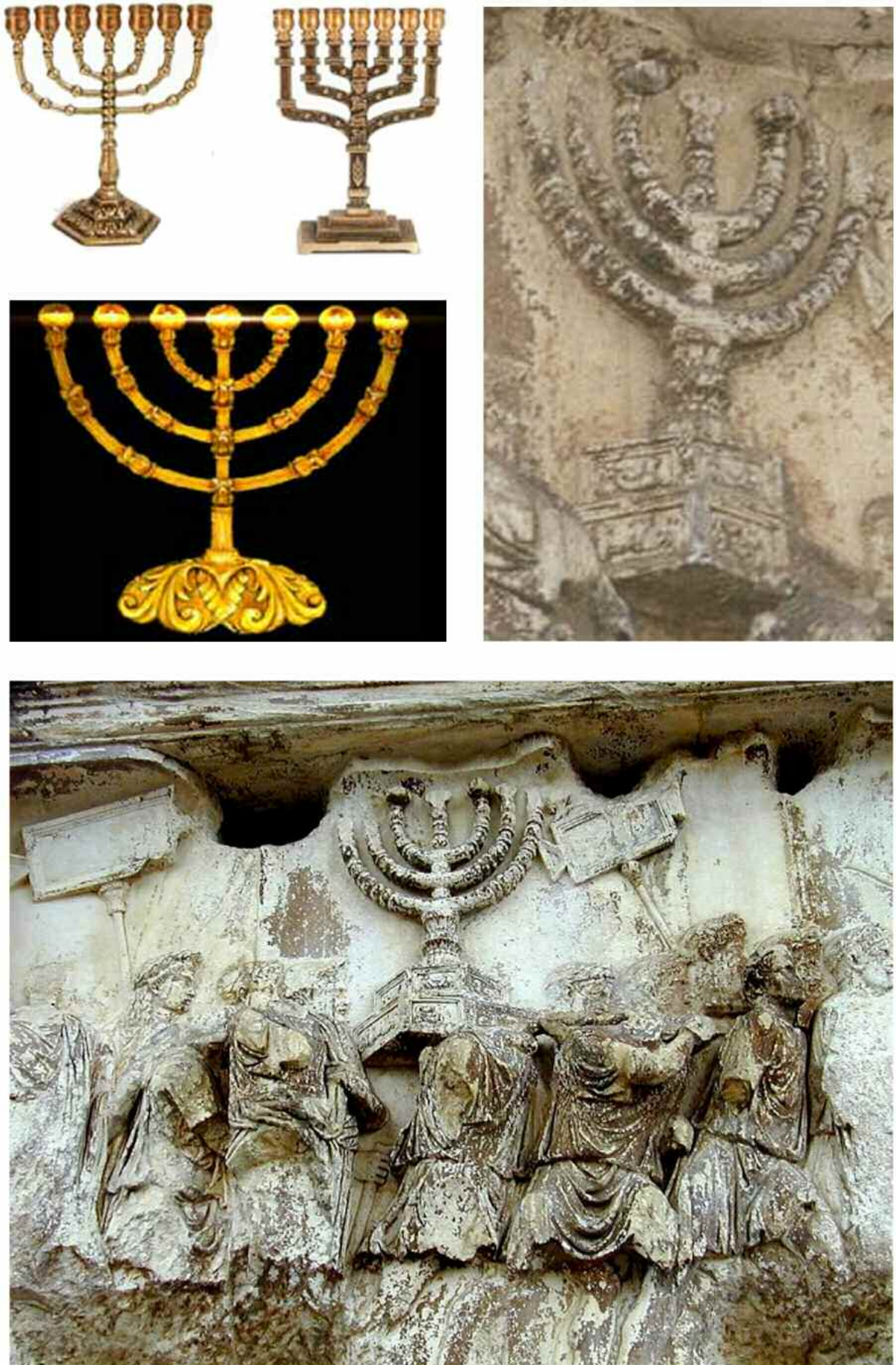


Figure A

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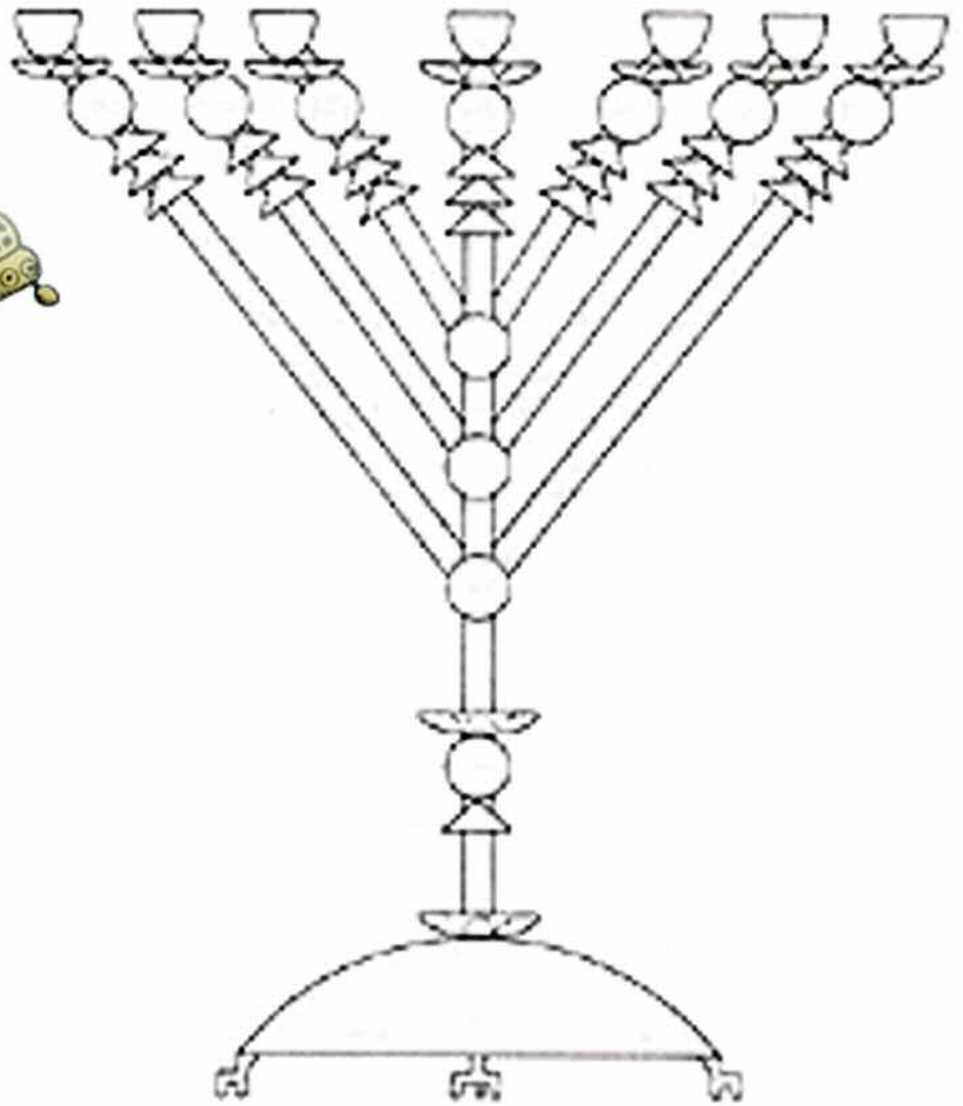
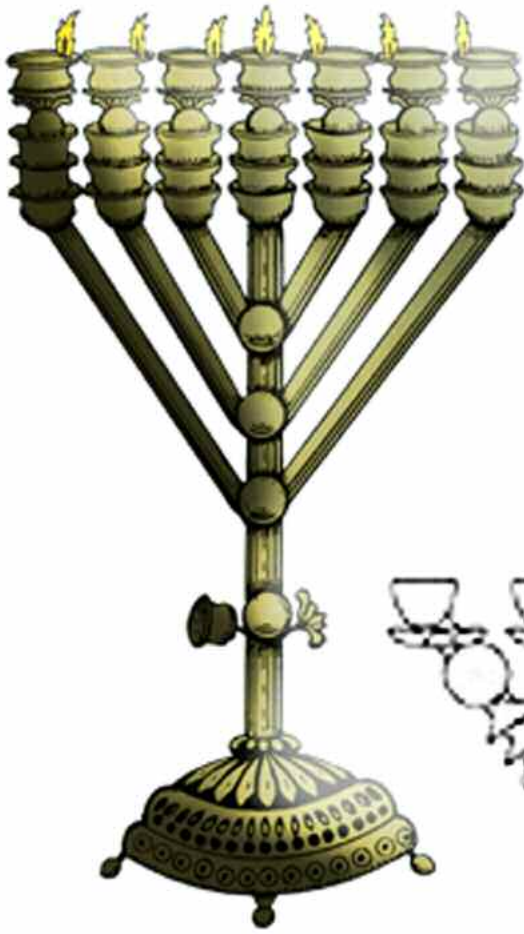


Figure B

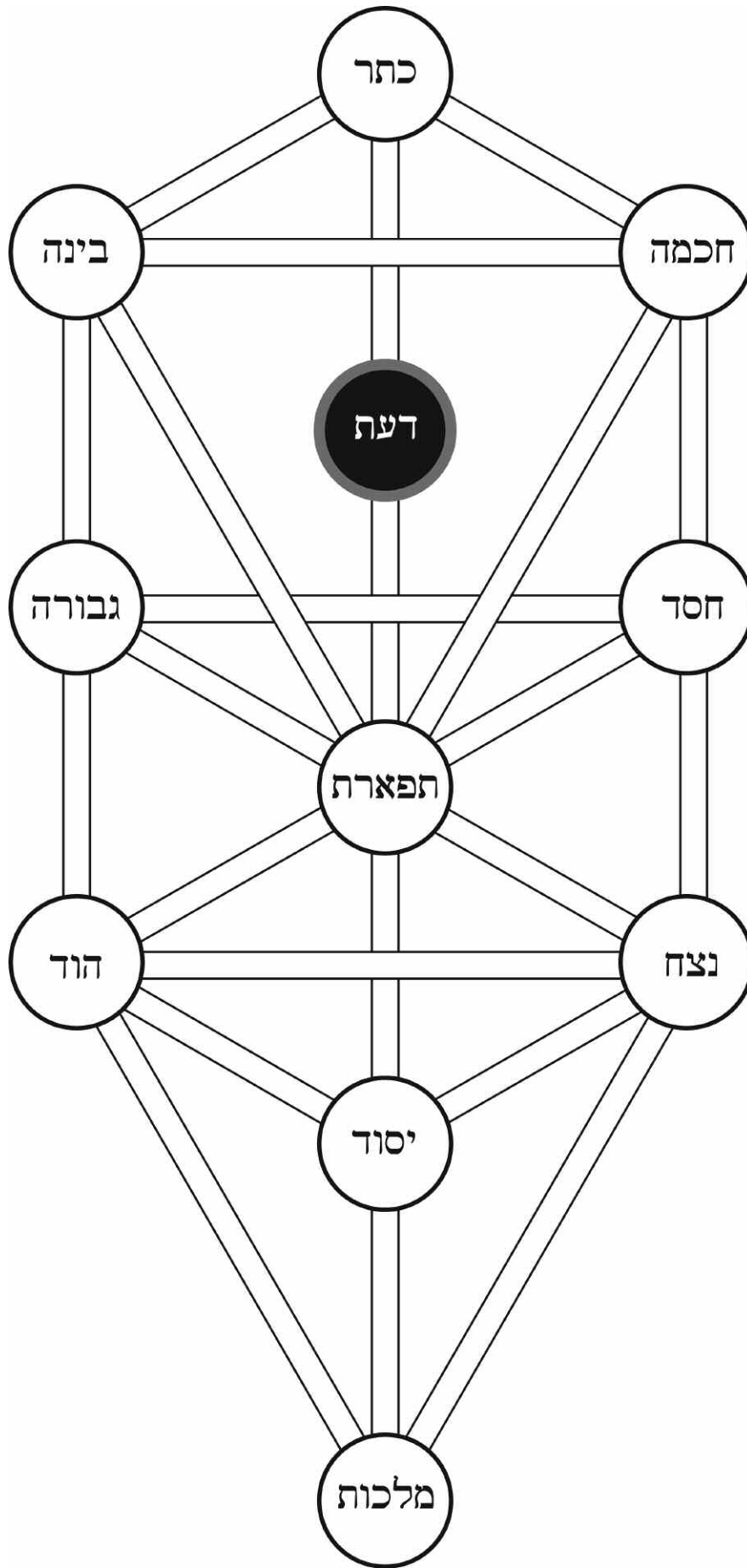


Figure C

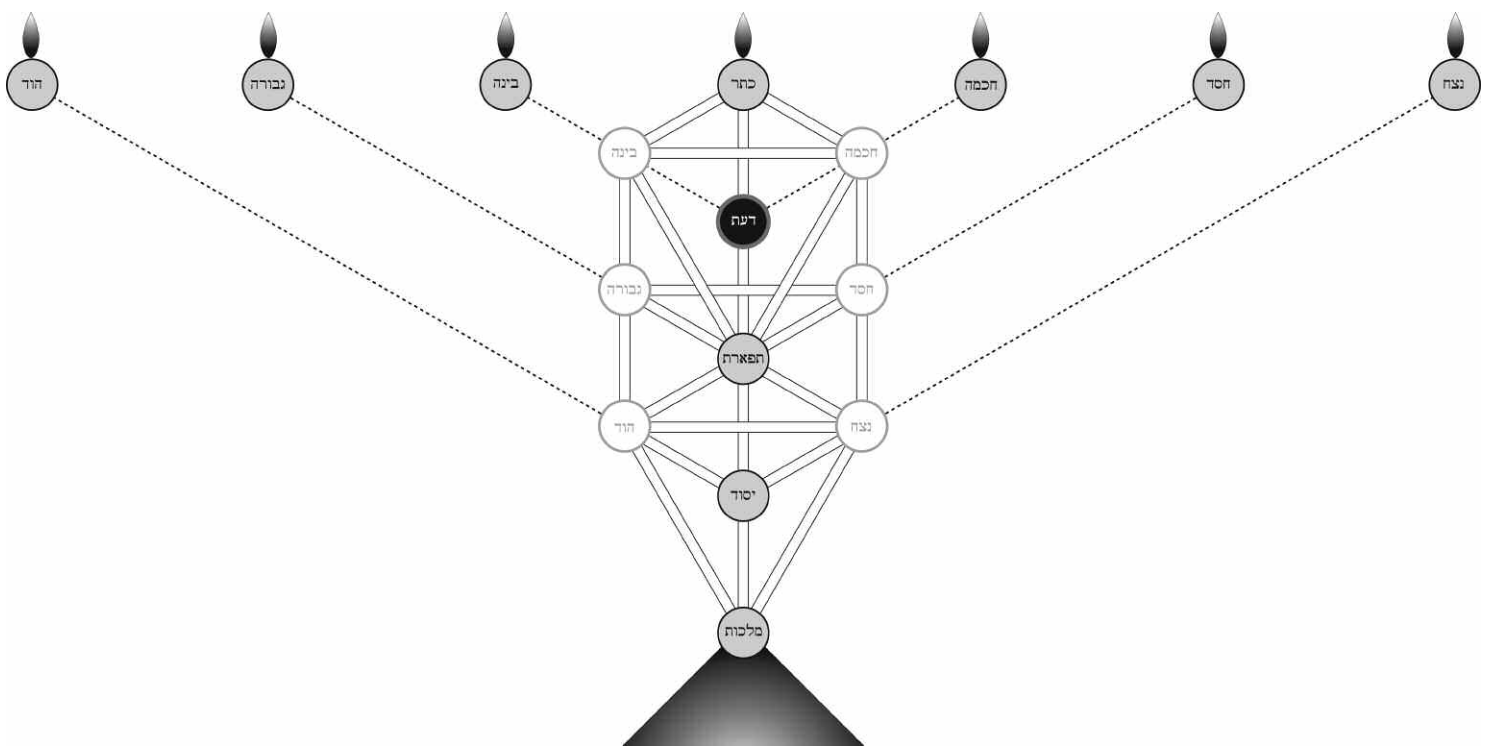


Figure D

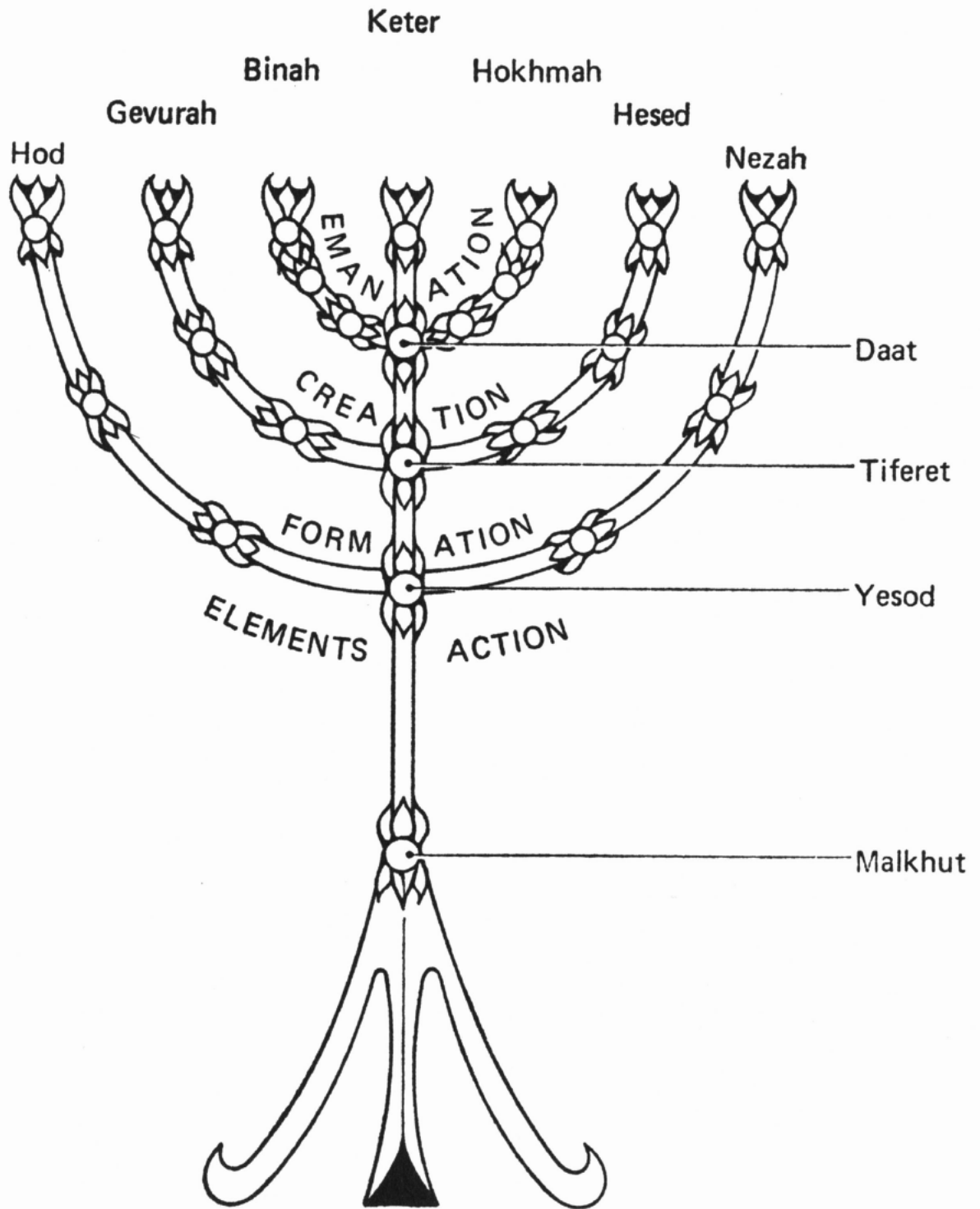


Figure E

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וְעִשִׂית מְנֹרַת זָהָב נִהָדָר מִקְשָׁה תִּיעֲשֶׂה