

Fake it Till you Make it

Should we try to use superficially “fancy” items in our performance of mitzvos?

At this time of year there is a certain focus on the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, enhancing the performance of a mitzvah. As we all scramble to accrue *zechuyos* (merits) during the *yemei hadin*, we may, at times, be inclined to spend increasingly exorbitant amounts of money on the accoutrements of our mitzvah performance. With the prices on *esrogim* and *succah* adornments skyrocketing, we may feel like we are being stretched to our limits financially, but we still want to perform the mitzvos of this time of year in the most fitting way.

In certain instances, we may be presented with a choice between an item that appears to be quite expensive and fancy or one that may look less impressive but is worth more and made

from better, more precious materials. Although we are still some ways away from Kislev, I would like to present a case study based on a *shaila* regarding the Chanukah menorah.

Someone with limited funds is looking to purchase a menorah. They can afford a small, basic one made from pure silver OR a large and “fancy” one that is silver plated, but looks real. Which is more *mehudar*?

To address the question, we must first learn the background of the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* and draw the parameters and limitations of its application. The Gemara in *Maseches Shabbos* (133a) introduces the concept of Hashem preferring mitzvos performed with more beautiful, higher quality items. Rashi elsewhere (*Yoma* 70a) elaborates and explains that it is not only that



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Hashem prefers mitzvos performed with more beautiful instruments, but that our effort to procure such objects enhances the mitzva's performance by highlighting our love for, and commitment to, the mitzvah.

Rav Asher Weiss shlit”a, (*Minchas Asher*, Shemos 26:6) discusses a question that directly relates to the practical applications of the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*. Is there a benefit to superficial beauty of mitzvah items? Does a nice-looking item that is cheap and of a lower quality enhance the performance of the related mitzvah? Perhaps when dealing with items that are looked at or used visually in the performance of a mitzvah (e.g. a sefer Torah that is read from, etc.), there is a concept of *hiddur mitzvah* that relates the superficial appearance of an item.

Another question that may help us draw parameters is whether the concept would extend to items that accompany the mitzvah item, but are not used in the actual mitzvah performance. For instance, is there a concept of *hiddur mitzvah* when choosing an esrog box? Perhaps when discussing these ancillary items, the concept of *hiddur* would not be extended to items of this nature.

What’s the nature of a menorah when lighting Chanukah candles? Is the menorah fundamentally part of the fulfillment of the mitzvah? Or is it merely a way to hold up and arrange the oil cups or candles with which we could fulfill the mitzvah without the massive silver menorahs, which are ubiquitous throughout our neighborhoods?

The Maharal (*Ner Mitzvah* vol. 2) notes that lighting a *ner* inherently requires a vessel to hold the oil and wick. This seems to imply that the vessel that holds our oil cups or candles is necessary for

the fulfillment and would also beg the same level of *hiddur* as any other item that must be present for the mitzvah’s completion. However, not all agree with this premise. Rav Shmuel Wosner Z’L, the author of the famed halachic work *Shevet HaLevi* (8:157) writes that the consensus of the poskim seems to be that the vessel that holds the ner is not critical to the performance of the mitzvah. Rav Soloveitchik (in *Nefesh HaRav* pg. 226) also felt that requiring a vessel is an unnecessary stringency.



Is there a concept of *hiddur mitzvah* when choosing an esrog box?

The *Mishna Berurah* (OC 673:28) writes that it is certainly a good practice for one to obtain a nice and fitting menorah. Although it does not seem that the *Mishna Berurah* viewed this as a halachic imperative, it is certainly telling

that he mentions the improvement that a *mehudar* menorah can provide and that he emphasizes that every individual should strive to obtain a menorah that is fitting based on their own financial situation.

In conclusion, based on our analysis of the topic, let’s now address our initial question. Should someone spend their money on a small, high-quality silver menorah? Or should they instead buy a large and ornate silver-plated one? Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky, shlit”a, the famed Rosh Yeshiva and leading posek, posits (*Kovetz Halachos*, Chanukah pg. 34) that with regards to the mitzvah of menorah, there may not be a definitive requirement of *hiddur* but there is certainly a fulfillment of the lofty concept of beautifying our mitzvah performance, which is linked to the *kavod* with which we view the mitzvah. Based upon this understanding, we can assess each of the two options that we have been presented.

If we are looking to enhance that *kavod* of the mitzvah and its fulfillment, posits Rav Kamenetzky, we should obtain the menorah that has the most beautiful and respectable appearance. Although the solid silver menorah may be worth more money, it does not look as impressive relative to the large and ornate silver-plated menorah. According to Rav Kamenetzky, when analyzing this question, we assess the aesthetic rather than the practical value of the object in question.



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