



והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Hanukah

By Noa Jeselsohn

Ronda Angel Arking, Editor

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A Time to Rise in Holiness

By Noa Jeselsohn¹

What is the message of the Hanukah lights? What is the meaning behind the *way* we light our Hanukiyot? If we turn to our sources on the nature of lighting Hanukah candles, we might be surprised to learn how much extra beauty and holiness we bring into our homes and our lives by adding one candle each night.

A RABBINIC HOLIDAY

The holiday of Hanukah is the only holiday whose halakhic framework and obligation do not stem from a biblical source. In fact, the entire discussion of the nature, origin, and rituals of Hanukah is contained in fewer than three talmudic folios found in Tractate Shabbat (21a–24a), inserted there as a segue from the talmudic discussion of Sabbath candles.

One of the most well-known pieces of this Gemara is the section relating to how many candles one should light to fulfill the obligation of Hanukah candles:

תנו רבנן: מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו. והמהדרין, נר לכל אחד ואחד. והמהדרין מן המהדרין, בית שמאי אומרים: יום ראשון מדליק שמנה. מכאן ואילך פוחת והולך; ובית הלל אומרים: יום ראשון מדליק אחת, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך. אמר עולא: פליגי בה תרי אמוראי במערבא, רבי יוסי בר אבין ורבי יוסי בר זבדא, חד אמר: טעמא דבית שמאי—כנגד ימים הנכנסין, וטעמא דבית הלל—כנגד ימים היוצאין. וחד אמר: טעמא דבית שמאי—כנגד פרי החג, וטעמא דבית הלל—דמעלין בקדש ואין מורדין. (שבת כא:)

Our Rabbis taught: The precept of Hanukah is one light for a man and his household. Those who want to enhance the mitzvah [kindle] one light for each member [of the household]. And as for those who want to make the mitzvah as beautiful as possible—Beit Shammai maintains: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are reduced one by one; but Beit Hillel says: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased. ‘Ulla said: In the West [Palestine] two Amoraim, R. Jose b. Abin and R. Jose b. Zebida, differ [in their explanations of the opinions of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel]. One maintains that the reason of Beit Shammai is that [the number of lights] shall correspond to the days still to come, and that of Beit Hillel is that it shall correspond to the days that are gone; but another maintains: Beit Shammai’s reason is that [the number of lights] shall correspond to the bullocks of the Festival [of Sukkot], whereas Beit Hillel’s reason is that we promote in [matters of] sanctity but do not reduce. (Shabbat 21b)

THREE LEVELS OF LIGHTING

The first part of the Gemara details three levels of fulfillment of the obligation of Hanukah lights:

1. The basic level of fulfillment is for each household to light one candle each night.
2. Those who want to enhance the mitzvah and search for a more beautiful method of fulfillment should light one candle per member of the household each night.
3. Beit Hillel rules (and the halakha follows this opinion) that the most beautiful and dignified way, the *mehadrin min hamehadrin*² way, to fulfill this commandment is to light one candle the first night and add an additional candle each night until they reach eight candles on the last night of the holiday.

It is fascinating to note that the Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 671:2) only mentions the third and most ideal level of fulfillment! Although the Mishnah Berurah (ibid., note 4) points out that one who cannot afford all

those candles certainly fulfills his or her obligation with one candle per night, it is clear that there is an assumption in the halakha that everyone should *a priori* attempt to enhance the mitzvah as much as possible regarding Hanukah lights, an assumption we do not find regarding other commandments.

WHAT IS THE MOST ENHANCED WAY TO LIGHT?

There is an interesting debate between early Medieval decisors regarding how to understand the third-level ruling. Maimonides, in his Laws of Megilla and Hanukah (4:1–3), understands that each subsequent level of fulfillment, as spelled out in Tractate Shabbat, builds on the one before it. The most basic level is one candle per household. For those who can afford it and want to beautify the mitzvah, one candle is lit for each member of the household. The third level is to light one candle the first night per family member, two candles the second night per family member and so on until eight candles the last night per family member. According to this level, writes Maimonides, if there are ten members of a household, there are ten candles lit the first night, twenty the second, all the way to eighty candles on the last night.³ This is a familiar custom to most Ashkenazic Jews, where each family member has his or her own Hanukiyah and goes from one candle the first night until eight on the last.

However, the Tosafot (Shabbat 21b, s.v. *V'hamehadrin*) vehemently disagree with this understanding of the halakha. They point to the Gemara's explanation that the third level of fulfillment is intended to be symbolic of which day of the holiday is being celebrated. If each person lights multiple candles each night there is no *heker*—no obvious recognition—of which day it is. Therefore, the Tosafot understand that the second level and the third level of fulfillment both build on the basic level requiring one candle per household. The second level would have us light one candle per person whereas the third level would return to the basic obligation of one lighting per household but would have that one lighting begin with one candle the first day, proceed to two the second day, all the way to eight candles on the last day. According to this understanding, only one person lights for the whole household.

If one looks at the ruling of the Shulhan Arukh and the Rema (ibid.) we see something quite remarkable:

כמה נרות מדליק? בלילה הראשון מדליק אחד, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך אחד בכל לילה עד שבליל האחרון יהיו שמונה, ואפילו אם רבים בני הבית לא ידליקו יותר. הגה: וי"א דכל אחד מבני הבית ידליק (הרמב"ם), וכן המנהג פשוט ויזהרו ליתן כל אחד ואחד נרותיו במקום מיוחד, כדי שיהא חיכר כמה נרות מדליקין (מהר"א מפראג).

How many candles should one light? On the first night, one lights a single candle. From then on one should add on one per night, until they number eight on the last night. And even if the household members are many, they should not light more.

Rema: However, some say that each of the household members lights (Maimonides) and so the widespread custom goes. Each household member needs to place his or her candles in a separate place, so that it will be apparent how many candles are being lit.

Interestingly, the Shulhan Arukh, the ultimate halakhic source for the Sephardic community, rules like the Tosafot who were from Ashkenaz, whereas the Rema, who fills the role of bottom-line posek for the Ashkenazic community, rules here like Maimonides, who is the source of much of Sephardic halakha.⁴ As mentioned above, most American Jews are probably more familiar with the Ashkenazic custom, but the Sephardic ruling is that only one family member lights each night for the whole household. Although it is probable that this was traditionally the father or other male head of the household, any member of the household, male or female, can fulfill the household's obligation as long as he or she is over the age of bar or bat mitzvah.

THE REASONING OF BEIT HILLEL AND BEIT SHAMMAI

Now, let's turn to the second half of our section in the Gemara, which deals with the logic behind the positions of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. Why does the former think we should begin with eight candles and go down to one while the latter posits the reverse? The Gemara suggests two possibilities:

1. They are arguing about whether the number should represent the number of days that are yet to come or the number of days that have already passed.
2. They are modeling the halakha either after the number of bullocks brought for the Mussaf offering on Sukkot: thirteen the first day, twelve the second, and so on, or after the idea that we always rise in sanctity but never diminish in sanctity.

The first possibility to understand the argument between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is pretty straightforward.⁵ But it is not so clear what the second possibility means. What is the connection between the bullocks of the holiday of Sukkot,⁶ or the idea of rising in holiness, and the obligation of Hanukah candles?

Rav Soloveitchik (OU Mesorah Journal, *Kislev 5751*) understands that there are not two separate possibilities being brought here. Rather, he argues, the “two” reasons given are in fact an ongoing conversation about how to best light in relation to the number of the day of Hanukah. Beit Hillel first asserts that we are proclaiming the greatness of the miracle. Each day that the oil continued to last, the miracle grew. Therefore we begin with one candle and end with eight. Beit Shammai then argues that we are commemorating being saved from the distress of being without pure oil to light the Menorah of the Beit Hamikdash. It would take eight days to produce or procure more pure oil. Therefore, the distress that was averted the first day was the greatest since it would have meant going eight oil-free days, and was lessened each day as the availability of more pure oil grew closer. Beit Hillel then attacks Beit Shammai’s position by pointing out that we always rise in sanctity, we never descend. Rav Soloveitchik understands that Beit Shammai is simply countering this argument with the example of the bullocks of Sukkot, which descend in number as the holiday goes on. The idea of “reduction in sanctity,” argues Beit Shammai, only relates to objects. For example, one cannot cut the relevant sections out of a Torah scroll and use them for a mezuzah, since a mezuzah is of lesser sanctity than a Torah scroll. But we would not necessarily apply the rule of ascending holiness to a question of numbers and, as proof, Beit Shammai cites the example of the offerings of bullocks on Sukkot, where the Torah mandates reducing the number of bullocks each day.

THE SANCTITY OF HANUKAH

But how does “rising in holiness” specifically relate to the kindling of the Hanukah lights? Perhaps this holiness is connected with two other unique facts about Hanukah that we have already mentioned—that it is the one holiday with no biblical source and that normative practice involves pursuing the most beautiful and dignified level of fulfillment. I would suggest that Hanukah, fundamentally, is a statement about what it means to live a full, sanctified life. We do not believe solely in Torah, the Written Law, but we also adhere to a thriving Oral Law, without which we would not fully understand the life of holiness spelled out for us by the Torah, without which that life would actually be misunderstood and distorted. Hanukah, wholly devolving from rabbinic enactment, is a symbol of our adherence to the rabbinic translation and transmission of the message of the Torah. Within the framework of Beit Hillel’s *ma’alin bakodesh*, rising in holiness, we strive for the most enhanced fulfillment possible in order to achieve the goal of a full Torah life and commitment to sanctity in all our endeavors.

1 Noa Jeselson has taught Talmud, halakha, and Bible at The Frisch School, The Pelech High School, Midreshet Lindenbaum, and Midreshet Emunah v’Omanut. She is a graduate of the Drisha Scholars Circle and Nishmat’s Keren Ariel (Yoatzot Halakha). She lives in Alon Shevut with her husband and four children.

2 The term *mehadrin* comes from the word *lehader*, which has two meanings: to make beautiful, or to pursue.

3 I have deliberately used the passive voice in this summary of Maimonides’ ruling in order to focus exclusively on the number of candles lit without addressing the question of how many people are lighting. While Maimonides states explicitly that the prevalent custom was for each member of the household to light his or her own candles, it would seem from his formulation that the more basic understanding was for only the head of the household to light: one candle per person for the second-level position or one candle per person per night for the most enhanced, third-level position.

4 This reversal is mentioned as unique by the Taz (Orah Hayyim, 671:1) although R. Zevin in his “HaMo’dim BaHalakha” page 198, footnote 15, points to some other occurrences.

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Dedicated in memory of our grandmother,
Perla Blass Grunbart—פערל בת זוסמן ופייגע—
who emerged from the darkness of the
shoah and taught her children and
grandchildren to bring light into the world.

- 5 The Tosafot understand that the primary goal of the “*mehadrin min hamehadrin*,” level-three fulfillment, is to proclaim which day of the holiday it is. Hence, they reject the possibility of every family member lighting an increasing number of candles each day, since it would obscure the observer’s understanding of which day it was. As we saw above, the Rema adds in his ruling that although we rule that everyone should light an increasing number of candles, we should be careful that each person’s candles are in a discrete place, so as to make clear which night it is. Obviously the Rema is grappling with the Tosafot’s understanding while trying to support the accepted custom in Ashkenazic communities in his time.
- 6 There are many who do draw parallels between Sukkot and Hanukah in various ways but that is beyond the scope of this piece. Certainly, there is no explanation offered here in the Gemara.

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