



## CHANUKAH AND THE MIRACLE OF JEWISH CONTINUITY

It is often the middle child that feels overlooked and poorly understood and yet understandably carries a badge of resilience and optimism. The “middle child” of ner chanuka observance is no different. There are three different levels at which we can perform the mitzvah: the basic mitzvah, *mehadrin*, and *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. Or, in modern terms: economy, business class, and first class. The basic mitzvah is *ner ish uweiso*, one candle per household. *Mehadrin*, or business class, is one candle corresponding to each member of the house. *Mehadrin min hamehadrin*, or first class, which is universally practiced, is that the number of candles increases each day of Chanukah.

We can understand the message behind the basic mitzvah: Each home should publicize the miracle. We can also understand the message behind the first class *mehadrin min hamehadrin* option: The increasing candles represent the increasing accomplishments of the miracles, the increasing investment in the miracles, and the increasing potential of our efforts.

How do we understand the *mehadrin*, business class, model? It is not just an opportunity for each person in the house to light their own candle. In fact, the Rambam writes:

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.

*How many candles does one light on Chanukah? The [basic] mitzvah is to have one person light in each house one candle whether there are many people in the house, or whether there is only one person. If one wants to enhance the mitzvah, one should light based on the number of people in the house, one candle for each person, both men and women.*

### **Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 4:1**

According to the Rambam, the head of the household (or someone else) lights all of the candles; he just does so based on the number of people in the home. What does that commemorate? Why does it enhance the mitzvah if one home has four candles and one has six?

I carried this question with me ever since I studied the *sugya*, the Tosfos and the Rambam. It was not until I came across a story from one of our darkest moments that I may have found an approach to the mandate of our sages. In the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, Chanukah arrived and the Jews of the camp gathered together to light the first light out of a makeshift candle. The wick was made out of thread from a camp uniform, the oil was shoe polish, and a shoe was the receptacle. Rav Yisrael Spira, the Bluzhever Rebbe, was chosen to light the candle and recite the berachos. He recited the first two berachos and when he got to the third beracha — *Shehechiyanu* — he hesitated for a moment, but then recited that beracha as well. After the service was complete, a man by the name of Mr. Zamietchkowski, who liked to banter with the Bluzhever Rebbe, approached the Rebbe and asked: “I can understand why you recited the first beracha (*I’hadlik ner*) on performance of the mitzvah. I can even understand why you recited the second beracha (*she’asa nisim*), which commemorates miracles of the past. But how can you possibly recite *Shehechiyanu*, a beracha that thanks G-d for bringing us to a moment like this?” The Rebbe answered that he too had the same question, which is why he hesitated to recite the beracha. But then he looked around and saw the crowd of people willing to express their faith and attend a Chanukah service with death staring at them

from all sides. He said that it is worthy to recite *Shehechiyanu* because of the faith on this special occasion. (Dr. Yaffa Eliach’s *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* pp. 13-15)

The Bluzhever’s Rebbe recited the *Shehechiyanu* not because it was the first night of Chanukah but because of the people that were present at that moment. It was the strength and courage of those people that generated an independent obligation to recite *Shehechiyanu*.

## Why does it enhance the mitzvah if one home has four candles and one has six?

This idea may give us insight into the concept of the *mehadrin* level. When we commemorate the number of people in the household, we are expressing an appreciation for G-d’s watchfulness over us as well as our own allegiance to our *mesorah*. By expressing that there are five people living in this home or ten people living in this home, we recognize that without His watchfulness and our allegiance, there would be nobody lighting Chanukah candles. The Jewish people would not have survived the physical threats and/or we would have succumbed to assimilation. The fact that there are five or ten people present is an

expression of Jewish continuity.

This could be what the Rambam refers to when he writes:

מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד  
וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס  
ולהוסיף בשבח הא-ל והודיה לו על הנסים  
שעשה לנו:

*The mitzvah of the Chanukah candle is very precious, and one must be very meticulous about it in order to promote the miracle and increase in one’s praise of the Lord and thanks to Him for the miracles that He has done for us.*

**Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 4:12**

It was been suggested that when Rambam mentions the *nissim she’asa lanu*, the miracles that He has done for us, he is not referring only to the mitzvah of Chanukah but to the miracles that occur for us in each and every generation. He is referring to the fact that in the year 5780, we are still gathering to light Chanukah candles.

We all decide to go first class and light *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. However, the message of the business class level is still embedded within the mitzvah. Each of us should take stock of the miracles in our lives and the collective miracles of the Jewish people that brought us to where we are today, and thank Hashem for those miracles.



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