



Chanukah: The Brightest Light

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It is not the most jarring or stirring of questions. It is in fact quite simple in nature - which comes first? On this *Motzei Shabbos Chanukah* (this coming Saturday night), should we make *havdalah* or kindle our *menorah* first? And while this does not rank amongst the most troubling of theological questions, the resolution will provide us a profound insight into Chanukah and into life.

Let's begin the legal journey. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim Siman 681:2) writes that in *shul* we kindle the *menorah*, and then afterwards recite *havdalah*. The *Rema* (Rav Moshe Isserlis, b. 1525, Cracow, Poland) comments that at home we follow the same order. However, not everyone agrees. Rav Dovid HaLevi (b. 1586, Ludmir, Poland), in his commentary titled *Turei Zahav (Taz)*, writes that it is interesting to note that the Talmud does not discuss this question. Therefore, in the absence of a clear *halachic* mandate, we follow the principle of *tadir v'she'eyno tadir, tadir kodem* (if you have two obligations to fulfill, one which is performed frequently while the other is not; we perform the more frequent mitzvah first). Therefore, one should recite *havdalah* first, since this mitzvah occurs more frequently than the kindling of the Chanukah lights. The Mishna Berurah (681:2) argues and explains that *ner Chanukah* should come first, as it has the element of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing of a miracle).

Ner Chanukah is not the only example of a *mitzvah* which has an element of publicity associated with it. On Pesach, we have an obligation to drink *arba kosos* (four cups) of wine and recline during the *seeder* as behavioral displays of our freedom. On Purim, we read the *Megillah* as a way of publicly sharing the story of our salvation from the clutches of Haman. Yet, the *pirsumei nisa* of Chanukah is dramatically different. The Talmud explains that in its purest form, the Chanukah lights are kindled outside by one's doorway. One goes outside, kindles the *menorah*, and then returns inside. The connection and association with the *menorah* is limited to the time spent outdoors kindling it; the true beneficiaries are the pedestrians who walk past and bask in the holy glow of the Chanukah lights. This is *pirsumei nisa* to the extreme - we share this *mitzvah* with the outside world, almost to the exclusion of ourselves. How are we to understand this exaggerated and amplified *pirsumei nisa*?

To answer this question, we must first analyze the events leading up to the Chanukah miracle. The *Midrash Chanukah* relates that the Greeks had imposed many harsh decrees to break the spiritual resolve of the Jewish people. The final decree is described by the *Midrash* as the harshest and most difficult of them all. Every Jewish bride would have to spend her wedding night with the local Greek governor before living with her husband. The *Midrash* relates the revulsion and horror experienced by the communities suffering with this decree. At first, people stopped marrying, but as time wore on (the decree lasted for three and a half years) people accepted these circumstances and tried to come to grips with this new reality. Until the eve of an important communal wedding; the marriage of Chana, the daughter of Matisyahu the *Kohen Gadol (High Priest)*, to Elazar, a son of the Hasmonean family. This wedding represented a union between two of the most influential families. Scholar and simpleton, rich and poor, powerful and meek, all came together to celebrate this important union. During the wedding meal, Chana stood up, clapped her hands getting the attention of all those assembled, and proceeded to tear her dress. She cried out, "How dare you come here to celebrate, to eat, to drink, to pretend as if all is fine! Do you not realize where I must go tonight? When everyone leaves to retire to their homes, I will have to spend my wedding night with the evil and loathsome Greek governor." The initial reaction of both families was anger and indignation at Chana's outburst. But the truth of her words penetrated their hearts, and they understood the error of their ways. They had forgotten the pain of the women who were tormented. They had moved on, accepting the reality of the circumstances, but forgetting the hurt of those around them. They had somehow misplaced their empathy for the plight of others. It took courageous Chana to remind them not to forget the pain of those who were suffering. It took Chana to remind them that they must rise-up and try to fight this powerful enemy. It took Chana to remind them that they could no longer accept this persecuted, subjugated form of existence. The wedding of Chana and Elazar sparked the Hasmonean revolt.

Perhaps this gives us a window into the *pirsumei nisa* of Chanukah. When celebrating this Yom Tov, the rabbis did not want us to solely focus on the miracles of the oil and the military victory over the Greeks. They wanted us to remember the events which led to the miraculous resolution. The rabbis wanted us to remember our mistakes in the midst of celebrating our accomplishments. Therefore, when celebrating this holiday, we place our *menorah*



outdoors. We give up the pleasure of enjoying the *menorah* for ourselves and for our family, and we freely give of ourselves to others; representing our feelings of connectedness to those around us. By placing our *menorah* outdoors, not only does the passerby have the ability to enjoy its holy light, but he can actually fulfill his obligation as well (the *Shulchan Aruch* explains that if one does not have the ability to light at home, one can make a *beracha*, a blessing, on the candles of another). We give of ourselves to benefit the other. In celebrating Chanukah in this way, we pledge to never forget the challenges and difficulties of the other.

The light of the *menorah*, which represents this selfless devotion to others, is different than the light of the *havdalah* candle. We mark the conclusion of *Shabbos* by lighting a flame. The flame symbolizes the fact that *melacha* (constructive work) which was prohibited on *Shabbos* is now permitted. The flame symbolizes dynamic, personal activity. The flame represents the power of personal accomplishment. We kindle the flame as a declaration, "I am going to do *melacha*, I am going to accomplish something great in the coming week."

We can now understand the tension of *Motzei Shabbos Chanukah*. We have the *havdalah* candle, which represents personal growth and dynamic activity. Yet, we also have the Chanukah lights which represent a selfless devotion to the other. Which comes first? Which is more important? Personal development or selfless commitment to others? The *Mishna Berurah* comments, "*d'avad k'mar avad u'davad k'mar avad* (you can choose to align yourself with whichever opinion you prefer)." For some, it is necessary to kindle the fire of personal development and growth, and only afterwards can they kindle the fire of devotion to the other. For some, kindling of the *menorah* comes first; the process of devoting oneself to the needs of others enables one to grow and to light the flame of personal accomplishment.

The order of kindling is up to each of us. However, one thing is certain. We must each kindle both holy and special flames. It is on this *Motzei Shabbos* that we remind ourselves that while we must ignite the flame of personal accomplishment and growth, we must always make sure to remain sensitive to the needs and circumstances of others.

May we be privileged to ignite both luminescent flames and bask in their glow for the days to come.