

# The Menorah That Came Home

*Ninety years ago, a family fled Germany with their iconic menorah. This year, it came home.*

## The Menorah

This year, the New York Times reported, a special menorah made its way to its original home—Germany. It is the menorah famously lit in a window with the Nazi flag hanging across the street. A symbol of quiet defiance, it has become one of the most famous photographs associated with the Holocaust.

The picture was taken on Chanukah, 1931, in Kiel, Germany. By that year, the Nazi Party was already very powerful. Even though it wasn't yet the dominant party, it already was the second-largest party in the Bundestag, Germany's parliament. By then, just a bit more than a year before its rise to power, the Nazi Party's paramilitary wing known as the SA had already taken to the streets to impose terror on their opponents, particularly the Jews.

In the city of Kiel, there was a small Jewish community numbering just a bit over 500 Jews. The community's rabbi, Rabbi Akiva Boruch Posner, lived in an apartment with his family right across the street from the Nazi Party's local headquarters. When Rabbi Posner got up to light the menorah on a front windowsill, Rebbetzin Rochel Posner noticed the Nazi

flag through the window, bearing the infamous swastika symbol. It was then that she photographed the menorah with the swastika-adorned flag in the background.

A few days later, she developed and printed the photo and sent it to a Jewish newspaper in Germany. She wrote on the back of it, “Chanukah 1931; the flag says, ‘Die, Jew!’—the light replies, ‘Live forever, Jew!’”

The first part of the sentence, “Die, Jew!”, was a quote from a German song. The second part, “Live forever, Jew!”, was based on a verse from the Prophet Yoel (4:20), which says, “But Judah shall remain forever.”

Throughout the following year, Rabbi Posner had several run-ins with members of the Nazi Party. He even delivered a speech against them. And so in 1933, when the Nazi Party rose to power, community members begged him to leave Germany immediately.

That’s what Rabbi Posner did. He packed his bags and moved to Belgium. But before he departed, the whole community came to see him off at the train station. Rabbi Posner addressed his beloved flock and said, “There is no future for Jews in this place. Whoever can should flee!” He then requested that they always stay united.

Fortunately, the majority listened to him, and thus, the Jewish community of Kiel was largely saved. The bulk of them moved to Israel while others went to the United States—and when the Nazis came to take the town’s Jews to the death camps, they found only a few isolated Jews left.

Rabbi Posner himself made Aliyah to Israel in 1934, settling in Jerusalem. Along with his sizable personal library and personal property, Rabbi Posner also brought his menorah... and “the picture.” He would take pains to light that same menorah every year.

Many years passed, and the photo that had been sent to that Jewish newspaper at that time was sold by the family of the paper’s owner to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel’s official Holocaust Museum. But when Yad Vashem’s curators learned that the actual menorah still existed, and not too far from them in Jerusalem itself, they approached Rabbi Posner’s family and asked that it be donated, so that it could be displayed next to its famous photograph.

The Posner family agreed to loan it to Yad Vashem for the duration of 356 days of the year—but that for eight days out of the year, it would have to go back to the family. At each Chanukah, the family welcomes the menorah back home, and a grandson named Akiva Boruch, after Rabbi Akiva Boruch Posner, does the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah menorah with that famous menorah.

This year, their hometown of Kiel created an exhibition about the family, and invited them to participate. They decided to bring the menorah along, and this year it was lit in the President’s mansion, in the very same land that chased them out less than a century ago.

And that brings us right to this week’s Torah portion.

## Cows and Stars

The Parshah of Mikeitz starts with the story of the Pharaoh's dreams. What did the Pharaoh dream about? The answer that typically pops up in most people's minds is: cows! Despite the fact that the Pharaoh actually had two dreams (the first being cows and the second grain stalks), what everyone remembers is COWS.

So last week, at the start of Parshas Vayeishev, we read how Yosef also had two dreams. What did Yosef dream about? As you surely remember, "the sun, the moon, and 11 stars." We all know that line from the Passover song, "Who Knows One?" from the Haggadah. Now, that may be true—but that was actually Yosef's *second* dream. In Yosef's *first* dream, he dreamt about bundles of *stalks*. But what does everyone remember? The sun, the moon and the stars.

Why indeed did G-d communicate with Yosef using the symbols of heavenly bodies, while to the Pharaoh, He used cows?

The Prophet Yirmiyahu (46:20) says, "Egypt was a fair heifer." Now the Hebrew word translated as "heifer" there, *eglah*, refers to a young female cow. In fact, the national symbol of ancient Egypt was the *egel*, a calf (which also explains why the Jews made a Golden Calf when they left Egypt). And so when G-d communicated to the Pharaoh in a dream and wanted to hint to him what Egypt's situation was, He did so with the very symbol of the country itself: cows.

On the other hand, in the Torah, the Jews are symbolized by the stars.

Right at the beginning, G-d speaks to Avraham and says, “Please gaze upon the heavens and count the stars [to see] if you can count them; thus shall be your seed” (Bereishis 15:5). And again in the episode of the Akeidah, the Binding of Yitzchak, G-d says to Avraham, “I shall surely increase your seed like the stars of the heavens” (Bereishis 22:17). And that goes up right through Moshe Rabbeinu, who at the start of Devarim (1:10) says, “The L-rd your G-d increased you, and left you today like the stars of the heavens for quantity.” And so when G-d communicates to Yosef about the Jewish Nation, he uses the symbols of the sun, moon and stars.

What’s the difference between these two symbols? For starters, stars symbolize the spiritual. When a person wants to indicate G-d, he points up—as the verse states, “the heavens are to G-d.” The sky symbolizes G-d. At the same time, “the earth [He gave] to the sons of man”—the cow symbolizes the ground which cannot gaze upon the heavens. Instead, the earth symbolizes the physical and the material. Thus, the stars and the cows symbolize opposite things: the stars, which symbolize the Jewish Nation, symbolize G-d and that which is spiritual, while the cows symbolize everything that is physical and material. These dreams represent the struggle between the spiritual and the physical.

This explains something else:

## **The Dispute**

In these weeks, we read the entire saga of Yosef and his brothers. Everyone wonders what’s behind this clash of the titans. The Rebbe explains in a Sichah that Yaakov Avinu (and

likewise the Patriarchs Avraham and Yitzchok) and the Tribes isolated themselves from this world and therefore chose to be shepherds, so as to minimize contact with worldly matters to the extent possible—matters that are likely to disturb Torah study and service of G-d. That was not the case with Yosef, who from his youth was not a shepherd. Even when he was sold as a slave in Egypt, he found himself busy with running Potiphar's business. As the verse states, "And he came home *to perform his labor,*" which Onkelos translates as, "*to inspect the accounting records*"—meaning that Yosef was (among other things) essentially an accountant. Everyone knows that accounting is quite burdensome, especially when Yosef was later made second-in-command to the king and ran the entire kingdom. (See Likutei Sichos, Vol. III, pg. 828; Likutei Sichos Vol. 25, pg. 255.)

So Yosef and his brothers were really engaged in an ideological dispute. His brothers wanted to continue in the ways of their forefathers who had been shepherds. They knew that the best way to not be influenced by the big world out there was to simply avoid it. And so they wanted to be shepherds, as they in fact said to the Pharaoh (Bereishis 47:3), "Your servants have been shepherds, both us and also our fathers."

Yosef HaTzadik, on the other hand, argued that we need to take the faith of our ancestor Avraham and go with it to "the barren land," right into the middle of Egypt," and popularize it there. As the Rebbe says, "When you come to Egypt, you can't stay isolated from the world because the entire purpose of exile [there] is to refine the world, as the Sages say, 'G-d did not exile the Jewish Nation... but to increase converts among them,'

which also (and, in fact, primarily) refers to those sparks of holiness that are refined by the Jews through interacting with the world” (Hisvaduyos 5749, Vol. II, pg. 156).

Yosef argued that in the clash between the stars and the cows—between the Jewish Nation and Egypt, between Judaism and Nazism, between the spiritual and the physical—the stars, the spiritual, would win. And indeed, in the end, the Jewish Nation went down to Egypt and ultimately, Egypt lost the clash and the Jewish Nation left “with an upraised hand.”

And this is what is happening once again in our day and age. A land which once chased its Jews out (to put it mildly) now invited those same Jews to kindle the light of the menorah and spread its warmth throughout their land. Let’s hope that this will help usher in the spiritual side’s final victory—with the coming of Moshiach.