

THE MENORAH PSALM AS A CONTINUATION AND COMPLETION OF THE PRIESTLY BENEDICTION

By

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Psalm 67 is historically known as the *Menorah Psalm*, and people have rearranged its verses into the form of a *menorah* since as early as the fifteenth century¹. Furthermore, because this *Psalm* consists of 49 words (excluding the introductory words of the first verse), it has often been used in conjunction with the counting of the 49 days between *Passover* and *Shavuot*. In this brief paper we will explore many of the various patterns to be found in the *Menorah Psalm*, and we will analyze this *Psalm*, in particular, as a continuation of the well-known *Priestly Benediction* found in *Numbers 6:24-26*.



Psalm 67

¹ “The Menorah Psalm” by Shubert Spero, *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol 37, No. 1, 2009

Below are translations of both the *Priestly Benediction* and the *Menorah Psalm*.

“The Lord bless you, and keep you;

The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

(Numbers 6:24-26)

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶכָּה׃
יְאֵר יְהוָה אֲפָנִי וְיִחַנְנֶכָּה׃
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה אֲפָנִי וְיִשֶּׂם לִי שְׁלוֹם׃

The *Priestly Benediction* in Hebrew

2. *God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let His face shine upon us. Selah.*

3. *That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.*

4. *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*

5. *O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.*

6. *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*

7. *The earth has yielded her produce; and God, our own God, shall bless us.*

8. *God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him.*

(Psalm 67:2-8)

אֱלֹהִים יִהְיֶה וַיְבָרֶכְנוּ וַיִּבְרַכְנוּ יֵאָר פְּנֵי אֱתָנֹו סֵלָה
 לְדַעַת בְּאֶרֶץ דְּרֹכְךָ בְּכֹל גּוֹיִם יִשׁוּעַתְךָ
 יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כָּלֵם
 יִשְׁמְחוּ וַיִּרְנְנוּ לְאֵמִים כִּי תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְלְאֵמִים בְּאֶרֶץ תְּנַהֵם סֵלָה
 יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כָּלֵם
 אֶרֶץ נִתְנָה יְבוּלָהּ יְבָרֶכְנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 יְבָרֶכְנוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּירָאוּ אוֹתוֹ כֹּל אַפְסֵי אֶרֶץ

Psalm 67:2-8 in Hebrew

There are clearly some connections between the language of the *Priestly Benediction* and the *Menorah Psalm*. For instance, one cannot fail to notice the similarity between the first and second verses of the *Priestly Benediction* where it says, “*The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you,*” and verse 2 of *Psalm 67* where we read, “*God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let His face shine upon us.*” Clearly *Psalm 67* continues a theme begun in *Numbers 6*. Now let’s look at some other patterns, contrasts, and comparisons we can find in the text.

Names of God in the Priestly Benediction and the Menorah Psalm

There are also meaningful differences between the two documents, and some of the more important distinctions between the *Priestly Benediction* and the *Menorah Psalm* can only be viewed in the original Hebrew. For example, in the *Priestly Benediction*, *God* is referred to by the sacred four-letter name spelled as *yud-hey-vav-hey* which, instead of being read the way it is written, is generally pronounced as *Adonai* for *Lord*, but in the *Menorah Psalm*, the name *Elohim* is used for *God*. The import of this is that there is a tradition that *Adonai* represents *God’s* merciful aspect while *Elohim* represents *God* in the role of dispenser of divine justice.

“Wherever the Tetragrammaton (Lord/Adonai) is employed it connotes the Attribute of Mercy, as in the verse, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious (Exodus 34:6), ... Wherever Elohim (God) is employed it connotes the Attribute of Judgment: Thus: You shall not revile Elohim- God (Exodus 22:27); the cause of both parties shall come before Elohim-God (Exodus 22:8).”

(Genesis Rabbah 33:3)

“When I am judging created beings, I am called Elohim, ... When I am merciful towards My world, I am called "Adonai", for "Adonai" refers to the Attribute of Mercy, as it is said: The Lord, the Lord (Adonai, Adonai), God, merciful and gracious (Exodus 34:6).”

(Exodus Rabbah III:6)

“For this reason did the Attribute of Justice seek to attack Moses, as it says: And Elohim spoke unto Moses (Exodus 6:2). But when God reflected that Moses only spoke thus because of Israel's suffering, He retracted and dealt with him according to the Attribute of Mercy, as it says: And he said unto him: I am Adonai (Exodus 6:2).”

(Exodus Rabbah VI:1)

“Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and of mercy, and may it then

stand!’ Hence the expression,’ THE LORD GOD (Adonai Elohim) (Genesis 2:4).”

(Genesis Rabbah XII:15)

In this regard, one can also note that the sum of the numerical values of the Hebrew letters at the beginning of each verse of the *Menorah Psalm* is 72, *aleph + lamed + yud + yud + yud + aleph + yud = 1+30+10+10+10+1+10 = 72, and this is important because 72 is also the numerical value of *chesed*, the Hebrew word for mercy (*chet + samach + dalet = 8+60+4 = 72*). In the *Seferotic Tree of Life*, *chesed* corresponds to the right side of the tree and to the merciful aspect of *Adonai*. The left side of the tree, however, corresponds to concepts such as form, limitation, regulation, justice, and the *God* name *Elohim*. Thus, a picture is starting to emerge of the *Priestly Benediction* and the *Menorah Psalm* as complementary parts of a single whole with the *Priestly Benediction* invoking *God’s* mercy and the *Menorah Psalm* addressing *God’s* justice. Furthermore, the fact that the first letters of verses 2 through 8 add up to 72 serves as an additional bridge or connector between the two pieces of text.*

The Menorah Psalm as the Completion of the Priestly Benediction

The first cycle that we become aware of in the *Torah* is the cycle of seven days that is highlighted in the creation story in *Genesis*. Consequently, seven is a number of completion, and if we have seven sevens, or 49, then this can represent the completion of a much larger or grander cycle of events. This is seen, for instance, in the duration of the 49 days that occurred between the first *Passover* celebration and the receiving of the

Torah at Mount Sinai, which is commemorated today by the holiday of *Shavuot*. Furthermore, in viewing the number 49 as representing completion, the presence of 49 words in the *Menorah Psalm* also suggests that it is the completion of that which was begun in the *Priestly Benediction*.

Now let's look at the number of words in each verse for verses 2 through 8. When we do so, we obtain the sequence 7, 6, 6, 11, 6, 6, 7. Clearly, this pattern is by design and not by accident, and it is up to us to decipher the meaning of this pattern. My proposal is that the seven words in both verses 2 and 8 are meant to suggest to us seven sevens, or in other words, 49 as once again the completion of a grand journey or cycle. Similarly, the appearance of six words in verses 3 and 7 can be interpreted as six sixes, or 36, and the second six words in each of verses 4 and 6 gives us another six sixes or 36. And $36+36 = 72$. In other words, we have found a numerical pattern that not only reiterates the occurrence of the 49 words in this *Psalm*, but only reinforces the importance of the number 72 as a link between the *Menorah Psalm* and the *Priestly Benediction*. Additionally, because we have discovered each of these numbers in the *Psalm* in two different ways, that adds credence to our suspicion that these numbers are not there as a result of random chance.

Analysis of the Content of the Text

We not only find symmetry between verses 2 and 8, 3 and 7, and 4 and 6 with regard to the number of letters in each verse, we also find symmetry between these verses with

regard to the verbal content of each one. For example, let's look first at the content of verses 2 and 8 below.

2. God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let his face shine upon us. Selah.

8. God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him.

Both of these verses contain within them blessings from *God*, and in this respect, they reflect the content of the *Priestly Benediction*. Now let's examine the next pair, verses 3 and 7.

3. That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

7. The earth has yielded her produce; and God, our own God, shall bless us.

Both of these verses mention the *earth*, and there are many ways in which the *God* name *Elohim* is connected with the *earth* and creation. One way is through a well-known *gematria* where it is observed that the numerical value of *Elohim* is the same as that of *hatevah*, a word for *nature* or *the nature*.

Elohim = *aleph* + *lamed* + *hey* + *yud* + *mem* = $1+30+5+10+40 = 86$

hatevah = *hey* + *tet* + *bet* + *ayin* = $5+9+2+70 = 86$

Additionally, as already mentioned above, the *God* name *Elohim* refers to the left side of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life* which is the side of structure and form, and that includes the

physical world. And finally, we have a passage from the *Zohar* which eloquently describes a connection between *Elohim* and the physical universe in terms that are reminiscent of the Big Bang theory of creation.

“It is written: And the intelligent shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:3). There was indeed a 'brightness' (Zohar). The Most Mysterious struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This 'beginning' then extended, and made for itself a palace for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words 'the holy seed is the stock thereof' (Isaiah 6:13). Again there was Zohar, in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this 'beginning' the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called Elohim, and this doctrine is contained in the words, 'By means of a beginning IT created Elohim.'”

(Zohar I:15a)

Hence, as we move from the verse pair 2 and 8 to the verse pair 3 and 7, we are also making the transition from *Adonai* to *Elohim* and from the theme of the *Priestly Benediction* to that of the *Menorah Psalm*. And if we now look at verses 4 and 6, we can see what our final destination is.

4. *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*

6. *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*

These two verses are a word for word repetition of one another in both Hebrew and English, and if nothing else, this should be our clue that we are supposed to pair the verses together in the manner in which we have above. Furthermore, when we look at the text, a very beautiful final message becomes clear. Namely, that we are supposed to complete the cycle and close the loop by praising *God*. Alternate translations say to let the peoples *thank you* or *acknowledge you*, but regardless of which translation one prefers, the message is that we need to give back to *God*.

“R. Hanina b. Papa said, ‘To enjoy this world without a benediction is like robbing the Holy One.’”

(B. Berachot 35b)

Another proof of this may be found by looking at the final letters in each verse of the *Menorah Psalm*. If we add up their numerical values, we get *hey-caf-mem-hey-mem-vav-tzaddi* = $5+20+40+5+40+6+90 = 206$, and this is the same as the value of the phrase *peoples praise you* (*yud + vav + dalet + vav + caf + ayin + mem + yud + mem = 10+6+4+6+20+70+40+10+40 = 206*) that is found in verses 4 and 6. Thus, we could say that the cycle begins with *God’s* mercy, continues with blessings becoming tangible², and ends with us acknowledging *God* with praise, thanks, and gratitude. An yet another confirmation of this can be found by noticing that the first and last letters of verses 4 and

² Verse 7: The earth has yielded her produce.

6 are, respectively, *yud* and *mem* which together spell *yam*, the Hebrew word for sea. In mystical Judaism, the sea is a symbol for *God*, and in *Ecclesiastes* we find the whole cycle of the flow from *God* and back to *God* beautifully illustrated by the interplay between the rivers and the sea.

“All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place from where the rivers come, there they return again.”

(Ecclesiastes 1:4)

The framework of the *Priestly Benediction* when combined with the *Menorah Psalm* now becomes clear. *God* blesses us as *Adonai* in the *Priestly Benediction*, blessings bear fruit and take form and structure through *Elohim* in the *Menorah Psalm*, and then finally, we complete the transaction by giving our thanks and gratitude back to *God*. If this theory is to hold true, however, then we should find a synopsis of this message in the remaining verse, verse 5, which is at the heart of the *Menorah Psalm*.

Analyzing the Fifth Verse of the Menorah Psalm

We now want to look at verse 5 to see in what ways the messages we have already uncovered might also be present within this passage. First, we note that this verse contains 48 letters³ which is somewhat of a disappointment since 49 is the number of completion. However, do not despair! My theory is that there is a forty-ninth letter there;

³ Some texts show 47 letters as a result of using an alternate spelling for מְדַשׁוּר that omits the letter *vav*.

it is simply hidden like an *afikoman* for us to find. Thus, let's begin to take a closer look at this verse to see what we can uncover.

5. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.

In the text of this verse we read at the beginning of gladness and joy, and this harkens back to *Adonai* and the blessings of the *Priestly Benediction*. Next, we read about judging the peoples righteously, and the aspect of justice, as we have noted, is associated with *Elohim*. Thus, so far we are on track with regard to the themes we have identified.

Next, we have already mentioned that in the Hebrew for this verse there are 11 words, so let's try to give some explanation to this. First, let me mention that there is an old tradition in rabbinic literature that odd numbers are lucky and even numbers are unlucky. This may be due to the fact, first of all, that everything that *God* has created has been in pairs as is written in *Ecclesiastes 7:14*, "*This against this made Elohim.*" Thus, the created world is always described by even numbers. However, if we also include *God* in the picture, then we have an odd number, and that is the way it is supposed to be. This is elaborated on further in the *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Formation*, where a basic pattern is that we have one thing opposite another along with spirit or consciousness as a mediating intelligence.

"Neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Divine Spirit." (Genesis Rabbah VIII:9)

“Three mothers aleph-mem-shin in the world, air, water, fire. Heaven was created from fire, and earth was created from water, and air from spirit/breath decides between them.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 3:4)

The number 10 can refer not only to the ten utterances with which *God* created the universe, but also to man who has 10 fingers. And now, by adding *God* to both man and the creation, the cycle is complete, and this may be the true meaning behind why we have 11 words in verse 5. We need to add *God* to our lives, and we can do this by acknowledging *God* and by thanking *God* for blessings of both a spiritual and a tangible nature that we have received. Furthermore, yet another clue that this particular verse speaks of the need to connect with *God* is that the first and last letters of this verse, *yud* and *hey*, spell *Yah*, one of the more prominent names for *God* in Hebrew.

“With ten utterances was the world created.”

(Pirkei Avot 5:1)

“R. Johanan said: The ten utterances with which the world was created. What are these? These are the expressions ‘And God said’ in the first chapter of Genesis. But aren’t there only nine? — The words ‘In the beginning’ are also a creative utterance, since it is written, By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth (Psalm 33:6).”

(B. Megilah 21b)

“Ten sefirot of constraint in number. Ten fingers, five against five, and a unifying alliance oriented in the middle in the cut of the tongue and in the cut of the flesh.”

(Sefer Yetzirah 1:3)

Verse 5 is the heart of the *Menorah Psalm*, but we can go even further by finding the word that is the middle or heart of this particular verse, and that word is *amim* (*ayin-mem-yud-mem*) which means *peoples*. The first two letters of this word (*ayin-mem*) can spell either *people* or *with* or *accompanying*. The last two letters of this word when written in reverse order spell *mi* (*mem-yud*) which is Hebrew for *who*, and in the *Zohar* this is one of the more interesting names for *God*, i.e. *God* presented simply as the unknowable, unanswerable question, “*Who?*”⁴ Consequently, the middle word of verse 5 can now be reinterpreted as *God accompanying people*, and that reiterates how we close the loop and complete the cycle that commenced with the *Priestly Benediction*. By acknowledging *God* we bring closure to this cycle of the giving and receiving of blessings. Additionally, if we take these last two letters, *yud* and *mem*, in the order they are given, then they spell *yam* (sea) which, we’ve noted, is also a symbol for *God*.

“The interrogative Mi (Who) created eleh (these), but subsequently when it extended and completed itself, it became Yam (Sea).”

(Zohar I:30a)

And now, if we are still searching for the *afikoman*, the letter that is missing to bring the count in verse 5 up to 49, we can say that the missing letter is the letter *aleph*. We know

⁴ Zohar I:1b

this because in this verse *God* symbolizes the missing letter, and the silent letter *aleph* has a glyph that can be decomposed into two *yuds* and a *vav* in order to yield a numerical value of 26, the same value as *yud-hey-vav-hey* which is the most sacred name for *God* in Judaism.

$$aleph = \aleph = \aleph + \aleph + \aleph = yud + yud + vav = 26 = yud + hey + vav + hey$$

And finally, a confirmation that we are on the correct path may be found by looking at the word *l'amim* in verse 5 that occurs both before and after the middle word that we're analyzing. This word also means *peoples*, but it is spelled with the letter *aleph* instead of the letter *ayin*. Thus, this is a confirmatory hint that the silent letter *aleph*, symbolizing *God*, is, indeed, the invisible 49th letter for our verse! Furthermore, if we count the number of letters in verses 2 through 8, we reach a total of 215, but if we add our invisible letter *aleph* to this, then we reach 216. And this number has meaning for us because on the left side of the *Sefirotic Tree of Life*, *gevurah* has a numerical value of 216 (*gimmel + bet + vav + resh + hey = 3+2+6+200+5 =216*), and this associates 216 with *Elohim*, the *God* name that resonates with the left side of the tree.

Conclusions

What we know for certain is that the text of the *Menorah Psalm* does echo the *Priestly Benediction* and that there are patterns within the *Menorah Psalm* that are probably the result of human invention rather than chance. Beyond that, we can never be absolutely

certain if what we read into the text is, indeed, what the author intended in the first place. Nonetheless, capturing the author's original intentions is not always the purpose of such exegesis. Instead, it is through extended analysis such as this that we can come up with patterns and explanations that are meaningful to us even if they were not part of the original design, and in this instance, I believe, we have derived beautiful lessons from these two separate portions of *Biblical* text. Whether there was an original intent to interpret the text this way or not, it is still a beautiful and a coherent way in which to understand the *Priestly Benediction* and the *Menorah Psalm* as two parts of a single whole that teach us a valuable lesson regarding giving back to *God*. And as a final remark, I note that when we add up the number of spaces in each of verses 2 through 8, what we might call the *white fire* between the *black fire*, then we obtain $6+5+5+10+5+5+6 = 42$, and according to *Rashi's*⁵ comments on *Exodus 25:35*, the total number of decorative elements on the *menorah* is 42. Thus, it is quite appropriate that this *Psalm* has been designated the *Menorah Psalm*.

“R. Simeon b. Lakish said, ‘The scroll which God gave to Moses was of white fire and its writing of black fire. It was itself fire and it was hewn out of fire and completely formed of fire and given in fire, as it says, ‘At His right hand was a fiery law unto them (Deuteronomy 33:2).’””

⁵ “The Menorah Psalm” by Shubert Spero, *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol 37, No. 1, 2009