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# Chanukah: Higher or Lower?!

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## Chanukah is here! Undoubtedly one of the most enjoyable *moadim* and one which has given all of us many fond memories.

However, it is also one of the most enigmatic of the Jewish festivals. Most people are clear about the basic details of Chanukah, and the reason for its place as one of the *moadim*. But as with most things in life, when one starts to ask even the most basic of questions, things don't appear to be quite as simple as they originally seemed.

With that in mind, the question I'd like to tackle is why we start with one flame on the first night of Chanukah, increasing gradually until on the last night there are eight lights.

The discussion starts with a debate mentioned in Gemoro Shabbos 21b, where the opinions of Beis Hillel and Beish Shammai are cited. Beis Hillel assert that one should light one candle on the first night and increase by one each subsequent night, whereas Beis Shammai rule that we do the opposite – we begin with eight flames on the first night and decrease the number by one each night until on the last night, there is just one flame.

The *gemoro* presents two opinions to justify each of the opinions of Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai.

The two reasons given for Beis Hillel's view (1-8) are:

1. Corresponding to the number of days of Chanukah that have elapsed (for example, on the first night, one night has elapsed).
2. In accordance with the well-known principle, מעלין בקדש ואין מורידין, we always go upwards in matters of sanctity, and not down.

The two reasons for Beis Shammai's view (8-1) are:

1. Corresponding to the number days of Chanukah still remaining (for example, on the first night, there are eight days to go, and seven days left on the second night).

2. Corresponding to the 70 bulls (פרי החג) which were offered in the temple on Succos; for example, 13 on the first day and 12 on the second.

But for me, this merely raises many more questions than it answers. The most fundamental being:

1. Why should the number of days that have elapsed or are remaining be a factor in this discussion?
2. Doesn't Beis Shammai also agree to the principle of מעלין בקדש ואין מורידין? If so, shouldn't they too hold 1 - 8?
3. Of what relevance is the whole issue of the פרי החג, the bulls offered in the temple on Succos – how does that have any impact on a discussion about Chanukah?

Fortunately, the *meforshim* come to our rescue. The Pnei Yehoshua deals with these questions and his analysis of the *sugya* gives us some wonderful new perspectives on Chanukah.

Let's start with question 1. The Pnei Yehoshua explains that the debate as to the first of the justifications for each opinion (days elapsed or remaining), centres around the question of פרסומי ניסא, public awareness of the miracle that occurred. Imagine for a second, being present at the time of the miracle of the oil. Consider the anxiety that must have been felt by those present, when realising there was only enough oil to last one night, and that it would take a further week until fresh, pure oil could be produced.

Now imagine seeing the phenomenon of that eighth of a cup of oil, lasting all night. Then just think about what you'd think upon witnessing this happen again the next day, and again the day after that. And again. And again. FOR EIGHT NIGHTS!!

The gradual increase in awareness of Hashem's presence and *hashgacha* (supervision), needs to be acknowledged and

remembered. According to the first reason for Beis Hillel, by lighting one candle on the first night of Chanukah and gradually increasing, we find a way to express that.

Beis Shammai disagrees. The fact is that there was no rising awareness of miracles. In fact, the opposite was true. We've been focusing on the *menorah*; on the lights themselves. Let's consider the **oil** for a moment.

If it's true that each night, an eighth of the contents was consumed, then imagine what the jug would have looked like. On the first night, there would have been another seven portions remaining. That means that everyone knew this was going to happen again seven more times! This is tantamount to a decreasing level of excitement about the matter.

In recognition of that, claim Beis Shammai, we light eight candles on the first night of Chanukah, and gradually decrease.

The Maharsha continues this theme and by doing so provides an answer to the other two questions we raised earlier. Of course Beis Shammai agree to the axiom that we always increase in sanctity and detract therefrom. Except, however, if there is reason not to do so. Whenever there is justification to abandon that principle, it is permitted to do so.

The classic precedent for this in the Torah, is פרי החג, of which 13 were brought on the first day, 12 on the second, and so on until the seventh day of Succos. Why did the Torah permit this given the principle of מעלין בקדש ואין מורידין? The answer is that these offerings were meant to signify our desire for the eventual depletion of power of those wicked nations who wish us harm. That is justification to perform less offerings on the first day of Succos than on the second, and so on and so forth.

This precedent allows us to do the same with *ner* Chanukah. Because the events at the time created a gradual decrease in awareness of the miracle, this may be reflected in a gradual reduction in the number of lights we kindle each night.

Wishing you all a *freilechen* Chanukah!

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