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THE MAIMONIDEAN MENORAH AND CONTEMPORARY HABAD MESSIANISM: A RECONSIDERATION

The menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum first described in Exodus 25:31–40, was a central part of the Tabernacle in the desert and later in the Temple of Jerusalem. This seven-branched menorah has served as the most widely used iconographic symbol of Judaism for more than two thousand years. Common to all these depictions are the central stem and the three arms extending in a U shape from the central stem.1 The one exception to the commonly accepted iconography of the menorah as having U-shaped arms is found in Moses Maimonides’ halachic code, Mishne Torah. In his description of the furnishings of the Temple, Maimonides describes the design of the menorah, based on his understanding of the Biblical text. His version of the menorah has a number of differences from the “normative” iconography. The most distinctive difference is that Maimonides describes the arms as being straight, in a V shape, rather than the curved U shape.2 The only visual representation of this menorah is found in the Kaufmann Codex, the oldest known manuscript of the Mishne Torah.

Until 1982, this interpretation of the menorah had no impact or influence on Jewish life or religious practice. Shortly before Hanukkah of 1982, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, decreed that the Maimonidean menorah should become the new standard design for all menorahs employed or displayed by Habad followers and institutions. There is no history of Lubavitch-Habad having a distinctive menorah before 1982. However, as this was also the period during which the intensification of Habad messianic activity occurred, the question must be asked if there is any correlation between the introduction of this new menorah and Habad messianic activity.

The past decade has seen an exponential growth in the scholarly discussion and analysis of the overt messianism that has defined the Habad hasidic movement since the early 1980s.3 Two recent scholars have addressed the meaning of the Maimonidean menorah and its
place in Habad iconography. One has misunderstood the meaning of this menorah in Habad and the other, both a scholar and a follower of Habad, has offered an explanation that obscures more than it illumi

nates. After analyzing the two theories here referred to, I offer my own analysis that will demonstrate that the Maimonidean menorah is a central iconicographic representation of Habad messianism.

Maya Balakirsky Katz published an extensive article on the Habad public celebrations of Hanukkah that began in the late 1970s and continue to the present. She discusses the history and the meaning of the Maimonidean menorah in this article. The aspect of her article that is problematic is her discussion of the significance of the shape of the menorah. Two questions present themselves. First, why the sudden interest in a distinctive menorah? What was wrong with the traditional menorah designs? Second, why the Maimonidean menorah? It was an obscure topic in a theoretical text and the only known illustration was in a medieval manuscript. Further, there is no evidence that anyone actually made or used a menorah of this design before the Rebbe’s instruction to fabricate it, shortly before Hanukkah of 1982.

Katz explains the new Habad menorah as a rejection of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, both of which adopted the menorah as a symbol. She writes:

R. Schneerson’s rejection of the State menorah does not simply reflect a boycott of the ancient Roman aesthetic, but of modern Israel’s adaptation of what he perceived as secularist “Roman” values. Just as Chabad and other Orthodox institutions earlier rebuffed the Star of David because of its secular Zionist appeal, Chabad adopted Maimonides’ menorah as a counter-symbol that could reflect a religious Jewish tradition, given that it was the design of a medieval Torah scholar.

Katz’s argument, however, is unpersuasive, since if her logic is applied, a whole host of other Orthodox groups, hasidic and nonhasidic, which are non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist should have done something similar. Yet, we find that only the Lubavitcher Rebbe seems to have seen this as a problem, and his solution was the Maimonidean menorah. Why this particular menorah? The fact that Maimonides designed this menorah and he was a famous medieval Torah scholar is a non sequitor. The design of the menorah was an aesthetic decision and not a halachic one. One would think that an artist should be consulted for a project that is aesthetic and artistic and not halachic. The reason I would suggest lies more with the Maimonidean heritage of this design and has nothing to do with the State of Israel or Zionism. It has everything to do with the fact that
this design is found in Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah* and the role that this work comes to play in the ideology of Habad messianism.

The second scholar to discuss the Maimonidean menorah and its significance is Naftali Loewenthal. His study approaches the question of the menorah from another perspective. The purpose of his article is to show that Maimonides was an influence on Habad thought from the beginning of the movement and the eruption of interest in Habad for things Maimonidean in the early 1980s was not a *novum*, but the continuation of a natural process. Unfortunately, the quantity and quality of his evidence shows the opposite of this claim. And, at a minimum, Loewenthal admits that, “during the 1980’s there would be a new emphasis on Maimonides in the Habad-Lubavitch movement. However, near the beginning of the decade this was heralded by a striking challenge to traditional Jewish iconography, claiming Maimonides for support.” This iconographic challenge was the Maimonidean menorah. He explains the adoption of this menorah by reference to the discourses of the Rebbe about the relation of the Temple menorah and the Roman destruction. The relevant passages of the Rebbe’s discourse on this subject can be found in the Appendix to this essay. Loewenthal buttresses his argument by another iconographic innovation, the change in the shape of the Tablets of the Law from a rounded top to a square top, because the rounded top was an innovation of Christian artists in the middle ages. He introduces a second element that contributes significantly and points to the central clue that will explain the mystery of the Maimonidean menorah and its relation to Habad messianism. Shortly after the introduction of the menorah, the daily study of sections of Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah* was instituted as a regular Habad practice. Loewenthal tries to explain this apparent innovation by reference to the practice of “*Daf Yomi,*” a concept introduced by Rabbi Meir Shapiro in 1922 to reinvigorate the study of Talmud in the Jewish community. The idea behind *Daf Yomi* was that Jews would study a page of Talmud every day in groups and this would encourage people to study Talmud. Why does Loewenthal have to rely on *Daf Yomi* as an inspiration for the daily study of the *Mishne Torah* in Habad? Aside from the fact that *Daf Yomi* started in 1922 and Habad began this practice more than sixty years later, there is a much closer and more relevant Habad tradition of daily study of central texts. This is the study of *HiTaT*, the daily study of *Humash*, *Tehillim*, and *Tanya* in a prescribed order that also has its origins in an earlier Habad upsurge of Messianism.

The story begins not in 1982 with the introduction of the menorah, but has its roots much earlier. Messianic speculation and active efforts to hasten the advent of the Messiah have been an
important aspect of the Lubavitch-Habad hasidic movement since the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson (1880–1950), managed to escape from Nazi occupied Warsaw in the fall of 1939 and made his way to New York where he reestablished the headquarters of Habad Hasidism. After his death in 1950, he was succeeded by his son-in-law, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), who became the seventh and last Lubavitcher Rebbe. Habad messianism had two periods of public activity, from 1940 to 1945 and 1982 to the present. The second period is a continuation and expansion of the first period.

Shortly after his arrival in New York, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson began to propagate his ideas that the beginning of World War II and the Nazi persecutions of the Jews in Europe were the birth pangs of the Messiah, a period of suffering and travail preceding the advent of the Messiah. Other Orthodox leaders and thinkers at the time were making similar pronouncements orally and in writing. What distinguished Schneerson from other Orthodox leaders was that he disseminated his ideas publicly and not only in private correspondence or learned rabbinic publications. He did not content himself with offering theological interpretations of the events engulfing European Jewry, but also took active measures that he believed would hasten the advent of the Messiah and the salvation of the Jewish people. In the fall of 1940, he published a series of four proclamations in the major Yiddish and English Jewish newspapers informing the Jewish public that the Messianic age was at hand and only repentance could hasten the advent of the Messiah and mitigate the suffering that characterized the birth pangs of the Messiah. His motto, which characterized his ideology, was “Immediate Repentance – Immediate Redemption.” He also created a secret society within Habad whose mission was to disseminate and implement his program to hasten the Messianic advent. He called it, Machene Israel, the camp of Israel.

The task of Machene Israel and its members was to implement the Rebbe’s program through a number of means. These included the following:

1. Disseminating his ideas through various publications and other forms of publicity. Ha-Keriyya veha-Kedushah was the primary publication of Machene Israel.
2. Engaging in specific spiritual activities that would have positive theurgic effects. These included the regular recitation of Psalms and the oral recitation of the Mishnah.
3. Encouraging other Jews to engage in activities that would hasten repentance and through that bring about the Redemption more quickly. For the most part, these were
activities relating to strengthening religious observance among ordinary Jews. Many of the outreach programs for which Habad is known today had their origins in this period and were part of the Habad messianic program. Some aspects of this program, like the publication, Ha-Keriyya veha-Kedushah were suppressed after 1945 as the horrors of the Holocaust became known and others were continued, but their messianic significance was downplayed and de-emphasized. The name, Machene Israel, was attached to a summer camp for boys in the 1950s.

Another Habad custom that had its origins in Machene Israel during the 1940s and had messianic implications that continues to the present is the daily order of study, described in a booklet entitled Ha-Yom Yom. On the twentieth of Kislev 5703 (1942), Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson sent a letter to his son-in-law, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, instructing him to organize a regular daily order of study for the coming year, the cycle of study beginning on the nineteenth of Kislev, known to Habad hasidim as the Rosh Hashanah of Hasidism. The hasid was expected to study the following things every day, optimally after the conclusion of the morning prayers. The items to be studied were:

1. the study of Humash (Bible) following the weekly cycle of Torah readings, with the commentary of Rashi. Each day, one aliya (portion of the chapter) would be studied;
2. the Book of Psalms on a cycle that would complete the whole book every month;
3. the Tanya, the classic work of Habad theology by Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad, to be completed in one year; and
4. customs of Habad Hasidism and brief comments by Habad leaders and Habad teachings and practice. These passages were found in the booklet Ha-Yom Yom.

Each daily entry would begin by listing the appropriate Torah section, Psalms for that day, and sections of Tanya for that day, followed by a few lines of Habad customs or sayings by previous leaders of Habad.

The title page of the first edition indicates that this cycle was to be followed for only one year. However, this practice continued and became established as a Habad practice that is followed to the present day. This order of study came to be called by the acronym, HiTaT. If there was any doubt about the messianic purpose of this order of
study, the Introduction to *Ha-Yom Yom* ends with the following quotation from a letter of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson.

> In the present time of the birth of the world (*harat Olam*), in which the whole world shudders with the birth pangs of the Messiah, that the Holy One has ignited the exile... It is the responsibility of every Jew, man and woman, old and young, to ask themselves the question: ‘What have I done and what am I doing to ease the birth pangs of the Messiah and to be worthy of the complete redemption through the Messiah?’

The connection to *Machene Israel* is also made explicit. The inside front cover of my copy (1972 ed.) gives a “brief outline” of the activities of *Machene Israel*. It mentions the goals, membership, tasks, Oral Mishnah study, and Psalm study groups, as the public pillars of *Machene Israel*. Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson is listed as founder and Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson as president.

In the spring of 1984, another layer was added to the well-established program of *HiTaT*. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, announced that every follower of *Habad* should begin the daily study of Maimonides’ classic halachic compendium, the *Mishne Torah*. An order of study was laid out that would complete the study of the whole *Mishne Torah* in either one year or three years. It is noteworthy that the cycle of study was laid out in such a way that it ends on the Rebbe’s birthday (11 Nisan) and the last chapter of the *Mishne Torah* that would be studied on the Rebbe’s birthday are the so-called “*Hilchot Mashiach*,” the laws that describe the qualifications and person of the Messiah. It is not a coincidence that this study program coincided with the beginnings of the explicit claims about the Messiahship of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

The recent *Habad* interest in the writings of Moses Maimonides is noteworthy in that there is no evidence that Maimonides or his teachings played any particularly significant role in *Habad* thought prior to the 1980s. While there are citations of Maimonides’ teachings in earlier *Habad* writings, they are of no greater significance or importance than the writings of other medieval authorities. In many respects, Maimonides the rationalist thinker and his ideas are antithetical to the mystical teachings of *Habad*. Not surprisingly, there has been no *Habad* resurgence of interest in the *Guide for the Perplexed* or Maimonides’ other writings. Rather the entire interest of *Habad* is centered on his classic halachic compendium, the *Mishneh Torah* and more specifically the last chapter of this compendious work, the so-called *Hilchot Mashiach*.

As a rationalist thinker, Maimonides rejected the supernatural legends and traditions that developed in the course of Jewish history surrounding the person and activities of the Messiah. His concept of
the Messiah was stripped of its magical and supernatural elements. For Maimonides, the Messiah would be a normal human being who would be born and die and the natural order would continue even after the advent of the messianic age. The Messiah would be distinguished by his accomplishments and not by signs, wonders, and miracles.

The second Habad innovation related to Maimonides is the “Maimonidean menorah.” Beginning in Hanukkah, 1982, the Rebbe advocated the adoption of the Maimonidean menorah, about the time when the Habad claims for the Messiahship of the Rebbe intensified and became the central preoccupation of Habad. All Habad menorahs since then, both those for public display and for Hanukkah, have followed this design.

The explanation for this Habad innovation is found in a Sihah (discourse) by the Lubavitcher Rebbe delivered on the Shabbat of parshat Terumah, 1983. After discussing several aspects of Maimonides’ description of the menorah, he comes to the shape of the branches as they are found in the illustration of the menorah in the Kaufmann Codex of the Mishne Torah. He calls attention to the fact that in Maimonides’ opinion and that of Rashi (1040–1105), the branches of the menorah were not semicircular arcs as in the standard depictions, but straight diagonals. He further suggests that the semicircular branches are based on the non-Jewish depiction of the menorah found on the arch of Titus. According to the Rebbe, this depiction was not accidental and was done to emphasize the domination of Rome over the Jews and to cause anguish to Jews. He further argues that the menorah should serve as a symbol of the Jews as a “light unto the nations” and not as a symbol of defeat and humiliation. The way to remedy this situation was to restore the menorah to its original form, with the straight diagonal arms as depicted in the Mishne Torah.

Professor Daniel Sperber in his article on the history of the Menorah in the Temple discusses the differences between the menorah as it is depicted on the Arch of Titus and the menorah in the Temple as understood in Rabbinic sources. Sperber suggests that the menorah in the Temple underwent a series of stylistic changes from the period of the Hasmoneans to the Herodian period. The menorah on the Arch of Titus was the Herodian one. However, the shape of the branches was not one of the changes. If one puts aside the statements of Rashi and Maimonides, there is no evidence, textual, archeological, or visual that the branches of the menorah were straight diagonals instead of the “standard” semicircular arcs.

Two other interesting pieces of evidence are the depiction of Psalm sixty-seven as a menorah and the family tree “menorah” of the previous Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson. Psalm sixty-seven, if one deletes the preamble, consists of seven sentences and forty-nine
words. Traditionally, it has been depicted in the shape of a menorah. It is found in a wide variety of sources, including kabbalistic prayer books, mizraḥ’s and shiviti’s. In all of the extant illustrations, the branches are in the “standard” form rather than the Maimonidean version. The family tree “menorah” is a family tree of Habad hasidism, beginning with Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760), the founder of Hasidism, continuing with his successor, Dov Ber, the Magid of Mezhirech (1704–72), and continuing through the six generations of Habad leadership ending with Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, and father-in-law of Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, who prepared this illustrated family tree in the shape of a menorah. It was prepared in 1920, and is also of the “standard” configuration and not the Maimonidean V shape.

To the best of my knowledge, no contemporary Jewish group, not influenced by Habad, has adopted the straight diagonal design nor was it used or displayed by any other Jewish group prior to Habad. I would suggest that the adoption of this new menorah was not accidental, but another aspect of the Habad messianic program. One could say that this menorah has become the public symbol of Habad messianism. It is symbolic of the Temple and the messianic hope for the speedy rebuilding of the Temple by the Messiah and it is a further implicit iconic reference to the Mishne Torah and the contemporary Habad doctrine of a Messiah who was born, lived, may or may not have died, and whose followers believe will soon return to establish the Messianic kingdom and rebuild the Temple.

APPENDIX

[The following text is from Likutei Sihot (Brooklyn, 1991), Vol. 21 (Parshat Terumah), pp. 168–72. I have only translated those sections of the siḥah that directly relate to the shape of the Menorah’s arms. The paragraph numbers and divisions follow the original text. The original language of this text is Yiddish. The translation is my own.]

8. There is another detail in the above-mentioned drawing of the menorah, which is in the Rambam’s manuscript. It is different from the standard depictions of the menorah—the six branches of the menorah extend from the central branch in a straight diagonal and not like the standard depictions of the menorah, which extend in a curved arc.

Even if one could argue, with great difficulty, that the Rambam’s depiction was only a rough sketch—it is explicitly stated in the commentary of R. Abraham, the son of the Rambam, that “the six branches…extend from the body of the menorah in a straight line,
as my teacher and father, of blessed memory, drew it and not in a curve as others have depicted it.”

This is also stated in Rashi's commentary on the Torah, that the six branches “extended upwards in a diagonal.” The result is that the standard depictions of the menorah are not according to the opinion of Rashi and the way the Rambam depicted them...

10. If these things are correct, then it is appropriate “to return the crown to its ancient glory”—that all those who make depictions of the menorah (in order to learn about the appearance of the menorah in the Mishkan and the Temple) should draw the branches of the menorah as diagonals, in accord with the opinion of Rashi and the Rambam...

Since the goal of the depiction is to serve as a reminder of the menorah that was in the Mishkan and the Temple—it is more than appropriate that they should change the depiction and depict the branches as a diagonal.

11. In addition to these, there is another matter: the standard depiction of the menorah (that the six branches are semicircular arcs) is a copy of the depiction of the menorah that non-Jews depicted in Rome, on the “victory arch” of Titus, may his name be obliterated...

In addition, the depiction of the menorah is not precise. This was done to emphasize the domination and rule of Rome over Jews, heaven forbid, and the words “Judea Capta” were even engraved there. There were times when Jews were forced to come to the arch to see what was written and engraved there, in order to humiliate, etc.

The result is that the depiction of the branches of the menorah as semicircular arcs (as they are depicted on the arch of Titus) should provoke a scream of gevalt—in addition and it is also important that this is the opposite of Rashi and the Rambam, etc.—also because this gives a certain agreement, etc., heaven forbid, to the depiction of the arch of Titus, which was made in order to cause anguish to Jews and humiliate them.

In contrast to this, a depiction of the Menorah should remind and arouse a Jew that his purpose is to be a “light to the nations”—“it is a testimony to everyone in the world that the Shekhinah rests among Israel—the image of the Menorah is made in such a manner that it reminds us of the opposite—how Rome vanquished the Jews, heaven forbid!

May it be His will, the true and complete redemption will come very soon and we will have the menorah in its true form in the third Temple, and all will see how the menorah looks.

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NOTES

1. The two basic books on the history of the menorah are, Yael Israeli, ed., *In the Light of the Menorah: Story of a Symbol* (Philadelphia, 1999); and Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Seven-branched Lampstand* (Ithaca, 1971). Both books contain a significant number of illustrations of the menorah from a variety of sources and all periods of Jewish history where iconographic evidence exists. However, neither book has any evidence for a straight-armed menorah aside from the illustration in the *Mishne Torah*.

2. The discussion of the menorah is found in *Mishne Torah*, *Hilchot Beit ha-Behirah* 3:7.


8. Ibid., p. 300.


11. A study of how Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson was able to escape is, Bryan M. Rigg, *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler’s Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (New Haven, 2004).

12. One prominent example is Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman’s publication, “The Footsteps of the Messiah.” For an analysis of this text see,


15. The nineteenth of Kislev commemorates the release of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad from a Czarist prison after being falsely accused of sedition.

16. HiTaT is an acronym for Humash (Torah) Tehillim (Psalms) and Tanya.

17. It should be noted that Habad does not rely on the Mishne Torah for halachic rulings. The Shulhan Arukh of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad, is the definitive halachic source for Habad.

18. The one-year cycle consists of three chapters a day, while the three year cycle consists of one chapter a day.

19. For a contrary perspective, see Loewenthal, “The Image of Maimonides in Habad Hasidism.”

20. The text is found in Likutei Sihot (Brooklyn, 1991), Vol. 21, pp. 164–72. Relevant selections from this siah can be found in the Appendix to this article.


23. See Yael Israeli (ed.), In the Light of the Menorah.

24. A mizrach is a decorated poster that indicates the direction of prayer. A shiviti is a similarly decorated poster that is a reminder to reflect on the presence of God. Much of the time, the center of the poster is a depiction of Psalm sixty-seven, in the shape of a menorah, which is surrounded by a variety of divine names or other Biblical passages, according to the taste of the creator of the poster.

25. Rabbi Reuben Brin, “Kanei ha-Menorah ha-Tehorah,” in Mordechai Laufer (ed.), Heikhal Menachem (Jerusalem, 1994), Vol. 1, pp. 272–73. This is a letter written to the Lubavitcher Rebbe about the Menorah. Brin mentions that he searched all the major kabbalistic prayer books and none of them supported the Habad menorah.

27. Some more radical elements within Habad believe that the Rebbe never died, but is in “occultation” somewhere in 770 Eastern Parkway, the Habad Headquarters.


29. Commentary on the Torah, on Ex. 25:32.

30. Words in bold face are emphasized in the original.

31. Here he cites Rabbi Joseph Kafach’s commentary on Maimonides’ Mishnah commentary as the source for this argument.


33. He cites Yalkut Shimoni, Remez 185, as the source of this statement.