In his first halacha of Hilchot Chanukah (OC 670), the Shulchan Aruch codifies the custom to abstain from engaging in labor while the Chanukah candles are burning, despite the fact there is no prohibition enjoining labor on Chanukah. Let us suggest an explanation for this minhag.

The Rambam writes that the days of Chanukah were established as days of simcha. Since we don’t know the Rambam’s source (we only know of such an obligation on Purim), we need a definition of this mitzvah of simcha.

The Gemarah (Sukkah 41a) establishes an obligation incumbent upon Chazal to establish mitzvot DeRabbanan that will encourage us to remember the Mikdash. This is fulfilled on Sukkot when we take the lulav for the entire holiday or during the period of Sefira when we count the days of the Omer. One would doubt that the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles could be classified as זֵכֶר לַמִּקְדָּשׁ; rather, the essence of the mitzvah is זֵכֶר לְנֵס, to remember and thank Hashem for the great miracle of the lights of the Menorah.

Rabbeinu Zerachya HaLevy, in his opening comment on the second chapter of Masechet Shabbat, explains the prohibition of using the light of the candles for one’s personal benefit. The halachic status of the Chanukah candles is identical with that of the ner of the Menorah in the Mikdash, and is therefore אָסוּר בַּהֲנָאָה.

This ruling would seem to indicate that the mitzvah of הנר דַּהֲנָא is not only a zecher for the miracle but also a zecher for the Mikdash.

The same conclusion would seem to underlie the statement of the Ramban (Commentary on the Torah, beginning of Parashat Beha’alotcha): Hashem told Aharon that his obligation to light the ner of the Menorah in the Mikdash was an eternal one. It would continue even after the destruction of the Mikdash in the mitzvah – incumbent upon every Jew – to light the Chanukah candles. Apparently, the obligation is defined as a replication of the mitzvah performed in the Mikdash.

Perhaps the custom of abstaining from labor while the Chanukah candles are burning is an extension of the ruling of Rabbeinu Zerachya HaLevy. Not only does the קיִיָּם זֵכֶר לַמִּקְדָּשׁ engender a legal status vis-à-vis the candle itself, but even the status of the house where the candles are lit is transformed. The בַּיִת takes on the complexion of the בַּיֵּית המלך, where the Menorah was lit. Hence, the obligation of אָסוּר מְלָאכָה (awe for the Mikdash) applies to the בַּיִּית, which in turn precipitates an אָסוּר מְלָאכָה.

We can now understand the requirement of simcha on Chanukah. Once the home is transformed into a Mikdash and one is standing in the presence of Hashem, one must be in a state of joy.

עֹז וְחֶדְוָה בִּמְקֹמוֹ
"Might and joy are in His place" (Chronicles 1 16:27).

1 The Maharil includes both men and women in this custom.
2 The Ra’avya assumes an obligation to eat a meal with bread on each day of Chanukah!
3 See Rambam, Hilchot Tefilla, 11:8.
4 See Shurim LeZeicher Abba Mori, Vol. 2, pages 193-4. Just as the minhag of Yom Tov Sheini extends kedusha in זמן, so does the minhag of ner Chanuka generate kedusha in מקדש.