

Beit Shammai & Beit Hillel: Two Fundamentally Different Approaches to Chanukah

Rabbi Joshua Flug

Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

One of the more famous disputes between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is regarding the practice of the extremely scrupulous (*mehadrin min hamehadrin*) on Chanukah.

Our Rabbis taught: The precept of Chanukah [demands] one light for a man and his household; the scrupulous [kindle] a light for each member [of the household]; and the extremely scrupulous, — Beit Shammai maintain: On the first day eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually reduced; but Beit Hillel say: On the first day one is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased. Ulla said: In the West [Palestine] two amoraim, R. Yosi b. Avin and R. Yosi b. Zevida, differ therein: one maintains, the reason of Beit Shammai is that it shall correspond to the days still to come, and that of Beit Hillel is that it shall correspond to the days that are gone; but another maintains: Beit Shammai's reason is that it shall correspond to the bulls of the Festival and Beit Hillel's reason is that we promote in [matters of] sanctity but do not reduce.
Shabbat 21b (Adapted from 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 אמר עולא פליגי בה תרי אמוראי במערבא ר' יוסי בר אבין ור' יוסי בר זבידא חד אמר טעמא דב"ש כנגד ימים הנכנסין וטעמא דב"ה כנגד ימים היוצאין וחד אמר טעמא דב"ש כנגד פרי החג וטעמא דבית הלל דמעלין בקדש ואין מורידין.
שבת כא:

Beit Shammai are of the opinion that the lights are lit in descending order, either to correspond to the number of days that are left or to follow the model of the *mussaf* offerings on Sukkot (*parei hachag*), when each day, one less bull is offered.⁵ Beit Hillel are of the opinion that the lights are lit in ascending order, either to correspond to the number of days that have been observed or to

⁵ Bamidbar 29:12-34.

follow the model that one always ascends in matters of holiness (*ma'alin bakodesh*).⁶ There is a lot of Torah literature that discusses this passage in the Gemara, both from the perspective of Jewish law and the perspective of Jewish thought. In this article, we will collect a few of those ideas.

A Halachic Analysis of the Passage

The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), *Bei'ur HaGra*, *Orach Chaim* 671:4, notes that the dispute between R. Yosi bar Avin and R. Yosi bar Zevida has a practical ramification. In *Chanukah-To-Go* 5770, we noted the opinion of Tosafot, *Shabbat* 21b, s.v. *VeHaMehadrin*, who state:

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

The Vilna Gaon notes that the concern of Tosafot only applies if one follows the opinion that the primary argument between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is contingent on whether one marks the days still to come or the days that are gone. If this is the basis for *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, one can understand why the number of days must be recognizable in the lights. However, if one assumes that the primary dispute is contingent on whether one follows the *parei hachag* model or the *ma'alin bakodesh* model, then there is no need for the number of days to be recognizable in the lights.⁷

R. Yosef B. Soloveitchik (1820-1892), *Beit HaLevi* on *Chanukah*, takes the Vilna Gaon's idea a step further. R. Soloveitchik discusses the case of someone who is missing one candle in order to fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. For example, someone only has two candles for the third night. Is it preferable to light both of the candles or only one? R. Soloveitchik notes that according to Tosafot, the primary factor of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is to represent the number of days of Chanukah. If one cannot accurately represent the number of days, there is no *mehadrin min hamehadrin* fulfillment. As such, one should only light a single candle. However, according to the approach that one should always ascend and never descend, even in a situation where one

⁶ The Gemara, *Menachot* derives this concept from verses in the Torah. R. Yosef Teomim (1727-1793), *P'ri Megadim*, M.Z., O.C. 42:1, writes that this is a biblically mandated concept.

⁷ In *Chanukah To Go* 5770, we noted the opinion of Rambam (1138-1204), *Hilchot Chanukah* 4:1-2, who disagrees with Tosafot and maintains that *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is fulfilled when the lights reflect the number of members of the household and are increased each night. The Vilna Gaon tries to prove that R. Yitzchak Alfasi (1013-1103) agrees with Rambam on this matter from R. Alfasi's comments, *Shabbat* 9b, where he seems to prefer the *parei hachag* vs. *ma'alin bakodesh* approach. R. Alfasi generally doesn't record matters that have no halachic ramifications. The Vilna Gaon concludes that R. Alfasi views the dispute between R. Yosi bar Avin and R. Yosi bar Zevida as a halachic dispute. R. Alfasi prefers the *parei hachag* vs. *ma'alin bakodesh* approach because he is of the opinion that *mehadrin min hamehadrin* does not require that the lights correspond to the number of days.

cannot ascend, one should still not descend. Therefore, one should light both candles.⁸

R. Ya'akov Yehoshua Falk (1680-1756), *P'nei Yehoshua*, *Shabbat* 21b, has an alternative analysis of the opinions of R. Yosi bar Avin and R. Yosi bar Zevida. R. Falk suggests that the reason why having a different number of lights each night is considered *mehadrin min hamehadrin* is that it further publicizes the miracle. Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel dispute the focus of the miracle of the oil. According to Beit Hillel, the miracle was more spectacular each day and each day's miracle was built on the miracles of the previous days. *Mehadrin min hamehadrin* commemorates the spectacular nature of the miracle. This idea is supported by the statement that Beit Hillel's opinion corresponds to the days that are gone. According to Beit Shammai, the lights themselves were not an inherent testament to the miracle because each day, the lamps were cleaned and new oil was placed in them. The only inherent testament to the miracle was the flask of oil that was found. On the first night, the flask containing only one portion of oil was poured and miraculously, only one-eighth of the oil was needed and seven-eighths remained. On the second night, only another eighth was needed and six-eighths remained. Thus, the flask's testament to the miracle was in the oil that remained and therefore, *mehadrin min hamehadrin* should be commemorated in descending order. This idea is supported by the statement that Beit Shammai's opinion corresponds to the days still to come. The *parei hachag* and *ma'alin bakodesh* models are not relevant to *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. Rather, the *ma'alin bakodesh* model was used to support Beit Hillel's opinion because it is a model that is used in many areas of halacha and should override Beit Shammai's concern for displaying an inherent testament to the miracle. To this, Beit Shammai would respond that the *parei hachag* serve as a precedent to a model of descent and therefore, one should not be concerned about the *ma'alin bakodesh* model.⁹

R. Ya'akov Y. Kanievski (1899-1985), *Kehillot Ya'akov*, *Shabbat* no. 17, notes that according to R. Falk, the idea of corresponding to the days still to come or the days that are gone refers to the original miracle. Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel dispute whether it is preferable to publicize the miracle by focusing on the ascending aspect or the descending aspect. Tosafot's requirement to publicize the miracle by ensuring that the number of days is recognizable in the lights is not necessarily based on the statement of R. Yosi bar Avin or R. Yosi bar Zevida. Furthermore, R. Yosi bar Avin and R. Yosi bar Zevida do not seem to dispute whether the number of days must be recognizable in the lights. As such, one is not compelled to accept the Vilna Gaon's analysis (or R. Soloveitchik's analysis).

A Global Approach to the Dispute

Some commentators explain that the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel is not a localized dispute about *mehadrin*, but reflects two global perspectives on Judaism. The Zohar,

⁸R. Avraham Y. Kook (1865-1935), *Mishpat Kohen* no. 95, disagrees with this premise. He contends that *ma'alin bakodesh* was the factor in the original determination of how *mehadrin min hamehadrin* should be fulfilled. It is not a factor in specific cases where one cannot fulfill *mehadrin min hamehadrin* properly. If one cannot fulfill it properly, one should simply perform *mehadrin* or the basic mitzvah.

⁹ R. Eliyahu Bakshi Doron, *Binyan Av* 2:18, explains that *ma'alin bakodesh* as a determinant of order does not apply when there is another reason to choose a different order.

Reiyah Mehemna (page 245a), notes that the rulings of Beit Shammai follow the character trait of *din* (strict judgment) and *gevurah* (inner strength) and rulings of Beit Hillel follow the character trait of *chesed* (kindness) and *rachamim* (mercy).¹⁰

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 Friedlander, *Siftei Chaim, Moadim*, Vol. II (pp. 118-120), explains that Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel have two different approaches to the exile. Beit Shammai focus on the shortcomings of each individual and view spirituality in the exile as having a diminishing return. Every generation becomes weaker in its relationship with G-d. Beit Hillel focus on the positive aspects of each individual and view the exile as a testament to the endurance of the Jewish People. As each generation continues to observe mitzvot, a greater recognition of the endurance of the Jewish People is realized.

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.

The Effect of an Inspirational Moment

R. Shmuel Borenstein (1856-1926), in his *Shem MiShmuel* explains that the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel relates to the inspiration and joy that one experiences from an event as time goes on. In one of R. Borenstein's essays (Chanukah 5677), he explains that for some, inspiration can have a diminishing effect. The inspiration wears off over time. This is the basis for Beit Shammai's opinion. For others, a moment of inspiration is an opportunity for growth and one can use that moment as a stepping stone for further growth if one doesn't allow the inspiration to dwindle. This is the basis of Beit Hillel's opinion.

R. Borenstein (Chanukah 5674) also explains that Beit Shammai are of the opinion that the Chanukah lights commemorate the defeat of the enemy and the salvation. As each generation passes, it becomes more difficult to relate to the joy experienced at the time of the miracle. Therefore, the Chanukah lights are lit in descending order to commemorate the diminishing joy. Beit Hillel are of the opinion that the Chanukah lights also commemorate the rededication of the Temple. A rededication implies that the old is renewed continually. Renewal is a major

¹⁰ See R. Chaim Vital, *Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah* no. 34, and R. Ya'akov Bruchin of Karlin, Introduction to *Kohelet Ya'akov*, who develop this idea.

theme of Chanukah and each day a new light is lit to add a new quality of holiness to the day.

Other Approaches to the Dispute

R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntchitz (1550-1619), *Olelot Ephraim*, Vol. II, no. 44, notes that the body and the soul have opposite properties regarding maturity. The body ages over time and gradually deteriorates.¹¹ On the other hand, the soul begins with no merits and matures over time. Beit Shammai are of the opinion that the Chanukah lights represent the body. We light Chanukah lights to commemorate the victory over the enemy that wanted to physically destroy us. Just as a candle dwindles over time, so, too, the human body dwindles over time. For this reason, the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* practice serves to remind us not to pursue worldly pleasures because the body is only temporary. Instead, a person should pursue spiritual matters that remain with the person forever. Beit Hillel are of the opinion that the Chanukah lights represent the soul. The Chanukah lights celebrate the spiritual victory over an enemy that was intent on causing physical and spiritual destruction of the Jewish People. Since the soul always matures, the Chanukah lights are lit in ascending order.

R. Avraham Y. Kook (1865-1935), *Ein Ayah, Shabbat 21b*, suggests that the dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel relates to how the Jewish People can influence the rest of the world. The world is full of people and nations with many different views. Some of those differences are natural and bring good to the world and some of those differences cause dispute, evil and destruction. As the Jewish People assert a greater influence on the world, the differences between people of the world become limited to the natural differences and the people of the world become unified. Beit Shammai are of the opinion that the miracle of Chanukah was a step towards unification of the world. Therefore, the Chanukah lights are lit in a way that symbolizes unity- descending from eight parts to one part. Beit Hillel are of the opinion that unifying the world is one of the goals of our service of God. The means of doing so is by bringing light to the world. That light must be increased continually and this is why the Chanukah lights are lit in ascending order.¹²

¹¹ R. Luntchitz writes that the body melts from solid to liquid over time and eventually causes death. This idea is based on Galenic medicine which subscribed to the theory that there was "innate heat" in the body and over time, the body becomes cool and dry, eventually leading to death. See Edward Reichman, "The Halakhic Definition of Death in Light of Medical History," *Torah UMadda Journal* 4 (1994): 148-174, who cites numerous rabbinic authorities who subscribed to this idea. Thomas S. Hall, "The Biology of the Timaeus in Historical Perspective," *Arion* 4 (1965): 109-122, notes that the idea of "radical moisture" was popularized during the renaissance period.

¹² R. Moshe Feinstein, *Darash Moshe, Drush* no. 30, also explains that Beit Shammai focus on unity of the nations and Beit Hillel focus on bringing light to the world.