

# The Shirt Off Your Back: A Chanukah Message

Chanukah is a holiday highlighted by fun, especially with its amusing customs such as dreidels, latkes, *kvitlach* (a card game) and gift-giving. This seems to have long been the case, as Rambam explains:

מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד.  
*The mitzvah of kindling Chanukah lamps is very beloved.*

**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah 4:12**

And yet there exist more profound lessons embedded in the festival's traditions that pique one's curiosity. Rambam records a striking rule that provides meaningful insight into some of Chanukah's interesting themes and traditions:

אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק.  
*Even if a person has no resources for food except [what he receives] from charity, he should pawn or sell his garments and purchase oil and lamps to kindle them [in fulfillment of the mitzvah].*

**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah 4:12**

There are many Torah-mandated laws and rules for which one would *not* be required to sell his or her clothing to achieve fulfillment; why does this rabbinically-enacted commandment — lighting the menorah — require such a radical action? In most cases, even if he or she wanted to, a person of limited means is prohibited from going to this extreme:



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כל המפזר ממונו במצוות, אל יפזר יותר מחומש.

*A person who distributes his money for mitzvot should not distribute more than a fifth.*

**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Arachim Vacharamim 8:13**

In fact, for only one other mitzvah does Rambam require a poor person to take such drastic measures: the four cups of wine drunk at the Passover seder. Rambam states:

ואפילו עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה לא יפחתו לו מארבעה כוסות.

*Even a poor person who is sustained by charity should not have fewer than four cups.*

**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Chametz U'Matzah 7:7**

Clearly then, this requirement represents something fundamentally unique about both mitzvos, and unites them in their distinctiveness.<sup>1</sup>

In approaching a holiday established through the *Torah she-baal peh* (the Oral Law) such as Chanukah, we might look to our earliest compendium of Oral Law, the Mishna, for guidance. However, there exists neither a tractate nor even a full chapter about Chanukah, whereas other holidays such as Purim are

well represented. In fact, Chanukah's details appear tangentially in just a few pages of the volume relating to the laws of Shabbos (*Shabbos*, 21a-23b).

Thus, our analysis begins with a general rule regarding the relationship between Torah and rabbinic laws:

כל דתקון רבנן כעין דאורייתא תיקון.

*Whatever the Rabbis enacted, they enacted it similar to the Scriptural Law.*

**Pesachim 116b**

Based on this principle, it is striking that the rabbinically-mandated holiday of Chanukah shares an astounding number of similarities with the Torah-based holiday of Sukkos.

1. On a superficial level, both holidays are eight days. *Maccabees 2*, in the tenth chapter, notes that the original Chanukah celebration took place because the Jews missed Sukkos that year due to the siege of Jerusalem and the temporary loss of the Beis Hamikdash.

2. On Sukkos, there is a mitzvah to dwell in a sukkah, which is a mitzvah that relates to the house. On Chanukah, the mitzvah to light candles is a mitzvah on the house as well — מצותה שיהיה כל בית ובית מדליק

I would like to thank my chaver Nachman Calko for asking the question that prompted these thoughts and R' Eliezer Barany for his research that supported the various directions I sought in this analysis.

נר אחד — the mitzvah is that a single candle should be lit in each and every house, as we shall soon see from Rambam.

3. On Sukkos the *korbanos*, sacrifices, are *chalukin bekorbanoseihem*, differentiated in number by their days — we decrease their number every day; so too, the candles lit on each day of Chanukah are differentiated in number, and we increase their number every day.

4. On Sukkos, we take four species that are *mehudar*, or extra beautiful. In fact, the Torah description of the *esrog* is *pri etz hadar*, a beautiful fruit (Vayikra 23:40). On Chanukah, we have a very special occasion where the *mehudar* way to do the mitzvah is built into the mitzvah itself. Rambam states:

כמה נרות הוא מדליק בחנוכה. מצותה שיהיה כל בית ובית מדליק נר אחד בין שהיו אנשי הבית מרובין בין שלא היה בו אלא אדם אחד. והמהדר את המצוה מדליק נרות כמנין אנשי הבית נר לכל אחד ואחד בין אנשים בין נשים. והמהדר יותר על זה ועושה מצוה מן המובחר מדליק נר לכל אחד בלילה הראשון ומוסיף והולך בכל לילה ולילה נר אחד.

*How many candles should one light on Chanukah? The mitzvah is that a single candle should be lit in each and every house, regardless of whether there are many members of the household, or merely one person [lives] there. A person who performs the mitzvah in a beautiful and conscientious manner should light candles for every member of the household, whether male or female. A person who is even more conscientious in his performance of the mitzvah than this and observes the mitzvah in the most desirable manner should light candles for every member of his household, a candle for each individual, whether male or female, on the first night. On each subsequent night, he should add a*

*candle [for each of the members of the household].*

**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah 4:1**

5. Another point of comparison between Sukkos and Chanukah relates to the prohibition to benefit from the Chanukah lights. By contrast, the purpose of lighting candles on Shabbos is directly related to our need to use them. The Sukkos festival again sheds “light” on this strange phenomenon, as formulated by the *Tur*:

לא צונו לעשות סוכה באותו הזמן לפי שהוא ימות הקיץ ודרך כל אדם לעשות סוכה לצל ולא היתה ניכרת עשייתנו בהם שהם במצות הבורא יתברך ולכן צוה אותנו שנעשה בחדש השביעי שהוא זמן הגשמים ודרך כל אדם לצאת מסוכתו ולישב בביתו ואנחנו יוצאין מן הבית לישב בסוכה בזה יראה לכל שמצות המלך היא עלינו לעשותה.

*We were not commanded to make a sukkah during that time (Nissan) because that is summertime, and it is the way of man to make a sukkah for shade, and it would not be apparent that our making them (building a sukkah) is due to the commandment of the Creator, He should be blessed. And therefore, He commanded us to make [sukkahs] in the seventh month (Tishrei), which is the rainy season, and the way of man is to leave the sukkah and return to his house, and we go out of the house to return to the sukkah, and in this, everyone sees that it is a commandment of the King that it is on us to do.*

**Tur, Orach Chaim no. 625**

It would seemingly have been more appropriate to establish Sukkos during Nissan, since we dwell in a sukkah in order to remember the Exodus (Vayikrah 23:43):

למען ידעו דורותיכם כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל בהוציאתי אותם.

*In order that your [ensuing] generations*

*should know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt.*

However, the *Tur* states that we inhabit the sukkah in the beginning of the fall in order to demonstrate that we are not doing so simply for enjoyment, but for a mitzvah purpose. We celebrate Chanukah as well by lighting candles not simply for enjoyment, but for a mitzvah purpose!

What, then, is the purpose of this mitzvah?

In order to answer, we must note a sixth similarity between Chanukah and Sukkos:

6. As the *Tur* noted, we leave our houses for the sukkah for a more profound reason than enjoyment, i.e. to inspire within us the proper realization that even our houses are not secure. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks termed the holiday as “The festival of insecurity” (Sukkot 5774) for that very reason. Robbers, natural disasters, and accidents illustrate this very notion that in actuality, it is Hashem who rules the world. As Aldous Huxley wrote, “Experience



is not what happens to you. It is what you do with what happens to you.” Experiencing a week of living in a temporary dwelling without security helps inculcate that very message. So too, on Chanukah, we publicize to the entire world that Hashem runs the show; He is the one who turns on and off the lights, as it were.

What, then, provides the impetus for us to sell the very shirts off our backs in order to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting candles on Chanukah? *Pirsumei nissah* — spreading the knowledge of Hashem’s awesome and miraculous realities — as we pray in the blessing of Modim in the Amida, *she-bechol eys erev va-voker vatzahorayim*, every moment, evening, morning and afternoon, we recognize His intervention within the world.

This explanation also helps to clarify the link between lighting Chanukah candles and drinking four cups of wine at the Pesach seder. *Maggid Mishneh* explains why the same rule regarding the four cups applies to Chanukah lights:

נראה שלמדו ממה שנתבאר פ' ז' מהלכות  
חמץ ומצה שאפילו עני שבישראל לא יפחות

Those who might be lacking monetarily actually have a lot to give, and have something important to offer, in that they can spread the knowledge of Hashem’s miraculous nature to the world.

מד' כוסות והטעם משום פרסומי ניסא.

*It appears that it is derived from what is explained in the seventh chapter of the Laws of Chametz and Matzah that even a poor person in Israel should not have less than four cups, and the reason is to publicize the miracle.*

**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah 4:12**

As *Maggid Mishneh* explains, the institution of lighting candles on Chanukah is in fact derived from the four cups, as a display of the miracles Hashem performed for us. Based on this, one might inquire why we would not be required to sell our clothes in order to live in a sukkah? There are two possible responses, one technical and the other fundamental:

1. Halachically speaking, the concept of *teishvu k'ein taduru*, to dwell in a sukkah like you live in your house (*Sukkah* 28b), requires us to live in our sukkah the same way we would in our houses, which might preclude the option of selling our clothing.

2. The purpose of living in a sukkah is to bring about change *within* the person; however, Chanukah lights and drinking four cups of wine at the seder are other-focused, meant for us to influence others and not just ourselves.

Based on the latter explanation we can now understand the unique nature of both of these mitzvos: they provide the archetype for our responsibility to the world and not just to ourselves through the performance of Hashem’s will.

The phrase *giving the shirt off your back* implies a generous act; on the other hand, one who *doesn't even have a shirt on his back* suggests impoverishment. While the former often denotes someone who is monetarily able to

provide for others, and the latter refers to someone who is downtrodden and generally lacks the means to help others, with respect to the halachos herein discussed, an unusual permutation of the two arises. Indeed, regarding the requirement of the poor with respect to both Chanukah lighting as well as the seder’s four cups, halachah demands the personal generosity of the poor person! The lesson: those who might be lacking monetarily actually have a lot to give, and have something important to offer, in that they can spread the knowledge of Hashem’s miraculous nature to the world.

Thus, Chanukah is not just about taking the shirt off your back to put food on your own table — but rather to share Hashem’s message with the world. In order to encourage the world, one must be other-person focused, not just centered on oneself. As John Quincy Adams noted: “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.” This Chanukah, as we light, we may be focused on our own lacks and limitations, but let us remind ourselves to take the opportunity to inspire the world as leaders, spreading Hashem’s message of miraculous opportunities.

## Endnotes

1. The *Mishna Berurah, Bei'ur Halacha* 263:2, writes that one must also sell the shirt off of one’s back in order to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting Shabbos candles. However, that seems to be a function of *shalom bayis*, the domestic tranquility that is provided by having a home with lights, rather than a function of the mitzvah itself. See *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah and Chanukah* 4:14, and *Minchas Asher, Chanukah* no. 13.