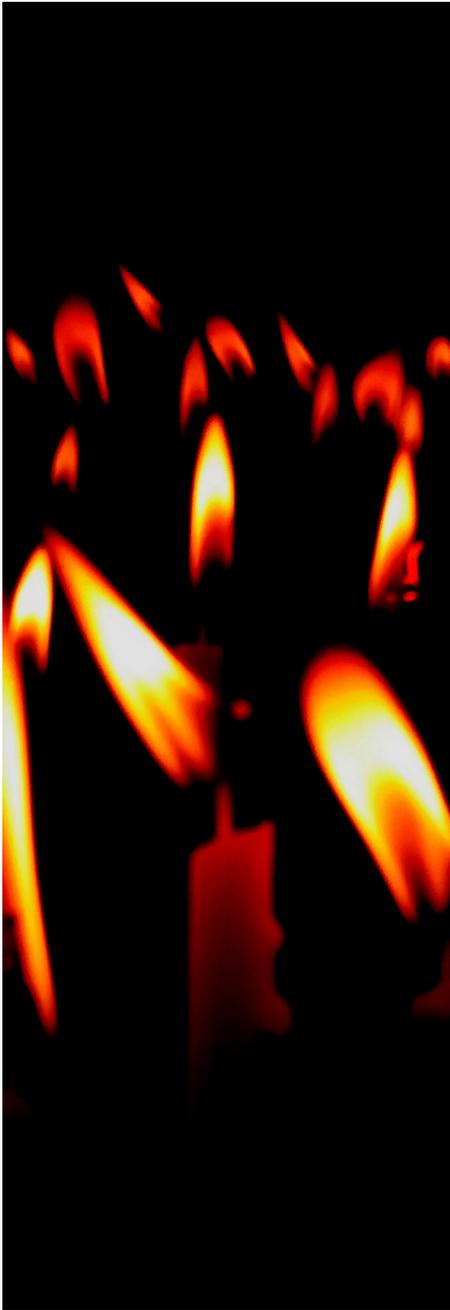




The Singular Light of Chanukah



Every night of Chanukah, we light numerous lights, ascending in number each day. Many families (following the predominant Ashkenazi custom) do not suffice with one set of lights, but light several sets, corresponding to the number of members of the household.

With so many lights being lit, why do we bless in the singular form, “To kindle the Chanukah light,” as opposed to the seemingly more appropriate blessing, “To kindle the Chanukah lights”?

On a straightforward level, one can answer that we make a blessing on the basic requirement of one light per household per night, regardless of which night of Chanukah it is. Seeing as any additional lights are a *hiddur* (beautification) and not part of the core commandment, they are not included in the blessing.

(This answer is less straightforward, however, when coming to explain why each member of Ashkenazi households makes a blessing. Unless we require every member of the household to actively or passively exclude themselves from being included in the blessings made by others, we may need to assume that one does in fact make a blessing on a *hiddur* and our original question remains.)

Rav Kook addressed this question in his commentary on Tefillah, Olat Re'iyah. For him, the blessing we make on Chanukah is not only about the technical act being performed at that moment. It represents the inner nature of light and the supreme purpose of life:

“Chanukah... depicts all the sources of light that need to radiate in the Nation: the light of Torah, the light of prophecy, the light of wisdom, the light of justice, the light of courage, the light of joy, the light of lovingkindness, the light of love, etc. However, prior to the realization of the supreme purpose of life, these many individual lights appear to us as if they are separate matters...”

However, the distinctions will not last forever, for as long as there are arguments, holiness cannot be established in the world. The essence of this blessing is the blessing for peace, and it will be fulfilled in the future when the realization is clear to all that all the individual lights are really one light. Therefore, the Chanukah blessing does not mention lights (in the plural), for it focuses its attention towards the more exalted distance, towards the more supreme future” (Olat Re'iyah Vol.1, page 435).

The world has many lofty values and priorities. Whilst each of these individual “lights” has an important role to play, they can also become a source of conflict as they compete for significance and superiority. In truth, however, “all the individual lights are really one light” – from a spiritual perspective, all these important values originate from a singular source and are destined to reunite in harmonious unity. The less we argue and the more we recognize “the supreme purpose of life,” the more holiness can be established in the world.

Thus on Chanukah, we light numerous separate lights, as indeed there are multiple ways to find light and share light in this world. While acknowledging the plurality of lights, the ultimate ideal is reflected in our blessing of peace and unity – “To kindle the (singular) Chanukah light.”

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Jewish unity is a cause that is not advanced by the advocacy of one point of view over another. It demands the difficult but not impossible exercise of thinking non-adjectivally as a Jew: not as a member of this or that group, but as a member of an indivisible people.

