

Chanukah & Mehadrin

Min HaMehadrin

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The term "*mehadrin*" is used for those who are scrupulous in the performance of *mitzvot*. In *kashrut*, "*mehadrin*" is the term one would use to connote that the standards applied to the product or establishment exceed normal *kashrut* standards. The Talmud provides various methods of fulfilling the *mitzvah* of lighting Chanukah lights, including a *mehadrin* method and *mehadrin min hamehadrin* method for those who are very scrupulous. In this article, we will deal with the following questions:

- 1) What are the various positions relating to *mehadrin* and *mehadrin min hamehadrin*?
- 2) Is it possible for all members of a household to fulfill *mehadrin* or *mehadrin min hamehadrin*?
- 3) Why has it become universally accepted practice to fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin*? Shouldn't this practice be reserved for the very scrupulous?

Our Rabbis taught: The precept of Hanukkah [demands] one light for a man and his household; the zealous [kindle] a light for each member [of the household]; and the extremely zealous, — Beth Shammai maintain: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced; but Beth Hillel say: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased.
Shabbat 21b (Soncino Translation)

מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו והמהדרין נר לכל אחד ואחד והמהדרין מן המהדרין בית שמאי אומרים יום ראשון מדליק שמנה מכאן ואילך פוחת והולך ובית הלל אומרים יום ראשון מדליק אחת מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.
שבת כא:

The Halacha follows *Beit Hillel*, who are of the opinion that on the first night, one light is lit and one continues in ascending order culminating in the lighting of eight lights on the eighth night. The ambiguity of the practice of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* lies in the relationship between regular *mehadrin* and *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. Do those who fulfill the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* also fulfill the practice of the *mehadrin*, or is the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* practice a distinct one that is not based on the *mehadrin* practice? This question is a matter of dispute between Rambam (1135-1204) and Tosafot:

How many lights should one light? On Chanukah, the mitzvah is that there should be one light lit in each house whether there are many people living in the house or whether there is just one person

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

living there. Those who are scrupulous regarding mitzvot light the number of lights corresponding to the number of people living in the house, one light for each person, whether they are men or women. One who is even more scrupulous and wants to perform the mitzvah in the most preferable way should light one light for each person on the first night and increase for each night one light. For example, if there are ten people living in the house, on the first night one light ten lights, on the second, twenty, on the third, thirty, until he lights eighty lights on the eighth night.

Rambam, Hilchot Chanukah 4:1-2

והמהדר את המצוה מדליק נרות כמנין אנשי הבית נר לכל אחד ואחד בין אנשים בין נשים והמהדר יותר על זה ועושה מצוה מן המובהר מדליק נר לכל אחד ואחד בלילה הראשון ומוסיף והולך בכל לילה ולילה נר אחד. כיצד הרי שהיו אנשי הבית עשרה בלילה הראשון מדליק עשרה נרות ובליל שני עשרים ובליל שלישי שלשים עד שנמצא מדליק בליל שמיני שמונים נרות.
רמב"ם הל' חנוכה ד:א-ב

Clearly, Rambam is of the opinion that *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is built on the practice of *mehadrin*. Therefore, the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* practice also factors in the number of people in the house. However, Tosafot claim that *mehadrin* and *mehadrin min hamehadrin* cannot coexist:

It seems to Rabbeinu Yitzchak that Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel only refer to [adding] to the one light per household because there is a greater fulfillment when it is recognizable when one increases or decreases corresponding to the days that are coming or the days that are going. However, if one lights one light for each member of the house, even if one adds lights each night, it is not recognizable, for the onlooker will think that it corresponds to the number of people in the house.

Tosafot, Shabbat 21b, s.v. VeHaMehadrin

נראה לר"י דב"ש וב"ה לא קיימי אלא אנר איש וביתו שכן יש יותר הידור דאיכא היכרא כשמוסיף והולך או מחסר שהוא כנגד ימים הנכנסים או היוצאים אבל אם עושה נר לכל אחד אפי' יוסיף מכאן ואילך ליכא היכרא שיסברו שכן יש בני אדם בבית
תוס' שבת כא: ד"ה והמהדרין

According to Tosafot, if the number of lights is reflective of both the number of people in the household and the corresponding day, it is not recognizable which practice is in effect. For example, if one lights eight lights on the fourth night, it is possible that there are eight members of the household and one is fulfilling the practice of *mehadrin*. Alternatively, there may be two members of the household, and one is fulfilling *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. For this reason Tosafot state that one can either light based on the number of members in the household (*mehadrin*), or light one light for the entire household (according to *Beit Hillel*) and increase one light every night (*mehadrin min hamehadrin*). According to Tosafot, the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* practice is considered preferable because there is more *hidur* (enhancement) when the lights correspond to the specific day of Chanukah.

R. Yosef Karo (1488-1575) *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 671:2, rules that even if there are many members of the household, one should light one light on the first night of Chanukah and increase one light every night of Chanukah. Rama (1520-1572), *ad loc*, notes that common practice is that every member of the household lights one light on the first night and increases one light per night.

The Opinion of Rama

At first glance, the dispute between *Shulchan Aruch* and Rama seems to correspond to the dispute between Tosafot and Rambam. *Shulchan Aruch* rules in accordance with the opinion of Tosafot that one can either fulfill *mehadrin* or *mehadrin min hamehadrin* but not both. Rama rules in accordance with the opinion of Rambam that the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* practice encompasses the *mehadrin* practice.

However, there are numerous difficulties in assuming that Rama rules in accordance with the opinion of Rambam. First, according to Rambam, *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is accomplished by the head of the household lighting one light for each member of the household. Rama's practice is that every member of the household lights his own lights. Second, according to Rambam, the number of lights corresponds to the number of members of the household – even those who are not obligated to light. Rama's practice will only provide lights corresponding to household members who actually light their own lights. Third, according to Rambam, the primary mitzvah is fulfilled by lighting one light. All additional lights are above and beyond the actual requirement. Ostensibly, it is unjustifiable to recite a *beracha* upon lighting additional lights as those additional lights are not part of the actual fulfillment of the mitzvah. Yet, Rama, in ruling that each member of the household lights his own set of lights, implies that each member of the household recites his own *beracha*.

The explanation for Rama's opinion is hinted to in Rama's own *Darkei Moshe*:

R. Avraham of Prague writes that according to our practice of lighting indoors and those in the house know how many members of the house there are, there is no concern of people thinking that the number of lights corresponds (only) to the members of the house, (and therefore) our practice is correct, even according to Tosafot. Furthermore, since we light indoors, every individual can light in a distinct location and they do not have to all light within a handbreadth of the door and each set of lights is recognizable and it is clear discernible when one increases each night. Therefore, our practice is valid according to all opinions.

Darkei Moshe, O.C. 671:1

וכתב מהר"א מפראג דלדידן שמדליקין בפנים ויודעין בבית כמה ב"א בבית וליכא למיחש שמא יאמרו כך בני אדם הם בבית אף לדעת התו' מנהגינו נכון ועוד דמאחר שמדליקין בפנים כל אחד יכול להדליק במקום מיוחד ולא בעי להדליק כולן בטפח הסמוך לפתח וניכר הנרות שמדליק כ"א ואחד ואיכא היכירא כשמוסיף והולך בשאר הלילות ולכן מנהגינו אתי שפיר לכו"ע.
דרכי משה או"ח תרעא:א

The Gemara, *Shabbat* 21b, states that the *Chanukah* lights should be lit outdoors at the entrance to the home. If it is too dangerous to do so, it is permissible to light the lights indoors. R. Avraham of Prague suggests that since nowadays everyone lights indoors, it is possible to light multiple sets of lights and still fulfill the opinion of Tosafot. This can be accomplished by lighting each set of lights in a distinct location. By doing so, it is clearly recognizable that each set of lights represents one member of the household. This method is the preferred method as it fulfills the opinion of Tosafot and Rambam.

One can now suggest that in principle, Rama follows the opinion of Tosafot. According to Tosafot, *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is fulfilled by one member of the household lighting the number of *Chanukah* lights that correspond to the day of *Chanukah*. Ideally, this should be

done by each member of the household who is obligated in the mitzvah of Chanukah. However, since doing so would inhibit the onlooker's ability to determine which night of Chanukah it is, only one set of lights is lit on behalf of the entire household. Nevertheless, nowadays, when it is possible to light multiple sets of lights and still determine which night of Chanukah is being observed, every member of the household who is obligated in the mitzvah should light a set of lights in a distinct location. According to this explanation, it is justifiable for each member of the household to recite his own *beracha*. [This explanation is based on the comments of R. Yechiel M. Epstein (1829-1908) *Aruch HaShulchan* 671:15-18.]

The only difficulty with this explanation is that it does not fulfill the opinion of Rambam in all situations. If there are members of the household who do not light, the number of sets of lights will not correspond to the number of members of the household. One can either suggest that Rama primarily follows the opinion of Tosafot, and is not concerned with the opinion of Rambam in these situations. [This is implied by *Aruch HaShulchan* 671:9.] Alternatively, one can suggest that even Rambam agrees that the number of lights only corresponds to the number of household members who are obligated in the mitzvah. [Meiri, *Shabbat* 21a, cited in *Mishna Berurah*, *Bei'ur Halacha* 675:3, states that only adult members of the household are counted.]

The Explanation of R. Yitzchak Z. Soloveitchik

R. Yitzchak Z. Soloveitchik (1886-1959), *Chidushei Maran Riz HaLevi*, *Hilchot Chanukah* 4:1, provides an alternative explanation for the opinion of Rama. He suggests that in principle, Rama follows Rambam's opinion. However, there is a dispute in *Hilchot Milah* as to whether *hidur mitzvah* (enhancement of the mitzvah) can exist outside of the context of the actual mitzvah. Rambam, *Hilchot Milah* 2:4, is of the opinion that once the actual fulfillment of the mitzvah is completed, there is no purpose to performing *hidur mitzvah*. R. Ya'akov ben Asher (1269-1343), *Tur*, *Yoreh De'ah* no. 264, disagrees and maintains that one can fulfill *hidur mitzvah* even after the mitzvah is completed. Rama, *Yoreh De'ah* 264:5, follows the opinion of *Tur*.

R. Soloveitchik suggests that Rambam's insistence that the head of the household light all of the sets of lights is due to his own opinion that *hidur mitzvah* cannot be accomplished outside of the context of the actual mitzvah. Therefore, a different member of the household cannot light the additional lights. However, Rama is of the opinion that *hidur mitzvah* can be fulfilled outside of the context of the actual mitzvah. Therefore, if another member of the household lights, it will constitute a fulfillment of *mehadrin min hamehadrin*.⁶

Mehadrin as a Theme of Chanukah

In the introduction, we questioned why the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* practice is universally accepted and not limited to the very scrupulous. This question is addressed by R. Yitzchak Meir Alter (1799-1866, also known as the Chidushei HaRim) who asks two more questions relating

⁶ One must still address whether it is appropriate to recite a beracha upon fulfilling *hidur mitzvah* and whether the head of the household should light additional sets of lights corresponding to the members of the household who do not light.

to the story of the miracle of the oil, the miracle that the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah lights serves to commemorate. The *Beraita* describes the miracles as follows:

For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they conducted a search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days.

Shabbat 21b (Soncino Translation)

שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונה בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים.

שבת כא:

R. Alter asks the following questions:

- 1) When they found the flask of oil, they knew that they were not going to be able to produce oil with ritual purity for another seven days (See *Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim* no. 670). If so, why didn't they use thinner wicks to allow the oil to burn longer? Why did they rely on a miracle?
- 2) The Gemara, *Yoma* 6b, states that on matters relating to communal *mitzvot*, the laws of ritual impurity are either overridden (*dechuyah*) or suspended (*hutrah*). If so, why was there a need for a miracle? Why couldn't they just use ritually impure oil?

R. Alter is quoted as answering the following:

My holy grandfather (the Chidushei HaRim) asked: Why do we find regarding this mitzvah that people insist on mehadrin and mehadrin min mehadrin which we don't find regarding other mitzvot? He answered that there were two enhancements. First, they were not required to light with impure oil. Second, when they found the pure oil, they divided it into eight portions and they used a wick one-eighth of the normal size. This would have resulted in a very small light. When they poured in the small portion, G-d performed a miracle that the entire fuel chamber filled with oil. They then replaced the wick with a proper wick. Therefore, the enhancement was the main feature of the miracle.

Siftei Tzadik, Chanukah no. 12

זקני הקדוש מו"ר ז"ל תמה מפני מה מצינו במצוה זו דוקא מהדרין ומהדרין מן המהדרין שלא מצינו בשאר מצות כן ותירץ שהי' כאן ב' הידורים. א' שלא הוצרכו להדליק עם שמן טמא. ב' כשמצאו פך טהור הי' מחלקים השמן ליתן חלק שמינית. והכינו מהפתילה שהיו רגילים ליתן שמינית מעובי הפתילה. הי' נר קטן מאוד וכשנתנו חלק שמינית דשמן. עשה הקב"ה נס שנתמלא הנר בשמן. אזי נתנו פתילה יפה וא"כ הי' עיקר הנס ההידור.

שפתי צדיק חנוכה אות יב

According to R. Alter, there was no need for a miracle in order to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting the lamps in the *Beit HaMikdash*. The miracle provided the Jewish people with the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah in a nicer, more enhanced fashion. Therefore, to commemorate the miracle, we all fulfill the mitzvah in the most scrupulous fashion.

R. Ya'akov Yehoshua Falk (1680-1756) suggests a reason why G-d performed this miracle:

We must return to our original question: If they were able to light with ritually impure oil [why did they need a miracle]? For this reason, it seems that the miracle primarily served to show them

ואם כן הדרא קושיא קמייתא לדוכתא שהיו יכולין להדליק בשמן טמא כיון דטומאה הותרה בצבור כדפרישית. לכך נראה דעיקר

G-d's affection for them ... Since they experienced a miracle of complete redemption from the evil Greek Empire who said to the Jewish people 'Write on the horn of a bull that you have no portion in the G-d of the Jewish people' and they instituted many forms of persecution, now that they were redeemed and experienced the great miracle of defeating their enemies, they were also provided with the miracle of the lights which is a testimony to the Jewish people that the Shechinah rests among them.

P'nei Yehoshua, Shabbat 21b

הנס לא נעשה אלא להודיע להם חיבת המקום עליהם ... והואיל ואיתרחיש להו ניסא בעיקר הענין שנגאלו גאולה שלימה מיד מלכות יון הרשעה שהיו אומרים לישראל כתבו על קרן השור שאין לכם חלק באלקי ישראל וגזרו כמה שמדיות ועכשיו שנגאלו ונעשה להם נס גדול ששלטו בשונאיהם לכך נעשה להם ג"כ נס זה בענין הנרות הוא עדות לישראל שהשכינה שורה בהם.
פני יהושע שבת כא:

The miracle of the oil came at a time when the Jewish people were subject to religious persecution. The Greeks wanted the Jewish people to abandon their relationship with G-d. In response, G-d provided a miracle that showed his ongoing relationship with the Jewish people.

As we celebrate Chanukah, we should reflect on the miracles that Chanukah represents. Our observance of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is but a small way of showing gratitude for the miracles of Chanukah and the miracles He provides on a daily basis.

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