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A D'var Torah for Hanukah

Karen Miller, Editor

SHINING OUTWARD: THE LIGHTS OF HANUKAH

By Julie Lieber<sup>1</sup>

While *hadlakat nerot*, the lighting of candles, marks the onset of Shabbat and many Jewish holidays, *hadlakat nerot* is not the only ritual associated with these days. On Rosh Hashana we blow the shofar, on Pesach we eat matzah, drink four cups of wine and have a Seder, and on Shabbat we make *kiddush* and *hamotzi*. On Hanukah, however, *hadlakat nerot* is the only mitzvah that characterizes the holiday. Moreover, there are several similarities between the *hadlakat nerot* of Hanukah, and the *hadlakat nerot* of Shabbat and the festivals, which further suggest that even this one commemorative act is not unique to Hanukah. The blessing recited before lighting Hanukah candles has the same wording as the Shabbat and festival blessings, differing only in the insertion of the appropriate holiday.

On Shabbat we recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו להדליק נר של שבת  
Blessed are You, God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with his  
commandments, and has commanded us to kindle the *Sabbath light*.

And on Hanukah we recite:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה  
Blessed are You, God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with his  
commandments, and has commanded us to kindle the *Hanukah light*.

Additionally, neither the mitzvah of Shabbat candles nor Hanukah candles is found in the Torah. Instead, both are rabbinic commandments derived from the lighting of the *menorah* in the Temple.<sup>2</sup> These similarities lead one to wonder whether the central ritual associated with the celebration of Hanukah is a unique marker of Hanukah at all, or if it is just representative of the beginning of another holy day, no different from the *hadlakat nerot* of Shabbat or other festivals.

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<sup>2</sup> Rambam, *Hilkhot Temidin U'Musafin*, Chapter 3, many of the laws regarding the lighting of the Sabbath candles are derived from this chapter.

When we investigate the *halakhot* of lighting Hanukah and Shabbat candles, what emerges from these initially identical rituals are two, quite different *mitzvot*, both in nature and purpose.

*Nerot Shabbat:*

In the halakhic discussion of Shabbat candles, there is much debate about what constitutes the essential act of *hadlakat nerot*. Does one fulfill the mitzvah simply through the act of lighting the candles? Or is the purpose of the mitzvah to have light in one's home on Shabbat night, with the ritual of lighting serving merely as an enabling act? The Hazon Ish, Rabbi Avraham Karelitz, a 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century halakhic authority, addresses this issue:

עיקר המצוה שיהא נר דלוק ואפילו הדליקו קוף כשר<sup>3</sup>

[The] essence of the mitzvah is that there should be light and even if a monkey lights the candle it is kosher.

Despite the rarity of monkeys lighting Shabbat candles, the statement of the Hazon Ish remains quite relevant for understanding the fundamental purpose of the mitzvah of *hadlakat nerot* on Shabbat. He explains that instead of focusing on the actual lighting of the candles, the true mitzvah is to have light in one's home on Friday night. Most authorities similarly conclude that the mitzvah of lighting Shabbat candles centers not on the act of *hadlakah*, lighting, but rather on the creation of an illuminated home, in which one can best celebrate Shabbat. The Gemara explains that lighting Shabbat candles contributes to *shalom bayit*, the peacefulness of the household, by preventing the stress often caused by darkness in a home.<sup>4</sup> Some Tosafot, medieval talmudic commentaries, claim that the light of the candles contributes to *oneg Shabbat*, the enjoyment of Shabbat, by lighting up the home during the festive Friday night meal,<sup>5</sup> while others see this as part of the fulfillment of *kavod Shabbat*, creating a respectful Shabbat atmosphere.<sup>6</sup> Because the lighting of Shabbat candles is so intimately tied to the larger mitzvot of *oneg Shabbat*, *kavod Shabbat* and *shalom bayit*, halakhic authorities question if one should even recite the blessing "*lehadlik ner shel shabbat*" over the act of lighting the candles.<sup>7</sup> The conclusion is, of course, that one does recite this blessing before lighting Shabbat candles. However, one fulfills the mitzvah not only through the act of lighting the candles but through *using* their light during Shabbat to prepare for and enjoy the festive meal and to create an atmosphere of peacefulness and respect in the home. For this reason, one should light the Shabbat candles in proximity to the table or in an area where members of the household will benefit most from their light.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Hilchot Temidin U'Musafin*, Chapter 3: halakha 12

<sup>4</sup> BT Shabbat 23b and Rashi

<sup>5</sup> Tosafot "*hadlakat*", BT Shabbat 25a

<sup>6</sup> Rashi "*hovah*", BT Shabbat 25b

<sup>7</sup> Tosafot, "*hovah*", BT Shabbat 25b

<sup>8</sup> Shulhan Arukh, Orakh Hayyim 263

## Nerot Hanukah

When we turn to the halakhot of lighting Hanukah candles we find a marked contrast to the laws of Shabbat candles. While a similar debate about what constitutes the essential act of *hadlakat nerot* also takes place in the halakhic literature on Hanukah, the conclusions here stand in contrast to that of Shabbat candles.

הדלקה עושה מצוה, ולא הנחה...  
לפיכך עשית שהיתה דולקת כל היום...  
מכבה ומדליקה לשם מצוה.<sup>9</sup>

The lighting constitutes the mitzvah and not the placement [of the menorah]... Therefore, a lamp that was lit all day...one has to extinguish it and relight it for the purpose of the mitzvah [of Hanukah].

The Shulhan Arukh unequivocally states that it is the act of lighting, the *hadlakah*, that constitutes the essential mitzvah of the Hanukah candles, as opposed to their by-product, producing useful light, as is the case with Shabbat candles. It is for this reason that one cannot use an existing light source, such as a lamp, to fulfill the mitzvah of *hadlakat nerot* on Hanukah. One must instead actually perform the act of lighting in order to satisfy the requirements of the mitzvah. This fundamental difference in the focus of the mitzvot of Hanukah and Shabbat candles can be seen in the many detailed obligations of the mitzvah of Hanukah candles. Whereas for Shabbat, the mitzvah of *hadlakat nerot* can be *bediavad*, in a less-than-ideal situation, fulfilled by anyone or anything that produces light, including a monkey (!), an automatic timer, or an existing light source, on Hanukah a man or woman obligated in the mitzvah of Hanukah must perform the act of lighting the candles in order to properly fulfill the requirements. Similarly, because the heart of the mitzvah of Hanukah candles is the lighting itself, a traveler is obligated to light candles, even if the home in which she/he is lodging already has lit candles.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Shabbat, the goal is not to have light in the home, but to actually participate in the act of lighting. This focus on the lighting itself and not the product of the light is highlighted in the Hanukah lighting ceremony in which we recite “*hanerot halalu*”, which states:

ואין לנו רשות להשתמש בהם אלא לראותם בלבד, כדי להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול על נסיד ועל נפלאותיך  
ועל ישועתיך.

We are not permitted to *use* the [candles], but only to look at them, in order to give thanks and praise to the Great God for God’s miracles, wonders and salvation.

Unlike the mitzvah of Shabbat candles, which is primarily fulfilled through using their light to prepare and enjoy one’s meal, Hanukah candles are not to be used for any practical needs. Their purpose is only to inspire wonder and contemplation of the greatness of God. On Hanukah the candles are part of the obligation of *pirsumei nisa*,

<sup>9</sup> Shulhan Arukh, Orakh Hayyim 675

<sup>10</sup> BT Shabbat 23a

publicizing the miracle of Hanukah, which can only be fulfilled if one makes clear that she is not using the candles for any practical purpose.

The difference between the roles of Shabbat and Hanukah candles is further manifested in the placement of the candles. On Shabbat we situate the candles on the table, inside the home in a place that will be useful for casting its light during the Shabbat meal. In contrast, on Hanukah, there are strict rules requiring the positioning of the candles at a “*petah*,” an opening of the house, so that it’s light will shine outward for all those who pass by to see and be stirred to ponder the miracles and greatness of God, fulfilling the obligation of *pirsumei nisa*, the publicizing of the miracle.

### The Uniqueness of Hanukah

What initially appeared to be almost identical acts, the mitzvot of lighting Shabbat candles and Hanukah candles, therefore emerge as two very different and even contrasting experiences. The Shabbat candles shift our thoughts inward, to the home, to our own enjoyment and celebration of Shabbat. In contrast, the lighting of the Hanukah candles inspires us to move outside of ourselves, our homes, our daily needs and pleasures and instead direct our thoughts towards the lighting itself – those moments in our lives in which we create light, radiate outward, and illuminate. By lighting the candles at an opening, a space that looks beyond the present, we challenge ourselves to leave the *shalom* of our *bayit*, the tranquility of our homes, and position ourselves at the borders, where we can publicize to the world around us the powerful message expressed in the miracle of light on Hanukah.

Hence, the one distinguishing ritual of Hanukah, *hadlakat nerot*, is in fact unique. For, unlike Shabbat which focuses our gaze towards the home and encourages us to find our strength internally and indulge in our own pleasures, Hanukah tells us that the essence of light itself, the true act of lighting, the moments in which we create sparks and inspiration, are achieved through venturing to the borders and exploring the various openings in our midst. *Using* the light of the Shabbat candles allows us the space to experience comfort, pleasure and peacefulness. But, on Hanukah, by shifting our focus to the *act* of creating sparks of light, we get a glimpse into the world of divine inspiration and miracles; we take our built up inner strength of Shabbat and dare to situate ourselves in new places, at the borders. It is there that we can best inspire ourselves and others to fulfill the mitzvah of *pirsumei nisa*, appreciating the greatness of God and God’s miracles. It is through the publicizing of the miracle of lights that we engage in a relationship with the world and invite them to join us in celebrating God’s miracles.