



Adding Light to Darkness

Hanukkah 2023

What does it mean to celebrate Hanukkah when Israel is at war and at a time of rising antisemitism across the globe? Hanukkah is the first Jewish holiday since the tragic attack during Simchat Torah on October 7th. Joshua Ladon and Masua Sagiv welcome Mishael Zion, founder of Kehillat Klausner in Jerusalem and research fellow at Hartman's Kogod Research Center, to explore what stories we are telling our young people and how they differ from last year.

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The Shalom Hartman Institute is a leading center of Jewish thought and education, serving Israel and North America. Our mission is to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, identity, and pluralism; to enhance the Jewish and democratic character of Israel; and to ensure that Judaism is a compelling force for good in the 21st century.

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I. Rabbinic Sources

1. [Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b](#) [at 16:57 min.]

תנו רבנן: מצות חנוכה, גר איש וביתו. והמהדרין, גר לכל אחד ואחד. והמהדרין מן המהדרין, בית שמאי אומרים: יום ראשון מדליק שמונה, מכאן ואילך פוחת והולך. ובית הלל אומרים: יום ראשון מדליק אחת, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך.

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: **The basic mitzva of Hanukkah** is each day to have a **light** kindled by a **person**, the head of the household, for himself **and his household**. **And the mehadrin**, i.e., those who are meticulous in the performance of mitzvot, kindle a **light for each and every one** in the household. **And the mehadrin min hamehadrin**, who are even more meticulous, adjust the number of lights daily. Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagree as to the nature of that adjustment. **Beit Shammai say**: **On the first day one kindles eight** lights and, from **there on, gradually decreases** the number of lights until, on the last day of Hanukkah, he kindles one light. **And Beit Hillel say**: **On the first day one kindles one** light, and from **there on, gradually increases** the number of lights until, on the last day, he kindles eight lights.

Question for Discussion

Today, the tradition is to light as the mehadrin min hamehadrin following the House of Hillel, increasing the number of candles each night. Why do you think this tradition became dominant?

2. [Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b](#) [at 15:46 min.]

תנו רבנן: גר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ. אם היה דר בעלייה — מניחה בחלון הסמוכה לרשות הרבים. ובשעת הספנה — מניחה על שלחנו ודין.

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: **It is a mitzva to place the Hanukkah lamp at the entrance to one's house on the outside**, so that all can see it. **If he lived upstairs, he places it at the window adjacent to the public domain**. **And in a time of danger**, when the gentiles issued decrees to prohibit kindling lights, **he places it on the table and that is sufficient** to fulfill his obligation.

Question for Discussion

Today, in North America, Jews are discussing a mix of feelings, including safety and pride. How do you decide whether you want to put your Hanukkah - in the window or on a table in the room?

3. [Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 21b](#)

אמר רבא: צריך נר אחרת להשתמש לאורה. ואי איכא מדורה — לא צריך. ואי אדם חשוב הוא — אף על גב דאיכא מדורה צריך נר אחרת.

Rava said: One **must** kindle **another light** in addition to the Hanukkah lights **in order to use its light**, as it is prohibited to use the light of the Hanukkah lights. **And if there is a bonfire, he need not** light an additional light, as he can use the light of the bonfire. However, **if he is an important person**, who is unaccustomed to using the light of a bonfire, **even though there is a bonfire, he must** kindle **another light**.

4. [Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 23a](#) [at 32:17 min.]

מאי מברך? — מברך: "אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה". והיכן צונו? רב אונא אמר: מ"לא תסור". רב נחמיה אמר: "שאל אביך ונגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך".

And **what blessing** does one **recite**? He **recites: Who has made us holy through His commandments and has commanded us to light the Hanukkah light**. The Gemara asks: **And where did He command us?** The mitzva of Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Torah, so how is it possible to say that it was commanded to us by God? The Gemara answers that **Rav Avya said:** The obligation to recite this blessing is derived **from** the verse: "**You shall not turn aside** from the sentence which they shall declare unto you, to the right, nor to the left" (Deuteronomy 17:11). From this verse, the mitzva incumbent upon all of Israel to heed the statements and decrees of the Sages is derived. Therefore, one who fulfills their directives fulfills a divine commandment. **Rav Nehemya said** that the mitzva to heed the voice of the Elders of Israel is derived from the verse: "**Ask your father, and he will declare unto you, your Elders, and they will tell you**" (Deuteronomy 32:7).

II. Contemporary Sources

5. **Correspondence between Rabbi Joseph B. Glaser and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1978), from *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience*, Notre Dame Press, 1997 [at 18:42 min.]**

Central Conference of American Rabbis, Office of the Executive Vice President

Rabbi M. M. Schneerson

770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11213

May 31, 1978

Dear Rabbi:

Following up on my letter of April 25 suggesting that we discuss religious observances, particularly the kindling of Hanukkiot, held on public property, I was pleased to receive a telephone call from your office inviting me to send our views for your consideration and response.

As believing Jews, Lubavitcher Chasidim, Reform Jews, and others share the conviction that the mitzvah of kindling Hanukkiot should be fulfilled by all Jews. Likewise, that the lights should be placed in the windows, or even outside, of Jewish homes and synagogues “to proclaim the miracle,” is a practice we encourage. All that we question is the necessity and desirability of holding this or similar religious ceremonies on public property.

The mitzvah is fulfilled when Hannukkiot are lit on Jewish property. So there is no halachic necessity for doing so on public property. We believe public property religious observances are not only unnecessary, but undesirable. Allow me to explain why we feel that way.

As you know, the American Constitution provides for the separation of “church and state.” The relative comfort of Jews in the United States has resulted in part from the application of that principle. By constant vigilance we Jews, and other American who believe that the full freedom of religion which church-state separation provides is important, have managed to minimize violation of the Constitutional principle. Of particular note in this context, we have had considerable success in recent decades in preventing Christmas displays, crèches especially, on public property, and in preventing religious assemblies and prayer-periods in public schools. Thus we and our children are

not forced—as Jews in many nations are—to support Christianity through our taxes or to be exposed, and have our children exposed, to government sanctioned proselytizing. The civil courts have repeatedly agreed that we and our children need not be exposed to Christian observances which we find offensive.

Clearly Jewish religious observances and displays on public property are no less a violation of the doctrine of church-state separation than are Christian observances and displays. And when Jews seek to violate the Constitutional principle we weaken our hand in our ongoing efforts to prevent Christian violations.

There is a second reason for our concern about Chabad’s practice of holding Hannukah observances on public property. For the reasons outlined above, in several communities Jews have objected to these observances. Heated debate in the Jewish community has spilled over into the general community and has been reported by the media. Surely the sad spectacle of Jews publicly fighting with other Jews is a chillul hashem. I must tell you in all candor that we continue to receive complaints about this particular Chabad practice, and thus I have no doubt that the disputations will continue and possibly even end up in court.

Since you and we have no difficulty “proclaiming the miracle” via Hanukkah observance on private property, continued confrontation serves no positive Jewish purpose, and indeed is counter-productive.

Our request of you, then, is simply that in your role as leader of the Chabad Lubavitch movement you direct a cessation of Hannukiot lighting or other religious observances on public property. I would be happy to meet personally with you or your representatives to discuss the matter further.

Shalom,

Rabbi Joseph B. Glaser

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Letter to the Jewish Community of Teaneck, New Jersey, 1982

The Jewish community in the U.S.A. is as old as the U.S.A. itself. We know the problems it faced, and the actual discriminations it suffered, until it has won its place in this country. Yet, even in this day and age prejudice and anti-Semitism exist, not only latently, but also

overtly. Under these circumstances we must not relax our alertness to any sign of erosion of our hard-won positions.

One of these positions is the annual lighting of a Chanukah Menorah in public places. As mentioned in my previous letter, such Chanukah Menorahs have been kindled in the Nation's capital (in Lafayette Park, facing the White House), in Manhattan, Albany, Philadelphia, Chicago, and in many other cities of the Union. There has been no opposition to their being placed on public property from non-Jewish quarters. Regrettably, there have been some Jews who did raise objections in several places out of fear that kindling a Menorah on public property, would call attention to the fact that there are Jews living in that city; Jews who would apparently be willing to forgo the claim that the public place belongs also to them, as part of the public.

I also pointed out that in Washington. D.C. the President personally participated in the ceremony, that in New York City the Attorney General of the State of New York personally participated in the ceremony, and elsewhere public officials and dignitaries were on hand at this public event. There is no need for any stronger evidence that the Chanukah Menorah-with its universal message, which is especially akin to the spirit of liberty and independence of this nation - has won a place not only in Jewish life, but also in the life of the American people.

In light of the above, when a Jewish community in the U.S.A. publicly raises objections to placing a Chanukah Menorah in a public place-on whatever grounds, and however well intentioned-it is thereby jeopardizing the Jewish position in general. It is also undermining its own position in the long run, as mentioned above. With all due respect to the claim that hitherto this policy has resulted in a "steady reduction of all Christological elements in public life," I doubt whether these have been eliminated completely. But granted, for the sake of argument, that this is the case, it would be most exceptional and unnatural in American life, since by and large the American people is Christian.

Someday, someone will raise the question, "Why should Teaneck be different from any other American town, and be hindered by Jews – a minority – from expressing itself in terms of religious symbols?" The answer that Jews, on their part, likewise refrained from placing a Chanukah Menorah in a public place – will hardly satisfy the majority of the Teaneck population.

Now, to come to the essential point; Why is it so important for Jews to have a Chanukah Menorah displayed publicly? The answer is that experience has shown that the Chanukah Menorah displayed publicly during the eight days of Chanukah, has been an inspiration to any, many Jews and evoked in them a spirit of identity with their Jewish people and the Jewish way of life. To many others, it has brought a sense of pride in their Yiddishkeit and the realization that there is no reason really in this free country to hide one's Jewishness, as if it were contrary or inimical to American life and culture. On the contrary, it is fully in keeping with the American national slogan "e pluribus unum" and the fact that American culture has been enriched by the thriving ethnic cultures which contributed very much, each in its own way, to American life both materially and spiritually.

Certainly, Jews are not in the proselytizing business. The Chanukah Menorah is not intended to, and can in no way, bring us converts to Judaism. But it can, and does, bring many Jews back to their Jewish roots. I personally know of scores of such Jewish returnees, and I have good reason to believe that in recent years, hundreds, even thousands, of Jews experience a kindling of their inner Jewish spark by the public kindling of the Chanukah Menorah in their particular city and in the Nation's capital, etc., as publicized by the media.

In summary, Jews, either individually or communally, should not create the impression that they are ashamed to show their Jewish-ness, or that they wish to gain their neighbors' respect by covering up their Jewishness. Nor will this attitude insure their rights to which they are entitled, including the privilege of publicly lighting a Chanukah Menorah, a practice which has been sanctioned by precedent and custom, as to become a tradition. I also must point out that I do not think that a Jewish community can disregard its responsibility to other Jewish communities in regard to an issue of this kind, which cannot remain localized, and must have its impact on other Jewish communities and community relations.

Questions for Discussion

- *What are the visions of religious freedom in America that Rabbis Glaser and Schneerson express in their letters?*
- *What are the challenges and possibilities of each of their arguments?*
- *How do these letters speak to our Jewish world today?*

6. [David Hartman, "Auschwitz or Sinai?," 1982 \(excerpt\) \[at 14:35 min.\]](#)

One of the fundamental issues facing the new spirit of maturity in Israel is: Should Auschwitz or Sinai be the orienting category shaping our understanding of the rebirth of the State of Israel? There are important differences resulting from the relative emphasis we place on these two models.

In the 20th century we have again become a traumatized nation. The ugly demonic forces of anti-Semitism have horrified our sensibilities. We can never forget the destruction of millions of Jews in World War II. Many, therefore, justify and interpret the significance of our rebirth in terms of Jewish suffering and persecution.

One often hears in speeches in the Knesset and at the UJA fund-raising dinners phrases such as: "Never again will we be vulnerable. Never again will we expose our lives to the ugly political forces in the world. Our powerful army has eliminated the need to beg for pity and compassion from the nations of the world".

While I respect and share in the anguish expressed in these sentiments, I believe it is destructive to make the Holocaust the dominant organizing category of modern Jewish history and of our national renewal and rebirth. It is both politically and morally dangerous for our nation to perceive itself essentially as the suffering remnant of the Holocaust. It is childish and often vulgar to attempt to demonstrate how the Jewish people's suffering is unique in history.

...Israel is not only a response to modern anti-Semitism, but is above all a modern expression of the eternal Sinai covenant that has shaped Jewish consciousness throughout the millennia. It was not Hitler who brought us back to Zion, but rather belief in the eternal validity of the Sinai covenant. One need not visit Yad Vashem in order to understand our love for Jerusalem. It is dangerous to our growth as a healthy people if the memory of Auschwitz becomes a substitute for Sinai.

The model of Sinai awakens the Jewish people to the awesome responsibility of becoming a holy people. At Sinai, we discover the absolute demand of God; we discover who we are by what we do. Sinai calls us to action, to moral awakening, to living constantly with challenges of building a moral and just society which mirrors the kingdom of God in history. Sinai creates humility and openness to the demands of self-transcendence. In this respect, it is the antithesis of the moral narcissism that can result from suffering and from viewing oneself as a victim.

Question for Discussion

Hartman argued in 1982 that the Jewish narrative needed to shift from one of victimhood to aspiration. Since the attacks of Oct. 7th and the rise in antisemitism, many Jews are struggling with the balance of power and vulnerability. How do you think about the balance between a narrative of victimhood and one of aspiration?

7. [Letter of St. Sgt. Lavi Lifshitz, z"l](#) [at 34:16 min.]

אני מבקש לא לשקוע באבל. הוא עשוי להיות יומיומי ומתיש, אך העשייה שיכולה לצמוח ממנו – אין היא מתישה – אלא בונה. אין דבר שהקשה עלי יותר מהבטלה, לכן אני מבקש מכל הסובבים אותי – תעשו תמיד.

I ask that you not sink into despair. Our daily existence is slated to be exhausting, but the possible action that can grow from it—is not exhausting, but constructive. There is nothing that has been more difficult for me than inaction, and so I ask of all those who surround me—always take action. (Translation: Tamar Marvin.)