

# *She'asa Nissim: The Beracha on Seeing the Chanukah Lights*

Rabbi Menachem Genack

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS • CEO, OU Kosher • Rabbi, Cong. Shomrei Emunah, Englewood, NJ

*Rav Yehuda said: On the first day, one who sees [Chanukah lights] recites two [blessings] and one who lights recites three. On subsequent days, the one who lights recites two and the one who sees recites one.*

**Shabbos 23a**

אמר רב יהודה יום ראשון  
הרואה מברך שתים ומדליק  
מברך שלש מכאן ואילך מדליק  
מברך שתים ורואה מברך אחת.  
שבת כג.

When someone who is not lighting his own Chanukah lights sees the Chanukah lights of someone else, he recites two berachos on the first night, *She'asa Nissim* and *Shehechyanu*, and on subsequent nights, he recites *She'asa Nissim*.

How does one understand the obligation to recite the beracha of *She'asa Nissim* upon seeing the lights of others? Is seeing the lights a fulfillment of the mitzvah of Chanukah lights, thus warranting a beracha? Or is the beracha a *birchas hare'iyah*, a beracha recited upon seeing a specific event, similar to the beracha recited on seeing a rainbow or lightning?

Perhaps one can prove that seeing the Chanukah lights constitutes a fulfillment of the mitzvah from the fact that on the first night, one recites *Shehechyanu*. May one can recite *Shehechyanu* on Chanukah or Purim if one is not fulfilling a mitzvah? The Meiri, *Shabbos 23a*, writes that one may recite *Shehechyanu*, even if one does not see any lights. However, the implication of the *She'iltos* no. 26, is that one may only recite *Shehechyanu* in conjunction with the Chanukah lights. The *Mishnah Berurah* 676:3, also considers the Meiri's idea to be novel and leaves the matter a *tzarich iyun* (requires more investigation). Furthermore, the Meiri himself, *Megillah 4a*, writes that only holidays that have Kiddush, as well as Yom Kippur (which should have Kiddush if not for the prohibition against drinking), warrant recitation of *Shehechyanu* because of their inherent sanctity. Chanukah and Purim do not have an inherent sanctity and therefore, the *Shehechyanu* is only recited on the Chanukah lights or the reading of the Megillah. If one assumes that there is no inherent obligation to recite *Shehechyanu* on Chanukah, why does one who sees the Chanukah lights recite *Shehechyanu*? One must conclude that it is because seeing the lights constitutes a fulfillment of the mitzvah.

Rashi, in explaining the aforementioned Gemara, writes:

*The one who sees recites two [berachos]—She'asa Nissim and Shehechyanu for one cannot recite L'hadlik (to light) because he is not lighting.*

**Rashi, Shabbos 23a**

הרואה מברך שתים - שעשה נסים ושהחיינו שאין עליו לברך להדליק דהא לא אדליק איהו.  
רש"י, שבת כג.

Rav Mordechai Krauss pointed out to me that Rashi's explanation for why one does not recite the beracha of *L'hadlik* seems extraneous. Why would we think that one who sees the lights should recite *L'hadlik*? Rav Krauss noted that perhaps Rashi is teaching us that despite the fact that one fulfills a mitzvah by seeing the Chanukah lights, one does not follow the same text as someone who fulfills the mitzvah through lighting the Chanukah lights. The beracha of *L'hadlik* must be omitted because it would be false to say that one is lighting when one really isn't lighting.

Tosafos write:

*One who sees the Chanukah lights must recite a blessing— Regarding other commandments such as on the lulav or sukkah, the rabbis did not institute a blessing. It is only regarding Chanukah lights because it commemorates a special miracle and also because there are people who don't have a home and don't have a way to fulfill the mitzvah.*

**Tosafos, Sukkah 46a**

הרואה נר של חנוכה צריך לברך - בשאר מצות כגון אלולב וסוכה לא תקינו לברך לרואה אלא גבי נר חנוכה משום חביבות הנס וגם משום שיש כמה בני אדם שאין להם בתים ואין בידם לקיים המצוה.  
תוס' סוכה מו.

The suggestion of Tosafos that a beracha was instituted upon seeing the lights so that people who don't own homes can fulfill the mitzvah implies that by seeing the lights, one can fulfill the mitzvah, at least partially. [See *Tzitz Eliezer* 15:29, who suggests that even if someone is not sleeping in a home (such as someone travelling on a train or camping in the woods), he is still required to light Chanukah lights. Tosafos' comments seem to undermine this position.]

One might also prove that seeing the lights constitutes a (partial) fulfillment of the mitzvah from the opinion of the Ran, *Shabbos* 10a, that if a member of the family lit at home on behalf of an individual, that individual does not recite a beracha upon seeing Chanukah lights. If the beracha upon seeing the lights is a *birkas hare'iyah*, there would be no reason why this individual, who has not yet seen Chanukah lights that night, would not be able to recite the beracha. However, if the beracha is for fulfillment of a mitzvah, this individual already fulfilled his mitzvah when someone lit for him. Therefore, he cannot recite a beracha when he sees someone else's lights. The Rambam, *Hilchos Chanukah* 3:4, (as understood by the *Maggid Mishneh*) disagrees and maintains that even if a family member already lit at home for an individual, that individual may recite a beracha upon seeing the Chanukah lights of someone else. The Rambam must be of the opinion that the beracha recited upon seeing the lights is a *birkas hare'iyah*, and therefore, not associated with one's fulfillment of the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah lights. Even if one already fulfilled the mitzvah, one may still recite a beracha upon seeing the lights for the first time that night. As a matter of practical halacha, the *Mishnah Berurah* 676:6, rules that if family members already lit on behalf of an individual, that individual should not recite a beracha upon seeing

Chanukah lights because of *safek berachos l'hakel* (the rule that one should refrain from reciting a beracha whenever there is a doubt).

I was once asked by someone who was in this situation if there was any way to fulfill the opinion of the Rambam. I considered that a possible solution would be for this individual to listen to the beracha of *She'asa Nissim* that is recited in shul, and through that recitation, he can fulfill his obligation to recite a beracha (according to the Rambam).

However, one can question whether this solution is valid. After all, the lighting of Chanukah lights in shul is not an actual fulfillment of the mitzvah, but rather a *minhag* (tradition). Can one (who does not have a family member lighting on his behalf) recite a beracha upon seeing the Chanukah lights by seeing Chanukah lights in a shul? This question is contingent on the nature of the obligation to recite the beracha. If the beracha is indicative of a fulfillment of the mitzvah of Chanukah lights, then one cannot recite a beracha upon seeing the lights of the shul because in shul, there is no fulfillment of the mitzvah of lighting. If one cannot fulfill the actual mitzvah by lighting in shul, one certainly cannot fulfill the mitzvah of seeing the Chanukah lights by seeing lights that were lit in shul. However if the beracha on seeing the Chanukah lights is a *birkas hare'iyah*, then one could recite the beracha on seeing lights in the shul because the *minhag* to light in shul gives the lights the status of Chanukah lights. A *birkas hare'iyah* can be recited whenever one sees lights that have the status of Chanukah lights.

If one cannot recite the beracha upon seeing the lights in shul, then one cannot fulfill the obligation by listening to the beracha when it is recited in shul. However, based on our analysis, if one's family member lit on his behalf, he can listen to the beracha recited in shul and be assured that he has fulfilled his obligation according to all opinions. This is because any obligation to recite a beracha upon seeing Chanukah lights is to fulfill the Rambam's opinion that the beracha is a *birkas hare'iyah*. If the beracha is on fulfilling the mitzvah, then he has already fulfilled his mitzvah when his family member lit at home on his behalf. At the same time, the only objection to reciting a beracha upon seeing the Chanukah lights in shul is based on the view that the beracha for seeing the lights is based on a fulfillment of the mitzvah. This individual doesn't need to be concerned about that view because he has already fulfilled his mitzvah. Therefore, listening to the beracha in shul seems like the perfect solution.

Nevertheless, there is a technical problem with this solution. Maseches Sofrim 20:6, states that one recites *She'asa Nissim* after lighting the Chanukah lights. However Rama, *Orach Chaim* 676:2, writes that the normative practice is to recite all of the berachos before lighting. Rav Solovetichik analyzed the dispute as follows: According to Maseches Sofrim, the beracha of *She'asa Nissim* (even for one who is lighting) is a *birkas hare'iyah* and therefore must be recited after one sees the lights. According to the Rama, the beracha is a *birkas hamitzvah*, a beracha recited prior to fulfilling a mitzvah. In order to fulfill the approach of Maseches Sofrim, Rav Soloveitchik would recite the beracha of *She'asa Nissim* after lighting the first light but before lighting the rest of the lights. By doing so, he was able to recite a beracha of *She'asa Nissim* after seeing the light and still fulfill the Rama's opinion by reciting the beracha before lighting the other lights. On the first night of Chanukah, this option is not possible, and therefore, Rav

Soloveitchik followed the Rama's opinion and recited all of the berachos before lighting. Rav Soloveitchik also noted that this was the practice of his grandfather, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik.

We see from Rav Soloveitchik's practice that one cannot recite a *birkas hare'iyah* before one sees the item that is the subject of the beracha. Without seeing the Chanukah lights, one cannot fulfill the opinion of Maseches Sofrim. As such, the individual who wants to listen to *She'asa Nissim* in shul will encounter the following problem: Most shuls don't follow the practice of the Rav and they recite all of the berachos before lighting. When this individual hears the beracha being recited, there are no Chanukah lights for him to see. Therefore, if his obligation to recite *She'asa Nissim* is based on it being a *birkas hare'iyah*, he will not fulfill his obligation. The solution of listening to the beracha in shul will only work if one attends a shul that follows the practice of Rav Soloveitchik and recites the beracha after lighting the first light.

In summary, there are two approaches to understanding the beracha that is recited upon seeing the Chanukah lights. One approach is that the beracha is indicative of a fulfillment of a mitzvah when one sees the lights. The other approach is that it is a *birkas hare'iyah*. There are three potential practical differences: whether one whose family member lit on his behalf recites this beracha; whether one can fulfill the mitzvah by listening to its recitation in shul; and whether one must recite (or listen to) the beracha after seeing the light. These three practical ramifications converge in the case of one whose family lit on his behalf and he wants to fulfill all opinions by listening to the beracha that is recited in shul.