# A Human Menorah

Spoken drash · 1 Kislev 5787 · November 11, 2026

**Gutn Chodesh, everyone, and good Shabbos.** For Rosh Chodesh Kislev and our Erev Shabbos Toldos drash, let’s ask what light we can bring into the world before we light the first Chanukah candle.

The Bnei Yissaschar begins his maamarim on Kislev and Teves with the *tziruf* of Hashem’s Name for this month. The four letters are **Vav–Yud–Ke–Ke**. They come from the first four words of a pasuk in Parshas Vayechi.

> וַיַּ֣רְא יוֹשֵׁ֣ב הָאָ֔רֶץ הַֽכְּנַעֲנִ֖י אֶת־הָאֵ֑בֶל בְּגֹ֣רֶן הָאָ֔טָד.
>
> *The Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning at Goren HaAtad.*

Think about that for a moment. If you asked me to find a pasuk for the month of Chanukah, I’d look for a pasuk about light. Maybe I’d look for a pasuk about the Menorah in the Beis HaMikdash. Here the Torah takes us to a threshing floor, in the middle of a funeral procession, and the first thing it tells us is what **the Canaanites saw**.

The Bnei Yissaschar gives us the connection to the month. He brings a tradition that Yaakov Avinu passed away on the first day of Sukkos and was brought to burial during Chanukah. So there is a reason we’re in Parshas Vayechi. But even within that parsha, there are plenty of pesukim to choose from. **Why these four words?** Why does the Torah want us to stand for a moment with the people on the side of the road and see the procession through their eyes?

And listen to what those people say.

## אֵבֶל כָּבֵד זֶה לְמִצְרָיִם.

*“This is a heavy mourning for Egypt.”*

It’s Yaakov Avinu’s funeral. Yosef has lost his father. The shevatim have lost their father. And the people watching say, “Look what *Egypt* has lost.” What did they see that made them say that?

And their words stay with the place. The pasuk goes on to say that it was called *Avel Mitzrayim*. Somebody coming through that area afterward would hear a name that came from what the people on the roadside had said. Before we ever get to Chanukah and the person passing a Jewish window, the Torah is already asking us to listen to the person passing by.

Bereishis 50:7–14 · Bnei Yissaschar, Kislev–Teves, maamar 1, §1

# What Egypt had lost

The **Abarbanel** gives a remarkable pshat. The Canaanites thought they were watching the funeral of the *king of Egypt*. They saw the Egyptian dignitaries, the size of the procession, and the magnitude of the hesped. Who else, they thought, would Egypt mourn this way?

Imagine somebody standing there and asking, “Who was he?” The Abarbanel says the Torah records that reaction to tell us something about the kavod Yaakov received. The people watching had no part in arranging the funeral. Their astonishment tells us what it looked like to somebody who came upon it from the outside.

The Abarbanel gives another possibility. The Canaanites may have been frightened by what they saw and hoped this was an omen for Egypt alone. You can hear the same words either way. “What a loss for Egypt,” or, “May this loss stay with Egypt.” Either way, they had to stop and reckon with what had just passed through their land.

The **Alshich** asks what Egypt itself had lost. The Egyptians had lived with Yaakov’s presence, and their country had received brachah in his merit. The Canaanites could see that the loss in this one family was a loss for a whole country. They could also see what it might mean for them that Yaakov was being brought into their territory.

Then the **Kli Yakar** asks why the Torah keeps mentioning the *threshing floor*. We’ve already been told where they stopped. Why tell us again that the Canaanites saw the mourning at Goren HaAtad?

A threshing floor is where you bring grain. Here, says the Kli Yakar, was a threshing floor with thorns all around it and no opening to get in. The Egyptians saw that and understood it as a sign. In Yaakov’s merit the famine had lifted. Now they had reason to fear that the food they had come to count on would be out of reach again.

That’s how the Kli Yakar hears the word כָּבֵד**, heavy**. The mourning was heavy because they remembered what it was like when the famine was heavy. Standing at a place where grain ought to have been available, they began to understand the brachah they had been living with.

Those are three ways to hear what the Canaanites said. First they saw how much kavod Yaakov received. Then we begin to understand why Egypt felt the loss. And in the Kli Yakar’s reading, the very place where they stopped made the loss visible. **Now the Gemara asks us to look at what the people who came to meet the procession did.**

Abarbanel on Vayechi, on Bereishis 50:7–14 · Alshich on Bereishis 50:10–11 · Kli Yakar on Bereishis 50:10

# One crown at Goren HaAtad

Chazal picture a threshing floor surrounded by a hedge of thorns. And they tell us that Yaakov's coffin, too, was surrounded. It was surrounded by **crowns**.

The delegations had come ready to fight. Then they saw **Yosef's crown hanging on his father's coffin**. And when they saw it, they took off their own crowns and hung them there too. Chazal count thirty-six crowns.

Pause. Give the congregation a moment to picture the crown.

In Egypt, if you saw that crown on Yosef's head, you knew the man wearing it had power. At Goren HaAtad you see the same crown hanging on his father's coffin. Now you know something else about Yosef. You know what he does with his position when it comes time to honor his father.

The other rulers understand the gesture. They have crowns of their own. They know what it means to take one off. A moment earlier they were ready for a fight. Now they are standing there with their crowns hanging around Yaakov.

> **They saw what Yosef honored, and they reached for their own crowns.**

Rabbi Yochanan notices what the Torah does with the order of the procession. **On the way out** of Egypt, Pharaoh's servants and the elders of Egypt are mentioned before Yosef's brothers. **On the way back**, the brothers are mentioned first. Rabbi Yochanan says that once the Egyptians saw the kavod accorded to Israel, they themselves treated the brothers with kavod.

That change is still visible after they've left the threshing floor. You can see it in who goes first on the way home.

The Midrash asks what the Canaanites themselves did. Rabbi Yudan bar Shalom says they pointed and said, אֵבֶל כָּבֵד זֶה לְמִצְרַיִם. They acknowledged the weight of somebody else's grief. And the Midrash calls even that **chesed**.

One person can offer a crown. Someone else has a few words to offer. The Torah records what the people on the side of the road saw, and Chazal ask us to notice what they did once they had seen it. That brings us to the first word of our tziruf, **וַיַּרְא**.

Sotah 13a · Bereishis Rabbah 100:6

# Which way does the menorah face?

The **Kedushas Levi** says Chanukah is a yom tov of *re'iyah*, of seeing. On Chanukah we have a chance to perceive the good Hashem has already bestowed on us. He connects that directly to the first word of the Kislev pasuk, וַיַּרְא.

There's another kind of seeing in the mitzvah itself. The Gemara tells us to put the ner Chanukah at the entrance to the house, facing outward. Someone who lives upstairs can put it in a window facing the street. A Jewish family lights the menorah at home, and the mitzvah takes account of somebody walking by outside.

The Gemara measures the time for the lights by the people still out in the marketplace. Rashi identifies the last people there as the *Tarmudai*, non-Jewish sellers of kindling. The poskim discuss who counts for the halachic obligation of *pirsumei nisa*. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik drew attention to what we ourselves say in *Al HaNissim*.

> וּלְךָ עָשִׂיתָ שֵׁם גָּדוֹל וְקָדוֹשׁ בְּעוֹלָמֶךָ.
>
> *"You made for Yourself a great and holy Name in Your world."*

In Your **world**. Rav Soloveitchik understood the miracle as making Hashem's Name known in the wider world, among Jews and non-Jews. That makes it easier to hear why the Torah's account of what a Canaanite saw might belong to the month of Chanukah.

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** wrote about this in a letter to Mrs. Ruth Benjamin in Johannesburg. He made two observations. The first was that every night we add a light. Two lights on the second night are already a beautiful way to do the mitzvah. When the third night comes, we add another one. There's room to grow even in something we already do well.

His second observation was that the light faces **outward**. The Rebbe writes that Torah and mitzvos should shape the way we live at home and the way we live outside it. The Torah's teachings about morality and justice should reach the wider world.

What does it look like when something Jewish reaches the people on the other side of the window? Let me take you to Billings, Montana.

Kedushas Levi, Derushim LeChanukah · Shabbos 21b and Rashi · OU Torah, on Rav Soloveitchik and pirsumei nisa · Kislev 5758 Souvenir Journal, p. 51

# The windows of Billings

In December 1993, in Billings, Montana, Brian and Tammie Schnitzer had put Chanukah decorations in the front bedroom window of their house. It was their five-year-old son Isaac's room. There were Stars of David, a menorah, and the words *Happy Chanukah*.

On Thursday night, December 2, the children were home with a babysitter. Someone came close to the house and threw a piece of cinder block through Isaac's window. It hit his bed hard enough to leave an indentation. Glass from the double-paned window scattered across the bed. Isaac happened to be in another room. Nobody was hurt.

The *Billings Gazette* reported that this was the second time in two weeks that a window had been smashed at the home of a Jewish family in Billings. The police chief took the attack seriously and called for a response from the community. At the Schnitzers' house, the advice they received was to take the Jewish symbols out of the window for their safety.

Put yourself in the mother's place. There's glass on your child's bed. Chanukah is still a few days away. And now you're trying to find the words to explain to a five-year-old why the Chanukah decorations have to come down.

> **"But how do you explain that to a child?"**

That was the question Tammie Schnitzer asked in the *Gazette*. A woman named Margaret McDonald, who worked with churches across Montana, read it. She had young children of her own. She tried to imagine telling them that they had to take down their holiday decorations because it might be dangerous to leave them up. She called her minister. He began calling other churches. And people in Billings began putting menorahs in their own windows.

On December 11, the *Gazette* printed a full-page picture of a menorah. Its editorial called the Schnitzers **"one of our neighbors."** It said that people of different faiths were coming together in support of religious liberty, and it asked readers to display the menorah **"on a door or window from now until Christmas."**

It was a piece of newspaper. You could pull it out, walk over to the window, and tape it to the glass. And that's what people did. There were soon thousands of paper menorahs across Billings.

Billings Gazette, Dec. 4, 1993 report · Dec. 11 editorial, reproduced in full · First Congregational Church account

# Two sides of the window

Years later, Tammie Schnitzer remembered what surprised Isaac. He looked around and saw all those menorahs in the windows. *He hadn't realized there were so many Jews in Billings.*

His mother explained that the people putting them up belonged to all different religions.

Pause. Let Isaac's surprise land before returning to the pasuk.

At Goren HaAtad, the people who had come ready to fight saw Yosef's crown and hung up their own. In Billings, it was the neighbours who went home and put menorahs in their windows. Both times, the people standing outside had a choice about what to do with what they saw. They could do something themselves.

Think about what **Isaac** got to see. One person had shown him what could happen to a Jewish window in the town where he lived. His neighbours gave him something else to see about that same town. And they gave it to him in a form a five-year-old could understand. He could look up at the windows and see it for himself.

So what does a **human menorah** look like? The Gemara in Yoma says שֶׁיְּהֵא שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם מִתְאַהֵב עַל יָדְךָ. Through you, Hashem's Name can become beloved. The Gemara describes someone who learns Torah, deals honestly, and speaks pleasantly with people. Then it asks what the people who see him say about him.

A neighbour may never sit at our Shabbos table. He may see how we speak to the person behind the counter when the order is wrong. He may see us keep a promise when it costs us something. He may see us show up when a family on the street is going through a difficult time. That's where the Torah we learn inside reaches the street.

When Chanukah comes and we stand by the menorah, let's look at it from both sides of the window.

> **From inside,** what good has Hashem given me that I need to see again?
>
> **From outside,** what can somebody see of that light in the way I live?

We'll light the first candle in a few weeks. As we begin Kislev, think of one person you'll see this week and one thing you can do for them. **That's a little light you can carry out the door this week.** Gutn Chodesh and good Shabbos.

Tammie Schnitzer's recollection, Not In Our Town · Library of Congress, Billings response · Yoma 86a