

The title of this week's parashah derives from the root עלה, which forms words such as *Aliyah* and means to ascend. *Beha'a lot'cha* (8:2) is commonly translated as "When you kindle ...", but actually means "when you cause to rise up." Citing Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 21a, Rashi explains that the menorah must be lit so that the flame ascends by itself and not by means of something else, i.e. adjusting the wick. This is not a one-time directive; it is the duty of the High Priest to light the lamps every day to ensure that the flames always burn brightly. It is noteworthy that this episode immediately follows the story at the end of last week's parashah of the tribal chieftains – with the exception of the tribe of Levi – bringing their offerings. Although the Levites receive the offerings, Aaron, their own chieftain, brought none. Midrash Tanchuma explains: "So Aaron did not make an offering with the princes, for he said, 'Woe is me! Perhaps it is because of me that the Holy One of Blessing is not accepting the tribe of Levi.' The Holy One of Blessing said to Moses, 'Go, say to Aaron, 'Do not be afraid. You are destined for something greater than this. ... The offerings remain in force as long as the Temple exists, but the lamps are forever. ... Moreover, all the blessings which I have given you to bless My children shall never pass away. ... Since I have brought light out of the darkness, do I have need for your light? So why did I say [to light the lamps]? Simply to exalt you, to set up an everlasting lamp.'" Indeed, after a brief reiteration of the menorah's construction, the narrative turns to the dedication of the Levites in place of the firstborn. But the description of the menorah contains a tantalizing discrepancy: "This was the form of the menorah; hammered work of gold, from its base to its flower it was hammered work; according to the *form that the Lord had shown Moses, so did he construct the menorah.*" (8:4) Did Moses, who was not known for his artisan skills, actually construct the menorah? What about Betzalel, whom HaShem appointed to be in charge of making the *mishkan* and all its utensils? Of course our sages discussed this at length, and Midrash Tanchuma offers a variety of opinions. For example, even after detailed instructions from HaShem, Moses proves unable to construct the menorah himself: "Nevertheless, Moses had difficulty; for when he descended, he had forgotten its construction. He went up and said, 'Master of the World, I have forgotten it.' ... The Holy One of Blessing said to him, 'Go to Betzalel and he will make it.' Moses went down to talk to Betzalel, and he made it immediately." The early medieval sages Rashi and Nachmanides also offered divergent views based on their understanding of the text. Having done quite a bit of translating, I appreciate the challenges of dealing equitably with texts written in bygone eras. Because we can never know for sure what the original writers actually meant, we can only hope that using the knowledge we have at our disposal, we are able to convey their message as they intended. Rashi is convinced that *he* refers to Betzalel, citing Exodus 31:1-5, which describes Betzalel's appointment as chief architect of the *mishkan*. Nachmanides however, suggests that Moses slowly and painstakingly acquired the skills necessary to construct the menorah himself. But both cite another discussion in Midrash Tanchuma that identifies a third possibility: It was HaShem Who ultimately fashioned the menorah. "For Moses spent much effort before the menorah was made ... When it became difficult for him, the Holy One of Blessing said to him, 'Moses, take a talent of gold and cast it into the fire. Then take it out, and it will have been made automatically ...' What did Moses do? He took a talent of gold and threw it into the fire. Then he said, 'Master of the world, here is the talent; it is cast into the middle of the fire. Let it be made before You, just as You wish.' Immediately the menorah came forth made as it should be. 'Moses made' is not written here [8:4], but merely 'he made.' So who made it? The Holy One of Blessing." If the story of casting the gold into the fire reminds you of the golden calf, Midrash Tanchuma certainly agrees. "... and when Israel made the calf, the tribe of Levi did not participate there ... When the Holy One of Blessing saw that they all were righteous, that He had tested them and they had withstood their trial ... The Holy One of Blessing immediately said 'And the Levites shall belong to Me.'" In other words, HaShem creates the menorah as a symbol of reconciliation, selects the Levites' tribal leader Aaron and his family for the priesthood, and tasks the High Priest with lighting the lamps of the menorah. Whoever created the menorah, it is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous symbols of Judaism. There are many opinions as to what its branches symbolize. Kabbalist Isaac Luria taught that they represent the scientific and academic disciplines, while Philo of Alexandria, Josephus and others relate them to the planets, and still others equate them with the seven character traits represented by the seven lower *sephirot* of the kabbalistic tree. No matter what they represent, the entire menorah was created from a single piece of gold. The six outer branches emanate from the long, central branch and shine their light toward it. This is a powerful metaphor. In our glorious diversity, we Jews are united through the focal point of our Torah, each of us shining our own, unique light toward it as it illuminates and defines our lives.

Shabbat shalom!