



Chanukah Candles: A “Household *Mitzva*”

By Rabbi David Silverberg

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (21b) famously delineates the three levels of performing the *mitzva* of Chanukah candles. The basic obligation, the Gemara establishes, requires the kindling of a single light in every household on each of the eight nights of Chanukah. The next level, which the Gemara calls the “*mehadrin*,” requires a candle for each member of the household. At the third and highest level – the “*mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*” – the number of candles changes from one night to the next. According to the accepted view (of Beit Hillel), this means that one candle is lit the first night, and then an additional candle each subsequent night.

Maimonides, in his codification of this *mitzva* (Hilkhos Chanukah 4:1-2), writes that even at the additional levels of *mehadrin* and *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*, only one member of the household lights the candles. In his view, when the Gemara speaks of “a candle for each person” and “adding in increments,” it means that the head of the household lights these extra candles. The *mehadrin* standard does not mean that each member of the household lights a candle, but rather that one person lights the number of candles that corresponds to the number of members of the household. Maimonides’ view is in contrast to the view codified by the Rama (Rabbi Moshe Isserles of Cracow, 1525-1572), that the *mehadrin* standard requires each person in the household to personally light a Chanukah candle (O.C. 671:1).

Different attempts have been made by later scholars to identify the conceptual underpinnings of Maimonides’ ruling. Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik of Brisk (the “Brisker Rav,” Lithuania-Jerusalem, 1889-1960) reportedly associated this ruling with Maimonides’ approach to the general principle of “*hiddur mitzva*” – enhancing *mitzva* observance. The Talmud speaks of a requirement to “enhance” or “beautify” *mitzvot* in several contexts, including the context of *berit mila* (circumcision). The essential obligation of *mila* requires the removal of the actual foreskin, but the concept of *hiddur mitzva* requires removing as well the remaining threads of skin, as an “enhancement.” However, Maimonides rules (Hilkhos Mila 2:4) that if the *mohel* withdraws momentarily after removing the actual foreskin, he does not then return to remove the remaining threads of skin. Apparently, as Rav Yitzchak Zev notes, Maimonides held that one fulfills the concept of *hiddur mitzva* only in the immediate framework of the *mitzva* itself. Once a person completes the actual *mitzva*, he can no longer achieve *hiddur mitzva*; the “enhancement” must be done as part and parcel of the essential *mitzva*, and if the essential *mitzva* was completed without the enhancement, there is no longer any possibility of achieving *hiddur mitzva*.

According to Rav Yitzchak Zev, this is precisely the reason why Maimonides interpreted the *mehadrin* standard of Chanukah candle lighting as requiring one individual to light multiple candles. As the Gemara established, the essential obligation of Chanukah candles is fulfilled through the lighting of a single candle for the entire household. Therefore, once a candle has been lit, there would be no value in other

members of the household lighting additional candles. Since, in Maimonides' view, *hiddur mitzva* can be achieved only in the immediate framework of the fulfillment of the essential *mitzva*, only the person who lit the original candle can achieve *hiddur mitzva* through the lighting of additional candles. Others, who did not perform the act through which the essential *mitzva* was fulfilled, cannot achieve the fulfillment of *hiddur mitzva*.

Rav Asher Weiss, a contemporary scholar, disputed Rav Yitzchak Zev's analysis of Maimonides' position (see <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/839mamar.htm>). Specifically, Rav Weiss contended that the *mehadrin* and *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* standards of Chanukah candle lighting are not intended as expressions of *hiddur mitzva*. The requirement of *hiddur mitzva* generally does not impose particular guidelines for enhancing the performance of a *mitzva*. Rather, it requires, in a general sense, performing *mitzvot* at a high aesthetic standard. When it comes to Chanukah candle lighting, however, it is clear from the Gemara's presentation that from the outset, the *mitzva* was established on three different levels. Lighting the additional candles does not fulfill the overarching requirement of *hiddur mitzva*, but is rather a "built-in" feature of the candle lighting obligation itself, which is inherently defined on three different levels. Therefore, Rav Weiss argued, Maimonides' position concerning *hiddur mitzva* as it applies to *berit mila* has no bearing whatsoever on his definition of the *mehadrin* level of Chanukah candle lighting.

Instead, Rav Weiss suggested that we approach Maimonides' position from the perspective of the fundamental definition of the basic candle lighting obligation. Maimonides defines this obligation as follows: "Its *mitzva* is that each and every household lights a single candle" (Hilkhos Chanukah 4:1). According to Maimonides, the candle lighting obligation is, fundamentally, cast upon the household, and not upon each individual. Essentially, it is the family, not the individual, who bears the obligation to light the Chanukah candle. This definition of the *mitzva* will directly impact upon our understanding of the *mehadrin* standard. If the *mitzva* is essentially defined as an obligation upon the household as a single unit, then there is nothing gained by requiring more members of the household to light candles. After all, from the perspective of this *mitzva*, the different members of the household are not viewed as separate individuals; the obligation applies to the family as a whole, and not to individual members thereof. By necessity, then, the higher level represented by the *mehadrin* standard must relate to simply an increased number of candles – not an increased number of people who light candles.

As we saw, the Rama argued with Maimonides' definition, and maintained that *mehadrin* requires each individual member of the household to light the Chanukah candle. Apparently, he felt that the Chanukah candle obligation rests upon each individual, and not simply upon the household as an organic unit. The basic standard is fulfilled through the lighting of a single individual, who lights on behalf of the others. Naturally, then, the higher standard of performing the *mitzva* is for each individual to light personally, rather than relying on somebody else's lighting.

According to Maimonides, however, the Sages enacted the candle lighting obligation as a requirement upon the household. The *mitzva* is therefore enhanced by the lighting of additional candles in (or outside) the home, and not through the participation of additional members.