

# The Inside Story: Reexamining *Mehadrin min Hamehadrin* in Contemporary Times

## Family Time

Imagine the picturesque scene of a family lighting Chanukah candles together. If you are an Ashkenazi, you might visualize the family gathering around their menoros, with the head of the house lighting his menorah first, and the rest of the family following suit. If you are a member of the Edot Hamizrach (Sephardi), where the custom is usually for the master of the household to be the only one lighting, you might think of the whole family watching as the father lights for everyone.

Unfortunately, as idyllic as such a scene is, it is sometimes hard to coordinate everyone being present for Chanukah lighting. Is there halachic importance to the entire family lighting in unison? The answer to this question can be reached after a careful analysis of the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles as it is presented in Chazal, the Rishonim, and the early Poskim.

## Two Observations

The Braisa, quoted in the Gemara, *Maseches Shabbos* (21b), states that the minimum requirement for the mitzvah of Chanukah candles is “*ner ish ubeiso* — one candle for a person and his household.” For those who perform mitzvos in an enhanced



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fashion, termed *mehadrin*, the Braisa prescribes a more respectable way of lighting — to kindle a candle per person in the home. The Braisa continues that people who are even more scrupulous in their mitzvah accomplishments, called *mehdarin min hamehadrin*, should light a number of candles paralleling what night of Chanukah it is numerically.

תנו רבנן: מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו.  
והמהדרין - נר לכל אחד ואחד. והמהדרין מן  
המהדרין וכו' בית הלל אומרים: יום ראשון  
מדליק אחת, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.

*The Tannaim taught: The mitzvah of Chanukah is a candle for a person and his household. And for those who perform mitzvos in an enhanced fashion (mehadrin), one candle per person. And those who are even more scrupulous in their mitzvah observance (mehadrin min hamehadrin) ... Beis Hillel say, the first day he lights one, from then and on, he increases [based on the day].*

There are two critical observations to reflect on in this Braisa.

First, as often noted, the Braisa does not discuss the relationship between

*mehadrin*, lighting based upon the number of people in the house, and *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, kindling based upon the number of the day of Chanukah. Although the prevalent Ashkenazic custom is to combine the level of *mehadrin* — based on the number of residents, with the level of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* — based on the day of Chanukah that it is, and to light a candle per person corresponding to the number of days, the Braisa itself is ambiguous regarding that point. The Braisa simply enumerates two options: *mehadrin* — based on the number of people, or *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. In fact, the Baalei HaTosafos on that Gemara (s.v. *V'Hamehadrin*) maintain that the level of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is independent of the level of *mehadrin*. A person may light as a function of the number of people, which is *mehadrin*, or based upon the number of days of Chanukah, which is *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. They explain that it is important to pick either *mehadrin* or *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, because if one were to combine both of those practices, the result would be

an amorphous mass of candles that would leave an onlooker unable to discern if the number of candles corresponds to the quantity of people, the number of days, or both. The opinion of the Baalei Hatosafos is practiced in many present-day homes of Edot Hamizrach/Sephardic heritage.

The second important observation about the Braisa concerns who actually lights the menorah. The Braisa is noticeably and conspicuously vague in applying the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles to a specific individual in the house. The Braisa simply instructs that the basic mitzvah of Chanukah is “*ner ish ubeiso* — one candle for a person and his household,” but it does not clearly highlight who actually lights the menorah. Although the Braisa does use the term “*ish ubeiso* — an individual and his household,” the focus is on how many candles are lit, not on who in the family lights. Chazal appear to be declaring that the mitzvah of Chanukah is to have a candle lit representing a person and his household. This is further evident from the phraseology the Rambam uses when he quotes the Braisa (*Hilchos Chanukah* 4:1), where he portrays the mitzvah of lighting as being fulfilled by the family — the *bayis*, as opposed to a specific person:

מצותה שיהיה כל בית ובית מדליק נר אחד בין שהיו אנשי הבית  
מרובין בין שלא היה בו אלא אדם אחד.

*Its mitzvah is that each household should light one candle, whether the residents of the house are numerous, or whether it is inhabited by only one individual.*

The Braisa continues this ambiguity when it discusses the practice of the *mehadrin*. Instead of a direct imperative, the Braisa focuses on how many candles should be in the house, not on who is actively lighting. Similarly, for the most enthusiastic individuals, *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, the Braisa continues to use a neutral term “*madlik*” — “one lights” which indicates that Chanukah candles should be lit in each house.

In all three practices of lighting discussed by Chazal, they emphasize the number of candles that are kindled in the home rather than which individual lights them. Although the head of the household was the one who was lighting, the lack of directive to him specifically seems to indicate that the Braisa’s main intention is that the family should make sure that it has Chanukah candles kindled in its house, not that a specific family member should necessarily light them.



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Likewise, the Rishonim who discuss or codify the Braisa echo the same inexplicit, general word — *madlik* — one lights, giving no significant instruction as to who must do the lighting. That is not to say that the presumption of the Braisa and all that follow it is that anyone aside from the head of the house would light. Yet from the language of the Braisa through the discussion of the Rishonim it would seem that who does the act of lighting is not important, as long as the house has Chanukah candles lit in it.

### Early Codification: The Rambam, The *Tur* and The *Darhei Moshe*

The Rambam (*Hilchos Chanukah* 4:1) quotes the ruling of the Braisa completely. In contrast to the Baalei HaTosafos, he expresses *mehadrin min hamehadrin* as an extension of *mehadrin*. For *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, candles are lit in accordance with the number of inhabitants and corresponding to the specific night of Chanukah. The Rambam also maintains the Braisa's ambiguity and lack of emphasis on who does the actual lighting.

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 יתר על זה ועושה מצוה מן המובחר מדליק נר לכל אחד ואחד בלילה הראשון ומוסיף והולך בכל לילה ולילה נר אחד.

*How many candles does he kindle on Chanukah? Its mitzvah is that each household should light one candle, whether the residents of the house are numerous, or whether it is inhabited by only one individual. And those that perform the mitzvah in an enhanced*

*fashion light one candle according to the number of people in the house, one candle per person — man or woman. And one who enhances even more than this and does the mitzvah in the choicest way, lights one for each person on the first night, and from then on adds one candle per night.*

In contrast to the Rambam's ruling on *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, combining the numbers of people and days, the *Tur* (O. C. 671) codifies the mitzvah of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* as the Tosafists emphasized, with the lighting centering solely on which day of Chanukah it is, and ignoring the number of people in the house.

The Rama, in his *Darhei Moshe* on the *Tur*, adds a comment from Rav Avraham of Prague. Rav Avraham asserts that nowadays, when the menorah lighting takes place in the house, even the Tosafists would agree that one should fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin* based on the number of days and the number of people, as the Rambam ruled. He explains that since the primary audience for the candle lighting is the family itself, which is aware of how many people are in its own house, there is no concern that the Chanukah candles will create an unidentifiable cluster of candles that do not indicate the number of days or people. Additionally, the Tosafists made their comment when the practice was for everyone to light outside the house by its entrance. When that was done, all of the candles had to be placed in a single location adjacent to the doorway. Therefore, the number and nature of the candles was indiscernible. By contrast, our practice is to light candles in the house. Consequently, it is easy for the members of the family to light candles in different locations, which will clearly indicate how many

people are in the house and which day of Chanukah it is:

וכתב מהר"א מפראג דלדין שמדליקין בפנים ויודעין בבית כמה בני אדם בבית וליכא למיחש שמא יאמרו כן בני אדם הם בבית אף לדעת התוספות מנהגינו נכון. ועוד דמאחר שמדליקין בפנים כל אחד יוכל להדליק במקום מיוחד ולא בעי להדליק כולן בטפח הסמוך לפתח וניכר הנרות שמדליק כל אחד ואחד ואיכא היכרא כשמוסיף והולך בשאר הלילות ולכן מנהגינו אתי שפיר לכולי עלמא:

*Rav Avraham of Prague wrote that for us, who kindle inside, and it is known in the family how many people are in the house, and there is no concern that they will say that there is a [different] number of people in the house, even according to Tosafos, our custom is correct. And furthermore, since we light inside, it is possible for each person to light in a distinct place, and they do not all need to light in the tefach beside the doorway, so [the number of] candles each one lights is recognizable, and it is noticeable when he increases and adds on the other nights, and therefore our custom is appropriate according to all opinions.*

The thrust of the Rama's quote from Rav Avraham of Prague is to give two reasons why now that we light inside, we can light candles correlating to the number of people in the house and the number of the days, and the concern of the Tosafists can be obviated. Although Rav Avraham and the Rama say that each person lights in a different location, their point is clearly not to innovate that each family member must do the mitzvah himself. They are simply explaining that it is presently possible to divide up the Chanukah lighting, with different people lighting for the family in separate locations in the home. Their focus is to redefine *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, to the advantage of putting Chanukah candles in different locations. Even though

Rav Avraham of Prague and the Rama do say that each person lights, they just mean to clarify how to break up the lighting in different locations and fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin* in the best way possible.

It would appear that there are, at least, two possible reasons that they discuss delegating the lighting to different individuals rather than charging one person with the entire task. First, it is simply more convenient for the family members to split the lighting, compared to having one person go around the house from location to location to kindle the candles distributed throughout the house. This can be better understood in light of the Braisa and the Rishonim that follow it, which seem to highlight that the long-standing practice in Klal Yisrael was that anyone in the family could light the menorah. Rav Avraham and the Rama do not see themselves as stating a notable point by adding that many family members light, since there was never any halachic emphasis on who, specifically, should light the menorah. Therefore, Rav Avraham and the Rama are not discussing any change in that way of lighting. Their goal is merely to focus on the definition of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* and to explain that if one is dividing the candles into different locations in the house, different people can light.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, it is possible that Rav Avraham and the Rama maintain that it is necessary for different individuals in the house to light in the different locations so that the entire lighting takes place at the same time. All the candle lightings are part of one large mitzvah of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* that is being fulfilled by all those in the household, which is to have one set of candles burning based upon the number of people and days. Therefore, the candles should ideally all be lit within the same timeframe rather than sequentially, so that they can join together to fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, which means lighting candles representative of the day of Chanukah and the number of people in the house, at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, Rav Avraham of Prague and the Rama do introduce the concept that each person perform the lighting. Yet it seems logical that their intent is to facilitate lighting in different locations in the easiest way possible. Additionally, there might be halachic benefits to all of them lighting at the same time. That would be the ultimate fulfillment of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* — candles lit paralleling the number of people and the day.



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Meet Nicole Bock from Teaneck, New Jersey. A Mathematics major and Art History minor at Yeshiva University, Nicole is a YU Honors student whose summer internship at Citigroup resulted in a job offer in its Capital Markets Origination division.

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## Shulchan Aruch and Rama

The discussion between the *Tur* and the *Darchei Moshe* is paralleled in the pages of the *Shulchan Aruch* (O. C. 671:2).

Like the Braisa, the *Shulchan Aruch* uses the very neutral term *madlik* – one should light. The Mechaber states:

כמה נרות מדליק? בלילה הראשון מדליק אחד, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך אחד בכל לילה.

*How many candles does he kindle? On the first night light one, from then and on, he adds one each night.*

The Rama adds to the Mechaber:

ויש אומרים דכל אחד מבני הבית ידליק, וכן המנהג פשוט, ויזהרו ליתן כל אחד ואחד נרותיו במקום מיוחד כדי שיהיה היכר כמה נרות מדליקין.

*And some say that each member of the household should light, and that is the prevalent custom, and they should be careful that each person puts his candles in a distinct place, so it can be noticed how many candles they are lighting.*

When the Rama adds that each person should light, he immediately elaborates that they should light in different locations, as he explained at length in the *Darchei Moshe* from Rav Avraham of Prague. Although the Rama's words literally mean that our custom is that each person lights himself, the Rama's focus does not seem to be on which people do the lighting. Since the long-standing practice was that anyone in the family could light, the Rama is not discussing any change in that way of lighting. His only intent is to focus on the performance of *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. Different locations can be lit concurrently by different individuals.

If this understanding of the Rama's words is correct, then the Rama would concur with the rest of the Rishonim and Poskim, that the lighting is a household event.

## The Approach of Several Acharonim

Several of the *Gedolei HaAcharonim* (such as Rabi Akiva Eiger in his glosses to O. C. *ibid.* and in his *Responsum, Tinyana 13*, also assumed by the Brisker Rav in *Chidushei Maran Riz Halevi al Harambam, ibid.*) explain the words of the Rama differently.

They understand that when the Rama writes that each person should light, he means to redefine the mitzvah of *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. According to this explanation, each person makes himself independent of the family, lights separately and fulfills his own mitzvah. Following that logic, there should be little need for a family to light together. Each person can perform his own mitzvah at a different time, comparable to a family doing the mitzvah of lulav and esrog on Succos. Two people in a family are allowed to daven at two different minyanim and shake their lulavim at different times. Similarly, two family members can light their menoros at different times.

## The Whole Story

In conclusion, the importance of a family lighting at the same time depends on how one understands the words of the Rama, who says that the Ashkenazic custom is for each person to light. At face value, as explained by some of the great Acharonim, the Rama means that the way to fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is for each family member to halachically separate himself from the rest of his family and fulfill the mitzvah independently. Accordingly, there is little reason for the family to light together because each person is performing his own mitzvah (notwithstanding the additional *pirsumei nisa* that might take

## The Symbolism of Mehadrin

ומהאי טעמא נקרא חנוכה שיש בכל שנה התחדשות ... כי הפירוש נר איש וביתו גם כן כפשוטו שיש התחדשות אור ונר דולק בכל איש ישראל בחנוכה. ומהדרין אחר המצות על ידי יגיעה ותשוקה שלהם יכולין לעורר כמה נרות לכל הנלויים אליהם. שפת אמת, חנוכה תר"מ

*It is called Chanukah (from the word dedication) because each year there is a renewal ... the explanation of "one candle per household" on a simple level, is that there is a renewal of light that flickers in each Jewish person on Chanukah. Those who are "mehadrin" and pursue mitzvos through their toil and desire, they can inspire [the lighting of] numerous candles of their followers. Sfas Emes, Chanukah 5740*

place if the family lights at the same time). In addition, according to the custom of the Edot Hamizrach, who do not usually follow the Rama, and have only one person light, *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is not increased by the rest of the family being present at the lighting.

On the other hand, a different understanding of the Rama emerges when it is understood in the context of the comment of Rav Avraham of Prague, quoted in the *Darchei Moshe*, which seems to be the source for the pithy comment of the Rama on *Shulchan Aruch*. Rav Avraham discusses splitting up the family's lighting only in regard to facilitating *mehadrin min hamehadrin* by them lighting in different locations throughout the house. Therefore, it is possible that it is more ideal for

the whole family to light at the same time, so they all perform their part of their family's *mehadrin min hamehadrin* in unison, with the resulting candles actually representing the number of people in the family, as well as what night of Chanukah it is.

## Hashkafic Thoughts

The Mishkan was dedicated in the wilderness amid much joy and celebration — for most of Klal Yisrael. The Midrash, cited by Rashi and the Ramban (*B'haalos'cha* 8:1), records that at the dedication, Aharon Hakohen was crestfallen. All the *nesiim* (tribal leaders) joyously approached the Altar and brought sacrifices, to the exclusion of Aharon and his tribe, Levi. Aharon thought that his slight involvement in the sin of the Golden Calf incriminated him and made him and his *shevet* unworthy of partaking in the ceremony. In order to assuage Aharon's disappointment, Hashem reassured him that *shevet Levi* was going to receive the greater privilege of performing a permanent dedication in the future. The Ramban explains that the Midrash is referring to the honor that the Maccabees had, as Kohanim of *shevet Levi*, to rededicate the Beis Hamikdash and the Mizbeach during the miracle of Chanukah.

At first glance, the Ramban's interpretation seems perplexing. Why was tradition labeling Levi's rededication of Chanukah as greater and more permanent than the dedication of the *nesiim* in the wilderness? Both of them were temporary and short lived; as soon the Mishkan or Beis Hamikdash were destroyed, both dedication ceremonies lost their significance.

Rav Sholom Spitz highlighted that it is evident that the rededication of the Maccabees had a degree of timelessness. Even without the actual Beis Hamikdash, a vestige of the Temple remains in the menorah of Chanukah. The *keilim* (utensils) of the Beis Hamikdash are no longer extant, but the menorah in the Jewish home burns as a miniature extension of the Menorah of the Temple. This is further evident from the words of the Ran (*Shabbos* 9a, b'dapei HaRif), who explains that our Sages prohibited benefit from the Chanukah candles as a semblance of the Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash. Similarly, the Gemara (*Shabbos* 23b) states that one who is scrupulous with kindling



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the Chanukah menorah will merit children who are Torah scholars. Just as the Temple Menorah represented the brightness of the light of Torah in the Jewish nation, one's children can likewise bask in the light and inspiration of a properly kindled Chanukah menorah.

Accordingly, it is hashkafically appropriate that the mitzvah of Chanukah was specifically declared by Chazal as *ner ish ubeiso* — a candle for an entire household. This unique, family requirement speaks to the nature of the Chanukah kindling as a perpetuation of the Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash because the Beis Hamikdash was usually synonymous with unity among the Jews. Chazal (Yerushalmi, *Chagigah* 3:6) termed Yerushalayim “The city that makes all the Jewish People friends,” because it created a unity of purpose among the Jewish people. When the Jewish people ascended to the Beis Hamikdash for *aliyah l'regel*, they left their differences aside and focused on their common objective of Divine service. Similarly, when the

Jewish home is privileged to light a Chanukah menorah, a diminutive extension of the Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash, it ushers in a singularity of purpose and feeling of unity as the different members of the family combine with the shared aim of thanking Hashem for the Chanukah miracle, and together bring a small light of the Beis Hamikdash into their home. Whether only one menorah is kindled or each person lights his own candles, the menorah burns brightly as it represents the Menorah of the Beis Hamikdash, which brings unity and the focus of common goals into each Jewish home. May we be privileged to see the ultimate commonality of purpose rekindled as we ascend to the Beis Hamikdash together for *aliyah l'regel*, and see it rededicated in all its splendor.

#### Notes

1. Each person who is lighting for the sake of *mehadrin* would then be making a separate bracha on lighting in his location even though all the lighting could have been done by one person, with one bracha. The *Terumas HaDeshen* (101) explains that one can make a bracha on Chanukah candles that are lit only

for the purpose of *mehadrin*, even though they are not necessary for the simple mitzvah, as in this case, where one increases candles because there are more individuals in the home, and makes a bracha on that lighting.

2. The *Magen Avraham* (671:5) quotes briefly from the *Machzor Maaglei Tzedek* (Chanukah p. 19a in the Sevonto, 1878 ed., p. 152 in the Jerusalem, 2000 ed.), who states that one should light at a time that all the family members are gathered together. Theoretically, according to Rav Avraham of Prague, it would be possible that the *Magen Avraham* and the *Maaglei Tzedek* are referring to the way to kindle *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, with the family all doing so at the same time. Yet upon closer inspection of his writings, it seems that the author of the *Maaglei Tzedek*, Rav Binyamin Halevi, a 16th century Ashkenazi posek, still practiced *mehadrin min hamehadrin* according to the Tosafists, with only the head of the household lighting.

The *Harrerei Kodesh* (glosses to Rav Zvi Pesach Frank's *Mikraei Kodesh* by his grandson Rav Yosef Cohen, Chanukah 23:2) quotes two reasons found in the Acharonim for the family being together. The *Hisorrerus Teshuva* suggests that it is only if family members are not lighting, and it is in order to enable them to say or hear the bracha of *She'asa Nisim*, which is said on seeing Chanukah candles. The *Harreri Kodesh* also quotes that the *Chayei Adam* (154:20) seems to see it as always necessary, in order to create additional *pirsumei nisa*.



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