



To Ignite the Candle Within

Chanukah is a holiday of opposites and contradictions – the few against the many, the impure versus the pure, light and dark. The *mitzvot* of the *chag* are also delicately balanced in “no-man’s land” – not placing the *chanukiah* too high or too low, lighting at the interface of day and night, between the house and the street.

Throughout the discussions in the Gemara, we come across the debate about whether it’s “the lighting that makes the *mitzvah*” or “the placing that makes the *mitzvah*.”

In other words, if a person first lights the *chanukiah* in a place where he does not fulfil the *mitzvah*, and only afterwards places it in his window or at the door, is he considered to have fulfilled the *mitzvah* or not? If we say the lighting is the determining factor, then no, but if we say the placement is what counts, then as soon as he places the lit *chanukiah* in the right place, he has fulfilled the *mitzvah*.

In a similar vein, if the candles burn out before their full time, do we need to relight them or not? If it’s the lighting that counts, then we’ve already fulfilled the *mitzvah* and there is no need to light again. But if it’s the placement that counts, we haven’t fulfilled the *mitzvah* until the lights burn in the right place for their full allotted time, hence we would have to light the candles again.

Excitement Versus Rote

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev addresses these debates in the Gemara and explains that the root of the differences in opinion is manifested in two ‘movements’ of the soul: lighting and placing. ‘Lighting’ symbolizes the soul’s full engagement

– enthused, alive, ebullient. ‘Placing’ symbolizes the soul opting for rest, settling, routine.

And so Rav Levi Yitzchak explains the debate. Those who say that lighting makes the *mitzvah* mean that ideally a person should fulfil the *mitzvah* with burning enthusiasm, and those who hold that ‘placing makes the *mitzvah*’ acknowledge those moments in our lives that we just cannot enlist our soul to be aroused by the ‘lighting,’ yet even then we should not forego the *mitzvah* and observe it if only by rote. There is a value to drab persistence, to habit, to fulfilling *mitzvot* in a routine way.

Rav Levi Yitzchak is describing one of the fundamentals of *Chassidut*: observing *mitzvot* through enthusiasm and a love of G-d. This was the great message of *Chassidism*, created to breathe new life into what had become a dormant, routine-style Judaism. To emphasize passion for *mitzvot* and love of G-d over mechanical ritual.

The Dangers of Enthusiasm

Nevertheless, there is danger in the ecstatic spiritual experience. Rav Levi Yitzchak notes the tension between the lighting and the placing, between breaking out of one’s comfort zone and remaining in routine. He cites three particular dangers: i) the escape from routine is fast and knows no limits, and hence can spill over into meaningless matters. ii) since it is momentary, it passes quickly and cannot be maintained over time. And iii) “sparks are not real,” i.e. raw enthusiasm has no existence in and of itself. It always needs something to ignite it.

The response to these dangers is the *mitzvah*. The *mitzvah* separates the wheat from the chaff and the meaningful from the meaningless, ensuring that our passions and yearnings are channeled into the sacred. Likewise, the world of *mitzvot* gives substance to that enthusiasm, holding it, preserving it and able to ignite it again and again. It is the *mitzvot* that connect enthusiasm to the world of eternity.

Connecting Opposites

Thus, Chanukah also represents the tension between static and dynamic.

This tension is enmeshed in all aspects of our lives – in prayer, in our relationships, in parenting and in our professional lives. We cannot keep things burning bright for too long and it is also impossible to remain too long in a debilitating routine without the occasional burst of enthusiasm.

Chanukah teaches us the middle path.

The family stands together at a juncture in time that is neither night nor day, in a place that is not really inside the house yet not really outside, and lights a small light that illuminates a world of darkness.

The Chanukah lights are beacons by which we can walk safely in a world full of opposites and contradictions. Lights that ignite the flames of desire and enthusiasm within eternity.

(Based on an article by Rav Itamar Elad.)

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