



IGNITING A MARRIAGE THROUGH THE LIGHTS OF CHANUKAH AND SHABBOS

The Gemara in *Shabbos* (23b) embarks on several discussions regarding the intricacies and minutiae of *ner Chanukah*. These include the forms of acceptable oils, candles and wicks, and the lengths we must go to perform the mitzvah, even under difficult circumstances.

The Gemara poses the following dilemma: If one realized late on a Friday afternoon that there was only enough money to purchase one single candle, should it be allocated for Shabbos or Chanukah use?

אמר רבא, פשיטא לי: נר ביתו ונר חנוכה - נר ביתו עדיף, משום שלום ביתו. נר ביתו וקידוש היום נר ביתו עדיף, משום שלום ביתו.

Rava said: It is obvious to me that when one has a choice between a candle for one's home [on Shabbos] and the candle of Chanukah, the candle of one's home takes precedence because it is for the harmony of the home. If one has a choice between a candle for one's home and [wine] for kiddush, the candle of one's home takes precedence because it is for the harmony of the home.

Rava declares that the answer is an obvious one — Shabbos candles take precedence. However, contrary to conventional logic, where we may assume that the Biblical sanctity of Shabbos supersedes the Rabbinic requirement of *ner Chanukah*, Rava's rationale is entirely different. He explains that while the Chanukah

light is necessary to fulfill the mitzvah, the Shabbos candles play a far more important and practical role. It is specifically through the light produced by the Shabbos candles that *shalom bayis*, harmony in the home, is achieved.

Rashi's definition of *shalom bayis* refers to our ability to safely function in the dark while avoiding injury (*Shabbos* 23b). The Rambam, however, interprets *shalom bayis* as a reference to marital harmony between husband and wife:

היה לפניו נר ביתו ונר חנוכה או נר ביתו וקדוש היום נר ביתו קודם משום שלום ביתו שהרי השם נמחק לעשות שלום בין איש לאשתו.

If one has the means of fulfilling the mitzvah of the candle in one's home or Chanukah, or the candle in one's home or kiddush, the candle in one's home takes precedence because it provides harmony in the home, for the name of G-d is erased to make peace between husband and wife.

Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 4:14

Rava's ruling is based on a fundamental contrast between the use of the Shabbos and Chanukah candles. While it is forbidden to derive any benefit from the lights of Chanukah, we are encouraged to utilize the lights of Shabbos. It is in the glow of the Shabbos candles that *shalom bayis* exists, where husband and wife can comfortably interact and enjoy a peaceful environment.

Yet it is this curious relationship between light and *shalom bayis* that creates a number of related questions:

1. What is the connection between the presence of light and a peaceful marriage?
2. The role of light seems to extend beyond the marriage itself and into the outcome of the children, as the Gemara (*Shabbos* 23b) states:

אמר רב הונא הרגיל בנר הויין ליה בנים
תלמידי חכמים.

Rava said: One who is accustomed to lighting candles will merit children who are Torah scholars.

Rashi, quoting the verse “*ki ner mitzvah v'Torah or*” — for a candle represents a good deed and Torah represents light (*Mishlei* 6) — explains that this merit is achieved specifically by kindling the lights of Chanukah and Shabbos. What connection is there between kindling lights and the development of children?

3. The mitzvah of Chanukah uniquely includes various tiers of fulfillment:

ת"ר מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו והמהדרין נר לכל אחד ואחד והמהדרין מן המהדרין ב"ש אומרים יום ראשון מדליק שמנה מכאן ואילך פוחת והולך וב"ה אומרים יום ראשון מדליק אחת מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.

The Rabbis taught: The mitzvah of [lighting candles on] Chanukah is [to light] one candle [per] person and his household [each night]. And those who pursue mitzvos [with greater enthusiasm light] one candle for each and every one [in the household each night]. And [as for] those who pursue mitzvos with even greater enthusiasm, Beis Shammai say that [on] the first day [of Chanukah] one lights eight [candles, and] from then on continuously decreases [the number of candles lit each night], and Beis Hillel say that [on] the first day [of Chanukah] one lights one [candle, and] from then on continuously increases [the number of candles lit each night].

Shabbos 21b

The mitzvah of Chanukah is fulfilled in its entirety by simply kindling one light for the entire home — *ner ish uveiso*. However, we may strive to capture a higher fulfillment of *mehadrin* by enabling each family member to light one candle, and an even higher level yet of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* by lighting eight candles. Per the debate of Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel, this is achieved when we either decrease one candle each night, or add one candle.

Although every mitzvah can be performed with various degrees of investment and intentionality, thus producing higher levels of *hiddur*, why do Chazal present such a particular roadmap regarding *ner Chanukah* for achieving higher levels of fulfillment of the mitzvah?

4. Why does the highest form of lighting the menorah require the addition or removal of candles each

night as described by Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel? Why not simply light eight candles every night of Chanukah as the ultimate expression of *mehadrin min hamehadrin*?

5. Why, regarding Chanukah, do Chazal place such an emphasis on the household and the members of the family — *ner ish uveiso* — something not seen in other mitzvos?

To answer these questions, it is important to recall that the miracle of Chanukah did not begin with the missing oil and rededication of the Temple. It was first a story of religious intolerance, anti-Semitism, and a war on Jewish observance that was waged on the family front.

The foremost goal of the Greeks was to unravel the Jewish family, the bedrock of Jewish continuity. By enacting decrees aimed at the eradication of *bris milah*, Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh, the natural flow of the Jewish home would become permanently disrupted.

שגזרו יוונים על כל בתולות הנשואות להיבעל
לטפסר תחלה.

The Greeks decreed that all Jewish brides must first be defiled by a Greek officer.

Rashi, Shabbos 23a

Through the Greeks' abhorrent practice of violating all Jewish brides, the sanctity of the Jewish marriage would become forever tainted. No longer could husband and wife turn to one another in holiness, but rather they would turn away from one another with trauma and shame.

Thus it is the salvation of the Jewish home and marriage that represents the underlying victory of Chanukah. The light of Chanukah, uncompromising and unusable, stands as a strict symbol and beacon of the miracles of the past.

By contrast, the light of Shabbos lives

in the present. It serves a practical purpose in supporting couples as they navigate the obstacles of marriage. It is by this light that families strengthen their bonds and grow closer to each other and their *mesorah*.

Can this be achieved in darkness?

In research studies on human interaction, behavioral scientists have found that anywhere from 66% to 93% of communication is non-verbal. In other words, achieving *shalom bayis* may be more closely related to how something is conveyed, rather than the actual words themselves.

Noted marriage researcher Dr. John Gottman spent over four decades observing couples talking and fighting. By watching their body language, facial expressions, eye contact, active listening, and ability to turn toward one another, he was able to see their levels of engagement, mutual concern, and friendship. After refining his research and honing his craft, Dr. Gottman, who has visually studied and coded the behaviors of more than 3,000 couples, can observe a couple talking for 15 minutes and amazingly, within the first three minutes of the conversation, predict with over 90% accuracy whether that couple will ultimately divorce.

In today's modern marriage, where stresses and distractions are at an all-time high, *shalom bayis* may be threatened even under the best conditions. How much more so is the risk elevated in homes where the proverbial darkness is growing. In my doctoral research studying several hundred divorced individuals in the Orthodox community, the findings uncovered the harsh realities of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse in one-third to half of those in the sample. These findings highlight a

need to raise awareness about healthy communication, and to educate our children and communities about safe relationships and *shalom bayis*. Thus the way we successfully relate to one another requires the foremost ability to truly see the other person — both literally and figuratively.

Chazal understood that marriage is not easy, and couples cannot skate by in the darkness. To have a successful home, husband and wife must be

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intentional about their relationship and their communication skills. It is not enough to converse in the darkness; couples must consciously invest in the larger, non-verbal forms of communication as well.

Thus, the role of light in the home is critical for the success of marriage and family. It is these countless interactions between husband and wife, albeit subtle and sometimes unspoken, that not only define the marriage, but ultimately mold and shape the children. When the home is filled with the physical and spiritual lights of Shabbos, children are taught about the power of human relationships, *bein adam lechaveiro*. At the same time, the lights of Chanukah reinforce our

Divine relationship, *bein adam LaMakom*. Children raised in such an environment, exposed daily to this dynamic duality where both illuminations are upheld and treasured, are bound to become *talmidei chachamim*.

Perhaps we can suggest that because the Greek warfare against the Jews was an assault on the Jewish home and family, Chazal emphasized the fulfillment of the mitzvah, not only in personal terms but in familial terms. Unlike other mitzvos, which are generally individualistic, the concept of *ner ish uveiso* reminds us of the centrality of the home, where the *bayis* is inseparable from the mitzvah.

Much like the views of Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel, who debate between adding or subtracting candles each night, the imagery of this ebb and flow captures an authentic snapshot of every home. The home is a living, breathing, and dynamic organism that requires a great deal of thought, love, patience, and investment.

Because Chanukah represents not only a rededication of G-d's home but of our own home and family, Chazal specifically chose Chanukah to emphasize the concept of *mehadrin*. For although a person can fulfill the mitvah of *ner Chanukah* with a single candle, the concept of *mehadrin* becomes a non-verbal expression of our desire to strive for more and go above and beyond. The lesson of Chanukah for the Jewish marriage is to strengthen the home by finding our own *mehadrin*. When husband and wife take the time to really see one another and interact in a healthy and loving manner, the silent but profound power of *mehadrin* has the ability to elevate a relationship to new heights.