

Going Above and Beyond in Our Service of Hashem: Lessons from *Hadlakas Ner Chanukah* and the Number Eight

Unlike almost every other major Jewish holiday, Chanukah has no tractate of Gemara dedicated solely to its laws. Instead, the Gemara *Shabbos* daf 21 transitions from a discussion about Shabbos candles to one about the Chanukah menorah, and eventually deals with the details of the holiday itself. The Gemara there (21b) delineates three ways to fulfill the obligation of lighting the *chanukah*. The first level is the bare minimum: one candle for each household every night of Chanukah. The second level, called *mehadrin*, requires that one candle be lit for each person every night. The highest level, the *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, is a topic of debate between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel. Beis Shammai argues that on the first night, eight candles are lit, and one candle is subtracted each night until, on the last night, only one candle is lit. Beis Hillel maintains, based on the famous concept of “*ma’alin b’kodesh v’ein moridin*,” “we only go up in holiness, and not down,” that one candle is lit on the first night, and each night another is added, for a total of eight candles on the last night of Chanukah.

What is clear is that we follow the view of Beis Hillel, but what isn’t so obvious is what exactly they hold. There is ambiguity in Beis Hillel’s statement, and the *rishonim* pick up on it: does Beis Hillel mean that this one through eight “*chanukah*” system



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should be performed by each member of the household? Or does one *chanukah* per family suffice? Rambam in *Hilchos Chanukah* 4:1-2, makes it clear that he follows the first approach, while Tosafos on the daf support the second view.

Yet there is something strange in the way most Jews nowadays actually perform the mitzvah of *hadlakas ner Chanukah*: nearly everyone performs the highest level, the *mehadrin min hamehadrin*! Whether they practice in accordance with Rambam or Tosafos, everyone seems to be achieving the greatest mitzvah possible. The question is, why? Why is it that specifically the mitzvah of lighting the *chanukah* gets this special treatment? How has *mehadrin min hamehadrin* become common practice? This is somewhat of an anomaly in halacha. Nowhere else do we find that the entire population takes the most scrupulous approach to a mitzvah.

There is another vexing idea that stems from the aforementioned Gemara. Immediately after the above discussion, the Gemara asks the famous question “*Mai Chanukah*,” what exactly is this Chanukah about which we’ve been speaking? The

question itself makes sense, because thus far, the Gemara has yet to explain the background of the holiday. But the answer given is quite perplexing. The Gemara states the date and length of Chanukah, the laws forbidding fasting and eulogizing, and then goes on to relate the historical basis for the holiday. Yet the Gemara seems to completely skip over the entire miracle of the spectacular Hasmonean victory, mentioning it only as a minor detail in the plotline of the miracle of the oil. This seems like an important omission! How could the Gemara not discuss in depth the enormous miracle of a few inexperienced Jewish soldiers defeating the robust Greek army?

To answer these questions, we must explore one of the most fundamental characteristics of the holiday of Chanukah: the number eight. This is the number of days the holiday spans, and the number of candles we light on the last night, all representing the number of days during which the Menorah burned from the fuel of a mere jug of oil. But what is the significance of the number eight?

The answer may lie in the common themes that emerge from the many things in Judaism that are

also characterized by the number eight: baby boys are circumcised on their eighth day of life; Shavuot is celebrated on the 50th day of the omer, the beginning of the eighth week; and *korbanos* become eligible to be brought on the eighth day from birth. What is the meaning of the number eight, the common denominator between these ostensibly unrelated concepts?

Kabbalistically, the number seven represents *shleimus* in *tevah*, or natural completion and perfection, because the world was created in seven days.¹ Consequently, the number eight signifies things that are *lema'alah min hatevah*, or supernatural, rising above and beyond the natural framework. This idea can be observed in all of the aforementioned mitzvos and halachos: A *korban's* eligibility means it is ready to go beyond its natural status as a farm animal, and be used for a higher purpose as a holy sacrifice. Sefiras HaOmer is a time for working on ourselves and our character traits for seven weeks,² culminating in our spiritual capability to receive the Torah on Shavuot, as a means of transcending normal human nature and become closer to G-d. And finally, the *bris* that a child receives serves as an *os*, a sign or symbol, ushering him into the community of the Jewish nation, a spiritually lofty people.

Equipped with this notion, we can answer our two original questions from the Gemara in Shabbos. On Chanukah, we light candles for eight days, and add a candle each night to form an eight-lamp candelabra, to evoke the number eight in its deeper meaning. We stress that Hashem caused the oil to last for eight days, altering natural law and going *lema'alah min hatevah* for our benefit.

Therefore, the Gemara focused solely on the miracle of the oil. It is true that the war was tremendously miraculous, and G-d's hand and *hashgacha* cannot be ignored,³ but ultimately no strict laws of nature were broken in the battle. However, the Gemara wanted to stress the fact that the miracle of the oil went **against** the natural order, and represents Hashem going above and beyond to do good for the Jewish people.

Our response to this exceeding kindness should be to act *lema'alah min hatevah* and go the extra mile in our service of Hashem. To that end, everyone fulfills the *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, because we want to show our willingness to transcend the basic "natural" requirements, and enter the "supernatural realm" in our service by performing the extra lighting.

As we light our Chanukah candles this year, let us try to keep this idea in mind, namely that we are performing the mitzvah in its finest state, to push ourselves to be extraordinary in our service of Hashem, in the hopes that Hashem responds *middah k'negged middah*, measure for measure, by continuing to relate to us in a spiritually transcendental manner.

Endnotes

1 Assuming Shabbos was also part of the creation, because the concept of *menucha*, or rest, was created on that day (see Rashi on Bereishis 2:2, and Rashi on *Megilla* 9a).

2 This idea is clear from the seven attributes (1. *Chesed* 2. *Gevurah* 3. *Tiferes* 4. *Netzach* 5. *Hod* 6. *Yesod* 7. *Malchus*) that we focus on during each of the seven weeks of sefirah.

3 In fact we *do* mention the greatness of the miracle of the war extensively, in the *Al HaNissim* prayer.

The Dispute between Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel

A number of Chasidic masters explain that the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is not limited to *mehadrin*, but reflects two broader perspectives on Chanukah.

R. Tzvi Hirsch Morgenstern, *Ateret Tzvi* (Chanukah 5669), notes that Beit Shammai prefer to highlight the strength of the miracle of Chanukah, the defeat of the enemy. This occurred on the first day of Chanukah and its impact diminished over time. Therefore, *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is performed to highlight the diminishing strength of the miracle. Beit Hillel prefer to highlight the holiness that resulted from the miracle. Just as the holiness increased each day because of the rededication of the Temple, so too the lights should reflect an increase in holiness.

R. Chaim Halberstam (1793-1876), *Divrei Chaim Al HaTorah, Chanukah* (page 18a), presents a mystical explanation of the dispute. Beit Shammai are focused on strict judgment and their approach tries to remove or diminish any bad judgments or decrees. Lighting in descending order represents removal or diminishment of these judgments. Beit Hillel are focused on mercy and their approach tries to "sweeten" any bad judgments or decrees. This is accomplished by elevating oneself each day. Lighting in ascending order symbolizes that daily elevation.

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