

Making Ourselves Understood

Here, in our mid-century modern sanctuary, the two menorahs on the bimah are acrylic glass, formed into a streamlined shape. But in the Torah, the menorah is anything but streamlined. Of everything Gd taught Moses on Mount Sinai—and it was a lot!—how to make the menorah for the *mishkan*, the sanctuary, was one of the most difficult things for Moses to understand.

Tonight we're going to consider a midrash—a rabbinic story—about when Moses didn't understand how to make the menorah, and we'll reflect on how we might approach making ourselves understood and understanding others.

This is a small part of the instructions Gd gives Moses in the Torah: “You shall make a menorah of pure gold. The menorah shall be made *mik'shah*; its base and its stem, its cups, buds and blossoms shall be of one piece of gold. Six branches shall issue from its sides.” Exodus 25:31-32. In the Torah, the botanical details of the menorah's form continue for eight more verses.

The ancient rabbis, whose skill as wordsmiths far exceeded their skill as goldsmiths, marveled at the complexity of the task Gd gave Moses. The word *mik'shah*, usually translated as “hammered,” comes from the word for “hard”: it means both “hard” as in hammered and “hard” as in difficult. With this wordplay, the rabbis begin interpreting: “How was Moses supposed to make such a difficult thing?” they wonder.

Remember, the rabbis had no trouble imagining that Moses could talk with Gd, negotiate with Pharaoh, lead the people across the sea, and learn the entire Torah on Mount Sinai. But here, with the menorah, the rabbis acknowledge that even an exceptional leader, even Moshe Rabbenu, does not understand everything.

The midrash opens, “Three things were difficult for Moses to learn on Mount Sinai...” The first difficult thing is “the making of the menorah.”¹ Moses acknowledges that he doesn’t understand how to make the menorah, and he asks for help. “The Blessed Holy One said to him, ‘See, I am making it in front of you.’ What did the Blessed Holy One do? Gd showed him white fire, red fire, black fire, and green fire. From them, Gd made the menorah, its cups, its buds, its blossoms, and the six branches.”

When Moses asks for help, instead of using words again to describe how to make the menorah, Gd shows him how to do it, fashioning the lamp right in front of him. But Moses still does not understand how to make it.

With patience, Gd tries again, saying to Moses, “This is the making of the menorah.” Numbers 8:4. The midrash interprets the Hebrew word זה, “this,” as meaning Gd showed Moses with a finger. Drawing on the text of the Torah, which also includes the word תבנית, pattern,² the midrash says, “The Blessed Holy One engraved the pattern for the menorah on the palm of Moses’ hand.”

Let’s pause there: “The Blessed Holy One engraved the pattern for the menorah on the palm of Moses’ hand.” This is a remarkable image. Moses has been trying to get closer to Gd since the burning bush, when Moses asked to learn Gd’s name and received an enigmatic answer. When Moses asked to see Gd’s face, Gd said no. Here, in contrast, it’s Gd who initiates intimacy, holding Moses by the hand.

¹ This story appears in different collections of midrash, in different versions. See Midrash Tanchuma Sh’mini 8:2; Midrash Tanchuma Buber Sh’mini 11:1; Midrash Rabbah B’midbar 15:4; Midrash Tanchuma B’ha-alot’cha 6:1; Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 29a.

² The concluding verse of the section describing the menorah is: “See and make it according to the patterns shown to you on the mountain.” Exodus 25:40.

I'm captivated by what the midrash offers here: the possibility that when we are overwhelmed and we don't understand and we ask for help, the Blessed Holy One might take us by the hand and trace, on our palm, the instructions. I'm captivated by the vulnerability Moses shows in extending his hand. The intimacy of touching someone's palm. The breathtaking possibility that the Torah we need might be inscribed directly onto our bodies, so that we can carry it with us anywhere, letting go of words and speech and difficulty, receiving touch.

No matter how compelling that moment might be for us, Moses didn't understand how to make the menorah from the pattern on his hand. Patiently, Gd tries again to help. Gd has tried explaining for verbal learners, using words of Torah to describe the menorah; for visual learners, showing Moses how to shape it; and for tactile learners, tracing the pattern on Moses' hand.

Now, Gd says to Moses: "Cast it into the fire, and with difficulty it 'will be made.'" The midrash is again playing with language. One verse in the Torah uses a passive verb to say the menorah "will be made," (Ex. 25:39), so the midrash imagines it happening on its own. This explanation is mystical, reminding us that we don't control everything, and we don't understand everything. Some things are "made" without us shaping them. Throwing a piece of gold into the fire could be seen as a gesture of frustration, but Gd frames it as a gesture of trust and letting go. As the midrash says, "It will be made *atzmah*, on its own."

Guess what? Moses still needs help! Imagine the resolve Moses musters in order to say, once more, "I still don't understand." Without expressing frustration, Gd says to Moses, "Go to Bezalel. He will make it for you." In the Torah, Bezalel is the artisan who makes the fixtures for the mishkan. "I have a guy," Gd says. "He'll take care of you." This solution lets Gd off the pedagogic hook, and it is also a beautiful invitation into humility: Gd isn't the only teacher or even the best teacher for everything, and Moses doesn't have to understand everything on his own.

As we move into this new year, sitting under the glow of our modern menorahs, what can we learn from this midrash?

This midrash shows us how our tradition, for centuries, has recognized that we understand each other differently. Some of us connect through words, or visual demonstration, or tactile experience, or we just go for it. Part of coming to understanding is knowing when to ask for help, sometimes more than once, and when to accept it. Part of connecting with another person is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. Each of these paths toward understanding is part of Gd's plan. And each of these paths can lead to the desired result: meeting a challenge, crafting a lamp, or shaping other means of illuminating our lives as a people.

In the midrash, Gd, who is notably impatient in other stories, expresses no impatience. When Moses doesn't understand one way, Gd, without comment, without judgment, explains another way. And another way. And another. Eventually, Gd realizes maybe someone else could help Moses more.

This too we can emulate. We explain ourselves to another person, but they don't understand. We try again, without judgment. And we try again. If forging gold is complicated on one level, making ourselves understood as human beings is complicated on another level.

In trying to make ourselves understood, we sometimes tell our stories as polemics, insisting our version is the only version, full stop. Sometimes we are afraid to tell our stories at all, especially our stories about what being Jewish means to us. Intimacy isn't easy; it can be hard to reach for someone's hand and share something personal. We are afraid of saying the "wrong" thing, worrying that others will misunderstand us, blame us, or cut off relationships. Or we are afraid people will not share our ideas, and we will feel isolated.

We can learn from Moses too. Faced with the dilemma of making the menorah, a task he doesn't understand, Moses asks for help. Without apology, he acknowledges more than once that he doesn't understand. He holds out his hand, practicing vulnerability, allowing the Holy One to build intimacy. And when Gd tells Moses about Bezalel, Moses lets go of being the one to shape the menorah. It's the lamp to illuminate the center of ritual life, but Moses is happy for someone else to take care of making it for him.

In the process of writing this, I asked for help from an actual goldsmith. I showed the passage in the Torah describing the menorah to my mother-in-law, Joan, a jeweler with a degree in metalwork. She told me fashioning the menorah as described is, quote, "perfectly doable."

Here we are in the first minutes of this new year. We can choose. We can decide that it is "perfectly doable" to make ourselves known to each other in all of our complexity, with our different, overlapping, conflicting stories.

This year, let's resolve not to give up the first time someone doesn't understand us. Let's not insist we have only one way of telling our story, and let's not withhold our stories out of fear or worry. Instead we can try Gd's practice of trying again, with patience, without judgment. Trying again, trusting that somehow, we can build intimacy. Instead of sitting in silence and isolation, we can turn toward each other and make ourselves known to each other. We are invited to take each other by the hand. We are also invited to turn to others for help.

Like Moses, we can commit to asking, again and again, when we don't understand someone. We can ask without apology and without embarrassment, trying, again and again, to understand and to learn. It's not easy to understand each other, especially when we have different experiences and perspectives. We can acknowledge that things can be both difficult and "perfectly doable."

We can only commit to trying this together; it's not something a person can do alone. For all of us, and for us as a community, may this be a year of sharing and listening with patience, with humility, without judgment, in whatever mode we learn best. Maybe we will understand one another through words or experience or touch or by trusting the right thing will happen. Maybe the instructions we need are already traced on the palms of our hands.

The artist who designed the menorahs for our sanctuary used a then-new, cutting-edge technology to illuminate the otherwise unadorned branches: fiber optics. Sitting here in their glow reminds us that our purpose in connecting with others is to radiate light outward. This year, may the difficult and doable project of making ourselves understood to each other generate light within our sacred space and extend that light outward.

Shanah tovah!