FROM LONDON TO MANHATTAN - REMEMBERING RABBI SACKS

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Joe? Hi! How are you? I hear you’ve been talking with JLIC, Rabbi Sarna, and the Bronfman Center. I just spoke to Rabbi Sacks this morning. He says that you have to take it! We’ve been spending time there since 2013. It’s an amazing place.

And that was that. If people as English as Lord and Lady Sacks could feel so enthused about Jewish life in downtown Manhattan, then so could Corinne and I - loyal subjects of her majesty that we were.

In the weeks since Rabbi Sacks’ passing we have realized how lucky we were to know Rabbi Sacks in two different stages of our lives and his. We grew up in the UK in the 1990s and 2000s during the prime years of his Chief Rabbinate, appreciating him there as he led the anglo Jewish community and achieved national prominence. We were also uniquely privileged to work closely with him from 2015 to 2019 during his tenure as the Ira Rennert Distinguished Professor at NYU, where the Bronfman Center became the launch pad for his profound impact upon American Jewry. In the lines that follow I share some reflections about these two stages of his life, what they meant to me, and what I think they meant to him.

London - Malkhut

It was the language and the power of his oratory more than anything else that made an impression on me as a child. He could hold spellbound two thousand people on a Bnei Akiva Shabbaton without the help of any microphones, his voice filling the room. And he found a completely different cadence in his regular appearances on the country’s most widely listened to morning radio show. He had a power with words that was unmatched.

He took the relationship between Judaism and the English language to a new level. One year at the Bnei Akiva Yom Ha’atzmaut celebrations, which he would always address together with a prominent politician, his theme was the innate Jewish spirituality of secular Israelis. He furnished his argument with numerous anecdotes and concluded with the sentence:
Whether one agreed with the insight about secular Israel or not, one could only marvel at the ability to construct such a sentence.

The language served a higher purpose too. It helped create a sense of that rarest of qualities - malkhut. Malkhut - a sense of regal dignity, royalty - is central to Jewish thought. God is of course referred to as King. Perhaps the most widespread form of midrashic parable is stories of kings and their subjects. But in our modern world, where monarchy has ceased to be an organizing principle of Western societies, flesh and blood examples of malkhut are few and far between. Yet Rabbi Sacks had it. It was present in the stories he told of meeting the Pope or havruta with Prince Charles. It was present in the unique halo effect he possessed to be able to pack a shiur or a lecture like no one else. And the sound of his voice and use of words facilitated it. Growing up in London, we all had tremendous pride that a member of our little community was the most sought after and respected religious figure in the country. He was not just a Lord but a melekh.

And yet the nature of malkhut is one of distance. Certainly, he was available to the special people who sought him out. But to the average Jew in the pew he was not accessible. We heard him on the radio and packed auditoriums to listen to him speak, but there was no sense of intimacy and personal connection. How could there be? If he had been among the people, one of the lads, he wouldn’t have been the king.

**Manhattan - Accessibility and Well-Being**

In New York the halo effect was still there, in some ways redoubled. Americans would go weak at his accent as he played up his Englishness - a real-life Jewish version of Downton Abbey and The Crown which they found so fascinating. The malkhut was there in humorous ways too. He was once asked to re-record a TED talk after the first take. Why? Had something been wrong in his presentation? No... it was just, explained the CEO, that TED’s dress code was one of informality, and would Rabbi Sacks mind removing his tie?

And yet the barriers came down and the king became deeply approachable and accessible.

The time that he would spend with us at NYU was certainly full of opportunities that showcased his unique skills. Events at the 92nd Street Y with public intellectuals. Day trips to Washington to present at important think tanks. Brown bag lunch discussions with university faculty and Shabbatot with hundreds of students and parents.

Yet amongst all this he would dedicate a full day each semester, from 9AM to 4PM, with hours divided into intervals of twenty minutes, to meet with individual students. There was no message that I would send to the community that would generate a quicker and larger response than the semesterly email with the subject line of “Sign Up For Your 20 Minutes With Rabbi Sacks.” Syrian students from Flatbush, Reform student leaders, the newly religious, the formerly religious, students from the mainstream of the Modern Orthodox community - a greater range than at any other occasion - would all rush to reserve a slot.

Two Chobani yogurts were all that he would ask me to bring him to get him through the 15 individual meetings with students in the first half of the day. At lunch time we would take a walk through Washington Square Park and when I would ask if he was doing ok, he would respond that this is the best day of his trip - that there is nothing more precious for him than hearing from individual students. I had provided a line or two of background for each student in advance, and any issue that a student brought up that he felt required my attention would be raised with delicacy and care.

I don’t know that our students understood that the accessibility they had to Rabbi Sacks was not something that most Jews from the UK would recognize. But in the weeks since his passing numerous students have reached out to me reflecting on how privileged they felt to have had the time they did with Rabbi Sacks.

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This greater access that he and his team gave to others in his later years may also have been reflective of and contributed to a deeper shift between his years as Chief Rabbi and those that came after. In America he appeared to me to be happier, more visibly relaxed, letting his guard down more, more humorous and even at times silly.

Being Chief Rabbi was not without its serious stresses. Amidst the astonishing outpouring of emotion at the loss of such a global giant, it’s sometimes hard to recall - and many who became fans of Rabbi Sacks in his later years are completely unaware - how many tumultuous moments there had been during his tenure as Chief Rabbi. Critiqued by the non-Orthodox denominations for not attending the funeral of Rabbi Hugo Gryn or the pluralist Limmud festival, blasted by the Haredi world for the claim in Dignity Of Difference that other religions were the correct ones for their adherents, it often felt that he was being attacked from all sides. Although an amazingly articulate defender of Israel, he was pilloried for an interview to The Guardian in 2002 in which he described being ‘uncomfortable as a Jew’ with certain Israeli policies. At multiple points throughout his Chief Rabbinate there were calls for him to step down. This was a tough job to feel relaxed in.

The first time I saw him in Manhattan was in September 2015 at a meeting of the Downtown Va’ad - a group of rabbinic colleagues serving communities in the neighborhood. The
location? A sports bar on Third Avenue with pounding music, dozens of screens, and free-flowing alcohol (the Israeli owner had recently agreed to stock only kosher wines). To all appearances he was having a great time.

This was the sakhar ba-olam ha-zeh - the reward in this world that he deserved. In America he was able to teach and preach to an enormously wide audience and to be appreciated for it without the political baggage of being a Chief Rabbi. Perhaps it was in this period that he ceased to be an Orthodox leader and came to see himself as a Jewish leader, sought after by communities and individuals across the spectrum. In such a congenial climate, appearing in a raucous student-run Purim spiel was an opportunity he was game for. Sports Bars and Purim spiels - these things did not happen in England. Amidst the deep sadness at his untimely loss, it gives me some comfort to think that in his final years we were able to help him enjoy the pleasure of being the world’s most sought after teacher of Torah without the attendant stress of being British Chief Rabbi.

A Final Thought
The story that Rabbi Sacks perhaps told more often than any other was of his journey to America while a Cambridge undergraduate in order to meet Rabbi Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and of the profound impact they had upon his decision to become a rabbi.

The week of Rabbi Sacks’ shiva was Parshat Hayyei Sarah. A well-known midrash relates that when Sarah died the light went out in the tent.

This month, a great light has gone out in the Jewish world.

Yet the midrash goes on to relate that when Rivka joined the family the light returned to the tent.

The story of meeting Rav Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe will never again be told by the person to whom the story happened.

But there will be other stories told years from now by people who will go on to be dazzling lights within the Jewish world. And they will tell of how when they were young, at a crossroads in their life, they met with the great Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, opened up their hearts to him, and shared with him their quandaries. And that the precious time they had with him helped them take the next crucial steps on their journey.

Thus is the way of the Torah. Amidst the most difficult and unexpected of circumstances she survives and is beloved. She flourishes in the hands and minds of those great individuals who can uncover her secrets, reveal her beauty, and pass her on to a future generation, who themselves will discover yet more brilliance within and pass her on as an inheritance once again to those who are yet to come.

“DO NOT SUMMARIZE ME ON WIKIPEDIA.”
THE THOUGHT OF HANAN BEN ARI
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In an “Do not confine me in any cage // Do not summarize me on Wikipedia,”¹ implores Israeli singer-songwriter Hanan Ben Ari. In his personal life, Ben Ari embodies this plea to reject stereotypes and embrace nuance.² As a self-described “Torah and mitzvot observant” Jew,³ Ben Ari followed a typical path. He wears a yarmulke, studied in yeshiva, married young, and has six children.⁴ Yet he performs for co-ed crowds, writes songs for female singers, and is not bothered by public transportation in Israel operating on shabbat.⁵ Similarly, Ben Ari’s music transcends stereotypes and labels. His songs span multiple genres such as rock, hip hop, funk, soul, and religious pop. In his own words: “[is it possible to] create Punk-Hip-Hop music and keep the beat // And still call it Jewish music?”⁶ Furthermore, as a lyricist, Ben Ari discusses diverse topics including social commentary, religious experience, literature, philosophical quandaries, and pop culture.

Ben Ari’s songs appeal to his listeners on multiple levels. First, good art—whether music, literature, or theatre—accurately portrays the human experience. Ben Ari’s lyrics are no exception. Ben Ari’s wide-ranging descriptions validate, normalize, and destigmatize the experiences and emotions of listeners. Second, he proposes practical insights and advice to cope with struggles. His lyrics present novel, external viewpoints that listeners can apply to their persistent issues. Third, his lyrics impart a nuanced worldview that appreciates the diversity and complexity of the human experience. An increased knowledge of different experiences along with the recognition that human experience varies leads listeners to practice empathy and sympathy towards others. In this essay, I analyze two of Ben Ari’s songs to showcase his talents. Since Ben Ari is relatively unknown among English-speaking Jews, I hope this essay will inspire readers to further explore his music.⁷

THE HEART WILL ARRIVE SOON⁸
The heart will arrive soon
The heart will arrive soon
Soon it will arrive
Soon it will arrive, it will be good

You have a birthday and a marzipan cake
You already are not celebrating, quarreling with time
Mother calls, blesses herself
That you will bring a grandchild, that the groom will come already

And the heart will arrive soon
The heart will arrive soon
Soon he will arrive
In “The Heart Will Arrive Soon,” Ben Ari paints a vivid picture of a single woman facing the marital pressures of traditional society. Ben Ari utilizes literary techniques to convey the anxiety and intensity of her experience, to illustrate how singlehood permeates her life. For instance, Ben Ari saturates the lyrics with imagery: a birthday cake, mother calling, dawn breaking, dancing, mother stroking her hair. These images offer a tangible medium for readers to picture and relate to her experience. They create a sequence of snapshots that provide a window into her life.

Additionally, Ben Ari emphasizes how societal and family dynamics contribute to her anxieties. Her mother pressures her into finding a husband. She eventually internalizes these messages, as her father’s disappointment lingers despite his absence. Furthermore, “The heart will arrive soon,” repeatedly echoes through her head. This inner dialogue reflects how social pressures invade her mind and quash any hope of respite and shelter. Finally, even the narrator talks to her throughout the song. This use of second person reinforces the pervasiveness of social commentary and pressure in her life.

Ben Ari’s lyrics also explore the relationship between time and anxiety. On the one hand, the social pressures of the present emotionally overwhelm her. On the other hand, anxiety drives her to look beyond the present for relief. Taste, scent, prophecy, and music fade into the past. The future dominates her consciousness. She internalizes the illusion that salvation is almost within her reach, as she repeats ad nauseam “The heart will arrive soon.” The breaking of dawn signifies that salvation will swiftly and surely follow the present darkness of night. Once she finds a partner, “No one will disturb you from dancing.” Anxiety weaves a mind warping obsession with love, which transforms into the magic potion that cures all ailments. Its absence solely divides the terrible present and the perfect future. She is “quarreling with time,” navigating through the dark, opaque thicket of time in search of her own personal Eden.
Yet Ben Ari discreetly advises her through the final scene. Through deep breaths and slowing down, she introspects and constructs a more nuanced view of the present. She finally comprehends the metaphor of the double-edged sword. The source of her anxiety doubles as her source of comfort, as her mother rebukes her but also embraces and reassures her. Additionally, Ben Ari slightly modifies the chorus. “The heart will arrive soon,” becomes “The heart is arriving soon.” This shift from future to present tense reveals the omniscient narrator’s knowledge. The future will work itself out. She will find her partner, even without personal initiative. Faith in a good future, a charitable view of the present, and patience will relieve her overwhelming anxiety.

Balance
I suspect I’ve become mediocre
Specifically after I thought that I’ve
Transcended in a non-temporal fashion
Reality came and awoke my memory
I’m a human, from dust I came and unto dust shall I return
The wind that blows in me is cold
Every time that I try to keep the groove
I’m either a beat too early or too late

[Chorus]
I need direction, balance // To step out of this atrophy
The right dosage // Between spirit-soul-essence
Between desire and action
Fire-wind-water-earth // Between fear and love
You need direction, balance // To step out of this atrophy
The right dosage // Between spirit-soul-essence
Between desire and action
Fire-wind-water-earth // Between fear and love

Is it possible to be holy // And remain normal?
To be free // Without doing everything I want?
To mature // And remain total?
To give it your all\footnote{11} for a dream in a rational fashion?
To find th’emotion within repeated routine?
To put on a costume and remember the purpose?
To create Punk-Hip-Hop and maintain the beat
And still call it Jewish music?

Of all the exiles from where I came
You could make a continent
Afghanistan, Hungary, and the armed Persia
I want a merge // Turning opposites into couples
But in order for it to be a pleasure...

[Chorus]...

The soul is not a sucker
And what you thought you’ve saved up
Over time, your soul will collect from you with an interest -
of a mortgage
Balance your strength // Control your heart with your brain
And then you can let go // And flow // And dream...
In “Balance,” Ben Ari paints a different scenario. In contrast with “The Heart Will Arrive Soon,” which was vivid and emotional, “Balance” depicts a philosophical, pondering account. As a further distinction, Ben Ari narrates from a personal perspective, as he references his musical career and heritage. He crafts the song’s philosophical mood through a couple of literary techniques. First, as the song progresses, the lyrics shift from the first person to the second person. This shift signifies an internal dialogue within Ben Ari as he attempts to solve his philosophical dilemmas. Many of these dilemmas revolve around the tension between traditional values and progressive, modern values. Second, Ben Ari poses these dilemmas as rhetorical questions: “Is it possible to be holy // And remain normal? To be free // Without doing everything I want?” The open-ended nature of the rhetorical questions contributes to the contemplative aspect of the song.

Ben Ari concludes his philosophical journey with a paradox: he can only attain balance if he ceases to pursue it. Initially, Ben Ari believed he “Transcended in a non-temporal fashion.” In other words, he thought he solved the riddle of life and accomplished perfect balance. However, reality rudely awakened him to the fact that “I’m a human, from dust I came and unto dust shall I return.” Humanity implies imperfection, which obstructs Ben Ari’s quest for perfect balance. Towards the end of the song, Ben Ari says that “The soul is not a sucker // And what you thought you’ve saved up // Over time, your soul will collect from you with an interest of a mortgage.” Humans cannot outrun their soul. Any plan for a perfect life, to “Control your heart with your brain // And then you can let go,” will backfire. Life is too complex. Eventually, Ben Ari reneges on finding a perfect, abstract, philosophical balance. Yet this conclusion does not dishearten him, but rather liberates him. It frees him from the fetters of the abstract and the shackles of speculation. He returns to commonplace, where he may now enjoy and appreciate his mundane life. “Brother, don’t be depressed // Move // From the sadness to the joy // From cessation to action.”

Ben Ari utilizes the lyrics of “The Heart Will Arrive Soon” and “Balance” to provide emotional appeal, offer advice, and impart a nuanced worldview. Ben Ari captures a wide range of specific societal experiences, such as how traditional societies pressure single women and balance eludes those who value both tradition and progress. His depictions provide cathartic solace and emotional relief to those who struggle with these experiences. However, Ben Ari’s songs also convey more general phenomena. “The Heart Will Arrive Soon” delves into overwhelming anxiety and “Balance” explores overthinking and perfectionism, which are both near-universal phenomena. Thus, even people who do not fit the specific scenarios depicted in these songs can at least identify with aspects of them. Both songs offer not only emotional catharsis, but also advice and insights. For traditional young women who endure societal pressure—in specific—and people who grapple with overwhelming anxiety—in general—Ben Ari advises them to slow down and exit the echo chamber of their thoughts. This progress creates space to introspect and develop a nuanced outlook. They can cultivate gratitude and thus combat the idea that their happiness hinges on addressing their anxiety, that somehow solving their specific worry will be a panacea. Similarly, for people who value tradition and progress—in specific—and those who flirt with perfectionism—in general—Ben Ari advises them to reject paralysis. They should acknowledge that the perfect balance is a myth, step outside of their head, and live their day-to-day life. Finally, these songs impart a nuanced worldview that generates feelings of sympathy and empathy towards young women who struggle with marital pressure and people stuck between tradition and modernity. Furthermore, this worldview cultivates an awareness of the anxiety and perfectionism latent in society.

While this essay touches on just two of Ben Ari’s songs, I hope that it will inspire readers to look further into his music. For those interested, the website LYRICS TRANSLATE provides community-sourced translations of many of his songs. In addition to being a brilliant lyricist, Ben Ari is also a talented composer, musician, and singer. I hope that Ben Ari’s music will be a welcome presence in the lives of others just as it has been in mine.

1 “Wikipedia”, Hanan Ben Ari.
2 I would like to thank Levi Morrow for helping me edit this essay and Yair Fax for introducing me to Hanan Ben Ari.
4 “Hanan Ben Ari”, Wikipedia.
6 “Balance”, Hanan Ben Ari.
7 Readers may be familiar with Ben Ari’s song “Shevurei Lev,” which was covered by Avraham Fried.
8 This translation is mainly mine. However, I did cross check it and update some parts based upon the translation from lyricstranslate.com.
9 Lit: ventricles.
10 This translation is mostly from lyricstranslate.com. However, I made some minor changes where I felt that the translation was imprecise.
11 Lit: To kill yourself upon.
Up to Hashem and Down to the World: Making Sense of Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel

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The two great schools of Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel found themselves once again at odds.¹ Beit Shamai ruled that on each night of Hanukkah we should light the candles in descending order, while Beit Hillel ruled that they should be ascending. What is the motivation behind each opinion?

The Gemara in Shabbat 21b offers cryptic reasons behind Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel’s opinions. Hazal suggest that Beit Shamai compare the Hanukkah candles to the “parei he-hag,” the bulls brought as sacrifices on the holiday of Sukkot, which decreased in number each day; in contrast, Beit Hillel’s ruling is based on the principle of “ma’alin ba-kodesh ve’ein moridin,” that one should increase in holiness and not decrease.

However, there is a significant problem with these explanations. Beit Hillel’s reason that you should only increase in holiness seems so compelling that it is difficult to understand how Beit Shamai could reject it. Perhaps we could understand Beit Shamai’s reason for rejecting ma’alin ba-kodesh if they quoted a similarly important principle in defense of their ruling. However, Beit Shamai do not cite a principle; they merely compare the Hanukkah candles to one aspect of the parei he-hag. This is not an argument but an analogy, and it does not seem to be an adequate response to Beit Hillel’s argument.

The explanations of Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai are not comparable and seem to be operating on very different planes. Therefore, our first job in untangling these reasons is to understand how Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel are in fact operating on precisely the same plane.

What is Beit Shamai based on?

Beit Shamai maintains that we should compare the lighting of the Hanukkah with the order of sacrifices listed in Parshat Pinhas for Sukkot. There we offer thirteen bulls the first day, twelve the next, and so on, all the way down to seven on the last day of the holiday. So too on Hanukkah, maintains Beit Shamai, we should start with eight and work down to one. However, the connection between Sukkot and Hanukkah remains unclear.

What actually happened on Hanukkah? The Beit ha-Mikdash had been desecrated by the Greeks; re-consecrating it was the first priority of the Hashmonaim when they won the war. They immediately returned to the Beit ha-Mikdash with the intention of bringing it back to its previous glory, re-purifying it, and re-dedicating it in service of God.

Hanukkah is about hanukkat ha-bayit, a dedication of the Beit ha-Mikdash. Beit Shamai invites us to look at the other times in our history when the Jewish people dedicated a Beit ha-Mikdash. For example, they always do so on Sukkot. In Melakhim I 8:1-4, we read about Shlomo ha-Melekh gathering Benei Yisrael (the Israelis) to Jerusalem to inaugurate the first Beit ha-Mikdash specifically on Sukkot. In Ezra 3:1-4, we see Ezra doing the same for the second Temple.

Beit Shamai is suggesting that on Hanukkah, the time when the Jews regained their Beit ha-Mikdash and re-sanctified it, we should be reminded strongly of Sukkot because when the Jews build a new Beit ha-Mikdash, they inaugurate it on Sukkot. In fact, Maccabees II 10:5-7 records that when the Hashmonaim retook the Beit ha-Mikdash on Hanukkah, they celebrated for eight days, explicitly stating that it was “in the manner of Sukkot.” Although they did not win the war at the time of Sukkot, they still chose to re-dedicate the Temple with a Sukkot-style holiday, which included bringing the parei he-hag.

We now know that throughout Tanakh, Sukkot is linked to the event of hanukkat ha-bayit. However, we still do not understand what specific element of Sukkot is being drawn on here. The answer to this will help us understand Beit Shamai’s reasoning, but let us leave it for a moment to gain a deeper perspective on the basis for Beit Hillel’s reasoning.

What is Beit Hillel based on?

Rashi on Shabbat 21b (s.v. ma’alin ba-kodesh) points to a gemara in Menahot 39a, which is the original source for the principle of ma’alin ba-kodesh. Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi teaches us that we learn this principle from the way that Moshe Rabbeinu built the Mishkan (the Tabernacle). Moshe built the Mishkan from the bottom up, starting with the sockets, then the planks, then the bars, and finally the tall pillars (Shemot 40:17-20). From Moshe’s example, we thus learn that in matters of holiness, one must start at the bottom and work one’s way up toward Hashem.

Beit Hillel apparently also understand that Hanukkah is a hanukkat ha-bayit; however, they connect it not to the Beit ha-Mikdash but to the original building of the Mishkan. Just as when Moshe first built the Mishkan he did so in a way that exemplified ma’alin ba-kodesh, so too on Hanukkah, we should recall the Mishkan by starting at the bottom and reaching up to Hashem. We emphasize this idea in the Torah reading throughout Hanukkah, which is taken from Parshat Naso (when Moshe and Benei Yisrael first dedicated the Mishkan).

It is thus clear that far from addressing one another’s opinions at cross purposes, Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai are in fact very

¹ My thanks to Rabbi J. J. Schacter for his invaluable assistance with this article and for his constant support and guidance.
much in conversation with one another. They agree that the
dedication of a previous holy house serves as the prototype
for Hanukkah. They only differ on which house. Beit Shamai
think it should commemorate the Beit ha-Mikdash while Beit
Hillel think it should commemorate the Mishkan.

But what makes the building of the Mishkan or the Beit ha-
Mikdash a more appropriate model for Hanukkah?

Building the Mishkan and the Beit ha-Mikdash
What is the difference between these two construction
projects? We have already noted that the Mishkan was built
on the principle of ma’alin ba-kodesh, as Moshe built the
Mishkan from its smallest parts at the bottom to the top. Is
this not obvious? How else does one build, if not from the
bottom up?

However, the way the verses describe the Beit ha-Mikdash
subtly departs from the principle of ma’alin ba-kodesh.
Granted, Shlomo followed the basic principle of building “from
the floor of the house till the ceiling beams” (Melakhim I 6:15-
16). However, in decorating the Beit ha-Mikdash, he inverted
the pattern; the text first describes the intricate copper work
on the tops of the pillars and then descends to describe the
“molten sea,” working from brim to base (Melakhim I 7). The
book of Melakhim apparently thought that it is more
important to mention the top before the bottom. Is this to
suggest that one should sometimes go down in holiness?

Another way of expressing the idea of bottom-to-top and vice
versa is to frame it as building from within or building from
without. The Mishkan was built purely out of materials found
in the desert (Shemot 35:20-29). Benei Yisrael freely donated
all the necessary materials, implying that they were all in the
desert with them. They started with what was available to
them within their own community and built up to Hashem.
Shlomo, on the other hand, sourced his materials from far and
wide, not only from within Eretz Yisrael but from other nations
too (Melakhim I 5:27-32). He created his great house for
Hashem with wood, stone, and precious metals from the
entire world. He was working outside-in.

These building techniques reflect the characters of each great
house. Moshe built the Mishkan from the bottom up, demonstrating to Benei Yisrael that between us and God, we
must start at the bottom of a long ladder where the only right
direction is up. An important quality of the Mishkan was the
way it encouraged intimacy between Hashem and Benei
Yisrael, being alone in the desert. In this private relationship
with Hashem, the only focus was on how to become closer to
Hashem; to draw closer, one must take gradual steps up one’s
personal ladder toward Hashem. The Midrash (Shemot
Rabbah 35) tells us that Hashem showed Moshe exactly what
the Mishkan looked like, with the result that the Mishkan
was built precisely to the specifications of Hashem. Bnei Yisrael
wanted to unify themselves entirely with Hashem’s wishes in
building the Mishkan, an expression of intimacy between
them.

Shlomo, however, was building God’s house as a grand
statement to all of humanity. He knew that when introducing
people to Hashem for the first time, he needed to dazzle them
with magnificent ceilings and masterpieces of design. His Beit
ha-Mikdash was built to showcase Hashem’s glory to other
people, rather than being purely about Benei Yisrael’s
relationship with Hashem. Shlomo stated this goal explicitly in
his prayer at the dedication of the Beit ha-Mikdash: “Also the
non-Jew, who is not of Your people Israel, but will come from
a far country for the sake of Your Name. For they shall hear
of Your great Name, and of Your mighty hand, and He will
come and pray toward this house” (Melakhim I 7:41-42). In fact, this mission was
accomplished in his lifetime. The Queen of Sheba came
precisely because she heard of the name of Hashem which
Shlomo had made famous (Melakhim I 10:1). Zekhariah
(14:16) tells us that in the future, the nations of the world
will come and celebrate Sukkot along with Benei Yisrael.

It is Sukkot which is the festival most representative of this
purpose of the Beit ha-Mikdash; therefore, it is Sukkot which
was chosen by Shlomo, Ezra, the Hashmonaim, and Beit
Shamai to commemorate the inauguration and re-
inauguration of the Beit ha-Mikdash. On Sukkot, we bring a
different number of bulls each day (the parei he-hag), which
adds up to seventy. Hazal teach (Sukkah 55b) that these bulls
represent the seventy nations of the world. The Midrash
(Tanhuma Pinhas 16) expands on this, suggesting that here
Benei Yisrael bring the parei he-hag with the intention of
inspiring the nations of the world to come to Jerusalem to love
Hashem and the Jewish people. They don’t just represent the
nations; they actively try to bring them closer.

For seven days of Sukkot, Benei Yisrael pour their national
energy into inspiring others. They start with thirteen bulls, the
largest number of the most expensive and impressive sacrifice
that we are obligated to bring throughout the Jewish calendar.
Why? When someone new walked into the Beit ha-Mikdash
on Sukkot, she was mesmerized by magnificent ceilings and
intricate copper work, blown away by the bountiful bull
sacrifices offered in honor of the Creator. The first time is as
impressive and exciting as possible. The following days are
gradually less so as we try to transition them to a more normal
and constant mode of worshipping Hashem.

Back to Hanukkah
We have explained how the ideas of parei he-hag and ma’alin
ba-kodesh are closely related to the inauguration of the
Mishkan and the Beit ha-Mikdash and are therefore suitable
precedents to choose for Hanukkah, and we have explained

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Beit Shammai’s underlying logic. But now the tables are turned. Beit Shammai’s rationale seems to be more intuitive than Beit Hillel’s. Since the Hanukkah story is about the Beit ha-Mikdash, why go back to the Mishkan?

The Mishkan represents the intimate relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people, while the Beit ha-Mikdash (particularly the element of parei he-hag) represents the way that the Jewish people take their existing relationship with Hashem and spread that message to the world.

I would like to suggest that Beit Hillel understand that Hanukkah is all about the relationship between Benei Yisrael and Hashem. The Greeks were fighting a fundamentally spiritual battle against the Jewish people, seeking to undermine the essential elements of our relationship with Hashem. We say in Al ha-Nissim that “the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and to make them transgress the statutes (hukim) of your will.” The Greeks were attacking the Torah, which was given particularly to the Jewish people, directing their efforts against the statutes (hukim), the laws without logical explanation, which are based entirely on our trust and faith in Hashem. And while Hashem helped Benei Yisrael win the war, He also gave them another miracle, separate from the national public victory. This was the miracle of the Menorah, which occurred in the intimacy of the Heikhal, a place that only the priests were allowed to go, showing Benei Yisrael that their relationship with Hashem had been redeemed. Of course the most appropriate symbol to choose for honoring our intimate relationship with Hashem is that of the Mishkan, not the Beit ha-Mikdash. And that, I suggest, is why Beit Hillel’s reason relied on the principle of ma‘alin ba-kodesh.

Beit Shammai read the story differently. In their view, Hashem helped Benei Yisrael achieve their victory because the Beit ha-Mikdash had been desecrated and was no longer capable of spreading the name of Hashem to all the nations. Indeed, how could it so long as there were idols in the Heikhal? Hashem helped the Jews win the war and take back the Beit ha-Mikdash in order for them to once again fulfill their mission of spreading His name. As we say in Al ha-Nissim, “You made for Yourself a great and holy name in the world, and for Your people Israel, You performed a great salvation.” The miracle of the oil in the center of the Beit ha-Mikdash is a strong assertion of Hashem’s renewed presence there. He intends to reside in His house and, from there, spread His light far and wide. The ideal of the Beit ha-Mikdash, expressed by the parei he-hag, is the ultimate pirsumei nissa (publicizing of the miracle). That, I suggest, is why Beit Shammai chooses to link the Hanukkah candles to the parei he-hag.

Yet we rule in accordance with Beit Hillel that the essential element of the Hanukkah candles is the Jewish people’s personal relationship with Hashem. When we walk into the Beit ha-Mikdash, we aspire to have a different experience from that of many others. We will see not the beautiful trimmings but the basic structure, the work that went into building it. We know the effort it takes to grow close to Hashem, and we pray that the rest of the world will also come close to Hashem, working up from the nuts and bolts of the relationship to reach its magnificent heights.

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3 The idea that these words refer to a particular relationship that Benei Yisrael have with Hashem is based on a Hanukkah siyah of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 5726 and 5734 (Likkutei Sihot [heb.] 25, Hanukkah), which I learned with my father, Tim Cowen. Thank you for all you have taught me and continue to teach me.

4 Beit Shammai’s position is reflected in our choice of haftarah on Shabbat Hanukkah. On the first Shabbat we read Zekhariah 2:14-4:7, a vision of the rebuilding of the second Beit ha-Mikdash. On the second Shabbat we read Melakhim 1 7:40-50, the completion of the work on the first Beit ha-Mikdash by Shlomo ha-Melekh.

5 This mahloket between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel could be said to parallel their debate about the way that Hashem built the world. In Bereishit Rabbah 1:15 we read, “Beit Shammai said the heavens were created first and after that the earth was created. Beit Hillel said the earth was created first and afterward the heavens.” Here too, we see them arguing about the order or building - do we build up or down? Perhaps Beit Shammai are consistently of the opinion that our job in this world is to take inspiration from above and spread it outward, while Beit Hillel think that Hashem made the world with the primary desire that we humans learn to rise closer to Him. My thanks to my father for pointing out this parallel.