

Let There be Points of Light

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The location of the Chanuka menorah is described in detail in the Gemara and poskim,¹ and we are told that if it is too high it is invalid, since it will not attract attention effectively. For these purposes, too high means more than 20 *amos* high, which is between 30-40 feet, or 10-13 meters. However, it is clear that while the placement of the menorah below that limit is valid, its proper location is far below that limit—specifically, below 10 *tefachim* from the floor, namely within 2-3 feet, or below a meter.

Ravina said in the name of Rava, this is to say that the Chanuka candle should be placed within 10 [tefachim from the floor].

Shabbos 21b

אמר רבינא [משמיה דרבא] זאת
אומרת: נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה בתוך
עשרה.

שבת כא:

No explanation is given in the Talmud for this height. At first, it might seem inconsistent with another major principle of the Chanuka menorah—the need for *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle—which might suggest that a more prominent position, such as higher up, ought to be optimal. What is the rationale for placing the menorah low down?²

The key to the answer is provided by the Rosh, in his commentary on the Gemara:

There is a mitzvah to place it within 10 as Ravina stated in the name of Rava, and this also publicizes the miracle in a greater way when it is lower because it is unusual to place something that is supposed to provide light so low to the ground.

Rosh, Shabbos 2:5

מצוה להניחה למטה מעשרה.
כדאמר רבינא משמיה דרבא וגם
איכא פרסום הנס טפי כשהיא
למטה דדבר העשוי לאור אין
דרך להניחה כל כך למטה
רא"ש, שבת ב:ה

According to the Rosh, the Chanuka candles are not meant for illumination, but to be points of light for us to notice them. Since candles typically function as sources of illumination, the Chanuka candles are apt to be misconstrued as lights, which they aren't supposed to be; rather, they are supposed to be markers, or indicators, or signs. The Chanuka candles are intended to

¹ *Shabbos 21b-22a*; Rambam, *Hilchos Chanuka* 4:7-9; *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 671:5-8.

² The Gemara does quote a dissenting view that does not insist or even prefer the low placement, and some rishonim, including the Rambam, do not mention the low placement as a preference. However, the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 671:6, does quote this preference, and writes that the proper height for the menorah is below 10 *tefachim*.

advertise the miracles of Chanuka. We view the Chanuka candles the way we view *yizkor* candles or *yahrtzeit* candles: as objects that we take note of, that remind us of something.³ This only works when the significance of the candles is evident. But when they are seen as lights, as illumination, then they fail as reminders. This is the insight of the Rosh. The Chanuka candles are to be placed low down precisely because that is *not* where lights go.

Since the Chanuka reminders (candles) are effective only when they are recognized as reminders and not as anything else, Chazal were acutely aware of the need to prescribe the rules of the candles in such a way as to enable the viewer to identify them as Chanuka icons. In addition to the placement close to the ground, as mentioned above, several regulations are aimed at ensuring that the role of the candles, and their message, is noticed and understood.

As an example, we recite the following declaration after lighting the candles:

These candles we light to commemorate the miracles, the wonders, the salvations and the wars that You performed for our forefathers in those days at this time [on the calendar] through Your holy priests. All eight days of Chanuka, these candles are sanctified and we have no permission to use them, rather just to see them in order to offer praise and thanksgiving to Your great name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvation.

הנרות הללו אנחנו מדליקין על הנסים ועל הנפלאות ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה על ידי כהניך הקדושים. וכל שמונת ימי חנכה הנרות הללו קדש הם ואין לנו רשות להשתמש בהן אלא לראותן בלבד כדי להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול על נסידך ועל נפלאותיך ועל ישועתך.

Many mitzvos come with a *bracha*, such as *netilas yadaim* (“*al netilas yadaim*”), *lulav* (“*al netilas lulav*”), *mezuza* (“*likboa mezuzah*”), and so does the mitzva of lighting Chanuka candles.

However, this mitzva is one of very few mitzvos that requires that we make a speech (*Haneiros halalu*) about the mitzva while performing it, describing the purpose of lighting the candles.⁴ Perhaps this is because the candles do not intrinsically signify anything, and to help promote the meaningfulness of those candles Chazal formulated the *Haneiros halalu* declaration.⁵

In a similar vein, the character of the *bracha* over Chanuka candles may be distinct from that of other mitzvos, in that the *bracha* may also be for the purpose of labeling the candles and identifying the message of the candles, which would otherwise be lost.⁶

It was asked: is the mitzvah fulfilled through lighting of the candles or through placement of the candles? Come and listen to what Rava said: If one was holding the candles [at the time of lighting it] one did not fulfill the mitzvah. We see from here that one fulfills the mitzvah by placing it in the correct place. [This is not a valid proof because], in that situation, the onlooker will think that he is holding

איבעיא להו: הדלקה עושה מצוה או הנחה עושה מצוה - תא שמע. דאמר רבא: היה תפוש נר חנוכה ועומד - לא עשה ולא כלום. שמע מינה: הנחה עושה מצוה - התם: הרואה אומר לצורכו הוא דנקיט לה. תא שמע. דאמר רבא:

³ Shabbat candles, by contrast, are intended specifically for illumination.

⁴ *Maseches Sofrim* 20:4

⁵ The Gemara that presents the rules of Chanuka candles does not make any mention of this declaration, however, so the poskim do not invalidate the lighting for omitting it. See for example *Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim* 671:8. However, see *Nefesh Harav*, p.224, that R. Soloveitchik felt that this declaration is an integral part of the mitzvah.

⁶ See R. Yaakov Emden, *Mor Uketziya* 672, and R. Tzvi Pesach Frank, *Mikraei Kodesh* pp. 58-59.

it in order to use it for his needs. Come and listen to what Rava said: If one lights inside (in the wrong location) and then brings it outside, one does not fulfill the mitzvah. This is best explained if one assumes that the mitzvah is fulfilled through the lighting of the candles. For this reason, one must light them in the proper place. However, if one assumes that the mitzvah is fulfilled through the placement, why doesn't one fulfill the mitzvah? In that situation as well, the onlooker will think that the candles were lit for personal needs.

Shabbos 22b

הדליקה בפנים והוציאה - לא עשה כלום. אי אמרת בשלמא הדליקה עושה מצוה - הדליקה במקומו בעינן. משום הכי לא עשה כלום. אלא אי אמרת הנחה עושה מצוה אמאי לא עשה ולא כלום? - התם נמי; הרואה הוא אומר לצורכו הוא דאדלקה.
שבת כב:

The Gemara insists that one not hold the Chanuka candle in his hand, even if it is in the correct location. Although at first, the Gemara understands this rule to imply that the Chanuka candle must be placed in position as an essential part of the mitzva, and consequently holding it in one's hand would be lacking this component, this is rejected. The actual reason for disqualifying Chanuka candles that one holds in his hands is that the onlooker will perceive the candles as illumination and thereby misconstrue their actual role.⁷ Thus, the very fact that the Chanuka candles are not meant for light requires that we avoid giving the impression that they are going to be used for light.

The Gemara rules that in addition to lighting the Chanuka candle(s) one must place another candle nearby, unless there is already a lamp or torch.⁸ Some merge this with a similar rule⁹ that forbids utilizing the flame or the light of the Chanuka candles because of their sanctity (which derives perhaps from their being reminiscent of the *nerot* of the Mikdash, or simply because of their being ritual objects).¹⁰ Thus, the insistence to place another, neutral, candle nearby is in order to prevent people from forbidden utilization of the Chanuka candles. However, others separate these two rules, and they understand the point of the first one is not to shield people from inadvertent or negligent misuse of the candles, but to help onlookers identify these candles as Chanuka candles rather than illumination candles.¹¹ This implies that the additional candle should be placed somewhat removed from the Chanuka candles and specifically higher or in a more central location, where light intended for illumination would typically be placed.¹²

Nowadays, we are accustomed to a porch light or front yard flood light, but years ago this was not common, so a Chanuka candle in the front doorway would be recognized for what it was

⁷ See R. Akiva Eiger, *Teshuvos* II: 125, who emphasizes this point.

⁸ *Shabbos* 21b.

⁹ *Shabbos* 22a.

¹⁰ See *Chidushei Rashba*, *Shabbos* 21b.

¹¹ See Rashba, *ibid.* and Ran on Rif, *Shabbos* 9a, and Meiri, *Shabbos* 21b.

¹² *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 673:1; although the *Mishna Brura* understands the purpose of distancing the extra candle from the others to avoid confusion over the number of Chanuka candles being lit, see R. Yerucham (*Adam V'Chava* 9:1:61:3) who describes, "לכ יאמרו על כלן לצרכו הדליקן", "When one places an extra candle in order to benefit from the light, one should place it by itself, for otherwise [onlookers] will say that all of them were lit for personal needs. If one lights in a place where it is unusual to light any candles, there is no need for the additional candle 'to benefit from the light,'" which is the position advanced in this essay. Incidentally, the *Tur*, *Orach Chaim* no. 673, appears to find no need for the extra candle to be placed remote from the Chanuka candles.

even without auxiliary lighting. If so, those placing their menorah in the front yard (which was the default location in Talmudic times) shouldn't have needed the extra candle.¹³ In fact, that is precisely the interpretation of the Meiri who understands the Gemara's insistence on having a supplemental candle to apply only when lighting inside, but when lighting outside, which is not where people are likely to need the light, and therefore not a likely location to place a lamp, there is no need for the extra candle. However, he concedes that people tend to walk past there, and sometimes to congregate at the doorway, so an additional candle would be appropriate even there.

Nowadays: Electric Light Bulbs

In the 21st century, we do not use candles for illumination at all. Any candle would be only for the purpose of having a beholder look at it, and not to benefit from its light. For example, candles are placed in a restaurant for ambiance, or birthday candles are used so people will look at them.¹⁴ Conversely, any need for illumination will be met by electric bulbs, and not by candle light. Consequently, we might have to re-examine the details of the halacha to see how our observance of Chanuka candles can be consistent with that of earlier times.

Just as candles have been replaced by light bulbs, one might propose that the Chanuka candles be brought up to date by using light bulbs in the menorah. Based on our approach, however, it would seem that **candles**, specifically, are perfectly suited for Chanuka, even more now than throughout history.¹⁵ These Chanuka candles are most striking as artifacts and draw the beholder's attention precisely because they are not light bulbs. By contrast, the "additional candle" described above (that we call the *shamash*), which is specifically for the purpose of shedding light over the area, ought properly to be a light bulb. Since its function is to highlight the Chanuka candles as indicators, and not as illuminators, it should itself be an illuminator and not an indicator. In our world, a candle near the menorah will not succeed in its purpose the way a light bulb would.

On the other hand, there is a problem with having a light bulb near the Chanuka candles that is too bright.

If one lights during the day, one may not benefit from the candles and one may not recite a blessing because [our rabbis] said: one may not recite a blessing on the candle until we benefit from the light.

Maseches Sofrim 20:2

ואם הדליקו ביום, אין ניארתין ממנו,
ואין מברכין עליו, שכך אמרו, אין
מברכין על הנר עד שיארתו לאורו.
מסכת סופרים כ:ב

Maseches Sofrim states that we don't begin the candle ceremony until we benefit from its light. The obvious difficulty is twofold: we cannot wait until we benefit from the candle to start the ceremony—the ceremony is when we light! Second, we aren't permitted to benefit from the light of the Chanuka candles! Clearly then, the intent of *Maseches Sofrim* is that we don't begin the candle ceremony until we **could** benefit from its light. But this doesn't seem reasonable. If

¹³ See above note 12 regarding R. Yerucham's view.

¹⁴ The notable exception for observant Jews is the Shabbat candles, as above.

¹⁵ Regarding using a light bulb for a *yahrtzeit* candle see R. Y. Greenwald, *Kol Bo al Aveilut*, p.397 #30. Apart from mystical considerations, the *yahrtzeit* candle should be comparable to the Chanuka candles in this regard.

the purpose of the Chanuka candles were to illuminate, then it would be reasonable to insist on their ability to provide benefit—to illuminate. But the Chanuka candles are not for that purpose, so why do we insist on their being able to illuminate? Presumably the answer is that when a candle is in a dark area it is vivid and readily noticed.¹⁶ However, in the words of the Gemara,¹⁷ what good does a candle do during the daylight? If the area is flooded with light, then a candle is unable to stand out and attract attention, and if we want people to notice the candle we would want it to be dark enough. The measure of darkness that we require for Chanuka candles is such that one can potentially benefit from its illumination. Thus, although we may not actually benefit from the light of the Chanuka candles, we must be **able to do so** as a confirmation of their high visibility.¹⁸ A bright room would not be suitable for the Chanuka candles.

Taking both rules together, the ideal environment is one that is illuminated somewhat by a light source other than the Chanuka candles, but isn't too bright such that the candles don't shine. In this environment there would be no preference for a low location over a higher location, as no misunderstanding would exist in any location.¹⁹ In this way, the candles attract the attention of the passerby, and successfully convey the message they are meant to convey, without causing any confusion or misunderstanding.

¹⁶ See Meiri 21b "...ומ"מ קודם שקיעת החמה לא שהרי היא כשרגא בטיהרא ואין בה פרסום נס... Nevertheless, before sundown, one may not [light] because it is like a candle in a well-lit hall and the miracle is not publicized."

¹⁷ *Chulin* 60b.

¹⁸ This requirement, to be able to benefit from the bright shine of the light when saying a *bracha* over it, seems to be common to all *brachot* over lights: Shabbat candles (*Shabbos* 23b and Meiri there; also see *Pri Yitzchak* 1:6 regarding the caution not to light too early), Havdala candle (*Brachot* 51b), Chanuka candles, and even *kiddush levana* (See R. Yona on Rif, *Brachos* end of perek 4).

¹⁹ See *Mishna Brura* 671:27. This idea may depend on the two opinions cited there.