

Chanukah's Pursuit of Beauty

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Judaism is of two minds regarding beauty, at times according it a place of honor, and at times denigrating it as superficial and without meaning. To take but one example, the Torah presents contradictory views of whether beauty indicates righteousness. Scripture and sages emphasize that our matriarchs must have been women of surpassing beauty – but regarding would-be leaders like Eliav and Avshalom, we are warned not to be impressed by aesthetics. Judaism both promotes and denies the value of beauty.

The rites of Chanukah, on the other hand, seem to demonstrate that the debate is closed: Physical beauty is a goal to be sought. Our celebrations are thoroughly invested with an impulse for beauty, directed by an imperative which values the attractive.

Chanukah's perennial emphasis on beauty

Witness the talmudic description of the menorah constructed by the impoverished Chashmonaim in the wake of their military victory:

The branches of their menorah were iron rods, and the Chashmonaim coated them with tin. When they became wealthier, they made the branches of silver. When they became still wealthier, they made the branches of gold.

Menachot 28b

שפודים של ברזל היו וחיפום
בבעץ העשירו עשאום של
כסף חזרו והעשירו עשאום
של זהב
מנחות כח:

Although the iron and tin menorah was halachically acceptable, the Chashmonaim sought to beautify the menorah of the Beit haMikdash with gold. And lest one argue that this was only because the Menorah's biblical predecessor was made of gold, note that the same impulse for *hiddur*, for beauty, applies to our own Chanukiah. Citing the biblical²⁴ principle of “שלא יהיו מצוות בזויות עליו, מצוות בזויות עליו” that one must ensure that his mitzvot are not degraded,” they ruled²⁵ that we must make sure to use a clean, fresh Chanukiah.²⁶

²⁴ See the many rishonim cited in Sdei Chemed 2:38 who argue that this is a biblical principle, extrapolated from the rule that one may not fulfill the mitzvah of הדם כיסוי (covering the blood of a slaughtered bird or beast) with one's foot.

²⁵ Masechet Sofrim 20:3, Tur Orach Chaim 673

²⁶ The Talmud Shabbat 22a also notes that we may not examine coins by the light of the Chanukiah, and that we may not light a non-Chanukiah flame from the Chanukiah itself, under this same principle.

This same desire for impressive appearances informs the candle-lighting options presented in the gemara:

The mitzvah of Chanukah is for each family to light one lamp. Those who beautify²⁷ light one lamp for each individual. According to Beit Shammai, those who beautify still more light eight lamps on the first day, and then reduce by one per day. According to Beit Hillel, they light one lamp on the first day, and then increase by one per day.

Shabbat 21a

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
שבת כא.

The weight assigned to aesthetics informs our choice of fuel for the Chanukiah, too. Malachi²⁸ rebuked the Jews of his day for bringing inferior animals as korbanot, and he dared them, “הקריבנהו נא לפתחך,” “Bring it now to your [human] ruler! Would he be satisfied, would he show favor to you?” The sages applied this principle to various elements of korban activities: Using water which has been left exposed for Succot libations,²⁹ using inferior klei sharet [service implements] in the Beit haMikdash,³⁰ bringing an offering with excrement upon it³¹ or in it,³² and tearing open a korban’s limb before bringing it on the mizbeiach.³³ They also extended the principle to kiddush wine, which is compared to the wine poured on the mizbeiach.³⁴ And, invoking this principle, Rav Yosef Teumim³⁵ ruled that one may not use fouled oil for the Chanukiah.³⁶

Using beauty to defeat the Greeks

Perhaps this emphasis upon beauty in our Chanukah celebration is not a definitive statement on Judaism’s approach to the physical, but rather a Chanukah-specific product of our ancestors’ victory over the Greeks. Each Yom Tov which celebrates the defeat of a foe includes some denial of that enemy’s approach, a message designed to counter the ethos of our antagonists. Our Pesach celebration includes the slaughter of the lamb, one of Egypt’s gods,³⁷ and Purim incorporates elements of unity, countering Haman’s description of the Jews as מפורד ומפרד,

²⁷ This is the translation of מהדרין according to Tosafot Shabbat 21b והמהדרין. Rashi, on the other hand, renders מהדרין as “those who pursue.”

²⁸ Malachi 1:8

²⁹ Succah 50a

³⁰ Sotah 14b

³¹ Zevachim 85a

³² Menachot 69a

³³ Chullin 90b

³⁴ Bava Batra 97b, and see Rashbam there

³⁵ Pri Megadim, Eishel Avraham Orach Chaim 154:19, based on Ran, Chullin 36b דפי הרי"ף

³⁶ The aforementioned rabbinic principle of avoiding degradation of mitzvot appears to be distinct from the biblical mandate of avoiding the use of inferior items for mitzvot. The former prescribes behavior, where the latter is about mitzvah objects.

³⁷ See, for example, Shmot Rabbah 16:2

scattered and divided.³⁸ Perhaps Chanukah employs beautification of Divine service in order to counter the Greek emphasis on the beauty to be found in the elements of this world.

In a 4th century BCE discussion of love, Plato put the following words into the mouth of Socrates: “Only in the contemplation of beauty is human life worth living.³⁹” True, he was referring to internal as well as external elegance, but his definition of beauty did not extend to the beauty of ritual mitzvot. This aesthetic emphasis persisted in Greek culture and values into the Hellenistic period, and Jews who were attracted to the world of Plato’s descendants may have been drawn to this ideal.

To this influence our Chanukah celebration replies: Find beauty in mitzvot! Kindle a splendid Chanukah, pour pure fuel into its lamps, and honor the mitzvah with increasing levels of splendor. With this you will encourage your generation and the generations of your descendants to avoid the errors of the mitvavim, and to embrace a life which sees beauty in mitzvot. Like the korban for Pesach, like mishloach manot for Purim, the beauty of Chanukah’s celebration will perpetuate the lessons of the original victory.

To take this a step further: Our ancestors may have rejected Hellenism, but who can doubt that the values of Chanukah’s vanquished yet survive and thrive? Our present reality seeks and rewards beauty - and we are undoubtedly influenced. Our eyes, and therefore our hearts, are drawn to beautiful things. Seen against this backdrop, the drive to beautify our mitzvot is about more than continuing the victory over the Greeks; throughout the year, the elegance of our Torah can serve as a magnet to attract our focus and inspire our commitment. The greater our efforts to demonstrate a Jewish life which is glorious and worthy of honor, the greater will be the reward in its lasting influence upon us and upon our children.

May we be מְהַדְרִין מִן הַמְהַדְרִין in all of our mitzvot, on Chanukah and throughout the year, reveling in the beauty of our Torah, countering the influences of the Hellenic world and creating a Judaism for all to admire.

³⁸ Shut Chatam Sofer 1:196 citing Manot haLevi to Esther 9:19

³⁹ Nehamas translation of Plato’s Symposium, 211d