

# Shining Our Light

by Eliezer Segal

In the spirit of acknowledging the victory of "the few against the many," I would like to open with an appreciation of that quintessential minority of talmudic tradition, the House of Shammai. Although normative halakhah usually follows the opinions of Beit Hillel, which achieved the support of the majority, it acknowledges that "both views are words of the living God" and that the House of Shammai is arguing coherent and legitimate positions that are deserving of careful study.

## ***Talmud Shabbat 21b***

...The House of Shammai say:  
On the first day eight lights are lit and afterwards they are gradually reduced.  
And the House of Hillel say:  
On the first day one is lit and subsequently they are increased.

Ulla said: In the West two amoraim,--Rabbi Jose bar Avin and Rabbi Yose bar Zevida, disagree.

One says: The reason of the House of Shammai is that it corresponds to the days still to come, and the reason of the House of Hillel is that it corresponds to the days that have passed.

And the other one says: The House of Shammai's reason is that it corresponds to the bullocks of the [*Sukkot*] Festival; and the House of Hillel's reason is that we rise in holiness but do not descend.

Rabbah b. Bar Hana said:  
There were two old men in Sidon: One acted in accordance with the House of Shammai, and the other one acted in accordance the House of Hillel.

The former gave as the reason of his action that it corresponds to the bullocks of the Festival. And the latter said that his reason was because we ascend in holiness and we do not descend.

We are all familiar with the dispute between the Houses of Shammai and Hillel in the Talmud over the preferred sequence for lighting the Hanukkah candles: Beit Shammai believe that we should decrease the number from eight to one, while Beit Hillel propose the procedure that we now follow, of increasing the number of candles on each successive night.

In their discussion of the underlying reasons for the respective rulings, the rabbis of the Talmud propose that Beit Shammai were taking their cue from the sacrifices on Sukkot. According to the Torah (Numbers 29), thirteen bulls are offered on the first day of the holiday, twelve on the second, finishing off with seven bulls on the seventh day. The House of Shammai thought that this pattern of decreasing numbers should also be followed in the lighting of the Hanukkah lights.

As arbitrary as this association between two totally unrelated rituals might appear to us at first sight, the connection of Hanukkah to Sukkot is, in fact, confirmed by historical documents.

According to 2 Maccabees 10:6, the original decision to celebrate for eight days was intended to compensate for the fact that during the war against the Hellenists the Jews were not able to celebrate Sukkot properly. It actually describes Hanukkah as being observed originally through the carrying of *lulavs*.

Now, this explanation is very difficult to accept at face value. After all, the uprising against the Hellenists went on for two years before the purification of the Temple. Granted that Sukkot was the most recent holiday of which they had been deprived, it was not the only one. The fighters would have missed out on the full cycle of the festivals. Why, then, of all festivals in the Jewish calendar, was it Sukkot that they missed so much?

And why, in the end, did the rabbis choose to perpetuate the connection with a ritual that has no visible association with Sukkot--the lighting of candles?

With respect to the first question, some of the commentators call our attention to a remarkable passage from the Talmud that explains the significance of those Sukkot sacrifices. This explanation is based on the premise that, if you add up the total number of the bulls offered on the seven days of Sukkot--13+12+11+10+9+8+7--you will arrive at a total of seventy, the number that traditionally represents the nations of the world. Following from this, the Talmud (*Sukkah* 55b) records:

**Says Rabbi Eleazar: To what do those seventy bulls correspond? To the seventy nations...**

**Rabbi Johanan said: Woe to the idol-worshippers, for they suffered a great loss but do not even know what they have lost. While the Temple was standing, the altar atoned for them, but now who shall atone for them?**

We see, then, that the Sukkot sacrifices are unique among the Jewish festival rituals in focusing on our responsibilities and contributions to humanity at large. While we are rejoicing in the ingathering of the crops, and as we recall the special relationship that we enjoyed with our Father in Heaven during our wanderings in the desert, we are reminded that the ultimate purpose of all this is to share our blessings with the rest of the world.

Antiochus and his collaborators sought to eradicate the distinctive faith of Israel; but had they succeeded in their campaign, the resulting spiritual devastation would not have been confined to the Jews.

On Hanukkah, as we are commemorating a military and spiritual conflict with hostile gentiles, it is all too easy to lose sight of these goals, to despair of the outside world, and to withdraw into insularity and xenophobia. Perhaps this is what Judah Maccabee had in mind on that first Hanukkah when he chose to model the new festival after Sukkot. If the point of the holiday was only to commemorate the triumph against foreign oppression, then Passover would surely have provided a more fitting model--or even Purim. However, focusing on Sukkot was Judah's way of teaching us that our determination to take up arms for the protection and preservation of the Jewish way of life is not only for our benefit; and that the purification of the Temple involved rededicating it to its original universal goals.

And this helps us to appreciate why Hanukkah focuses on the kindling of lights rather on any of the numerous rituals that were conducted in the holy sanctuary. In the terminology of the rabbis, the intent of this observance is *pirsomei nissa*, to spread the word of the Hanukkah miracle. The lights of the Menorah were very different from the fire of the altar. Whereas the latter was believed to have descended from the heavens in order to achieve atonement, the Menorah shone outwardly from the Temple, illuminating the world with the radiance of our devotion and the values of the Torah.

Maybe this also helps us understand another unusual feature of Hanukkah. As pointed out by the Rebbe Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger in his *Sefat Emet*, of all the holidays in the Jewish year, Hanukkah is the one that whose observance is defined almost entirely in terms of the individual

household. There is no major event that is conducted in the Temple or the synagogue--nothing analogous to the Passover sacrifices, the Hoshanna processions on Sukkot, or the Megillah reading on Purim. There is no real obligation to light Hanukkah candles in the synagogue, though it is required that every family--and preferably each family member--light a menorah that is placed at the door or window of their home. In spite of all those toddlers marching around like Maccabee soldiers, this week on what is ostensibly the recollection of a triumph in battle, we do not observe Hanukkah by means of military parades, or any other conventional collective ritual. Instead we emit our light from the home into the street, spreading it to wherever there is anybody around to see it.

Evidently, this is also the meaning of that odd time measurement that is utterly unique to Hanukkah. In connection with this mitzvah alone, we do not measure time by sunrise, sunset or the appearance of the stars--but rather by how long people are walking in the streets and marketplaces: "*ad shettikhleh haregel min ha-shuk.*" Because it is those people whom we are targeting with our light.

With respect to the miracle of Hanukkah, the *Sefat Emet* explains that the purpose of miracles is not really accomplished until the world has recognized their spiritual significance. Though the Almighty can perform all kinds of wondrous acts, involving suspensions of the laws of nature or of history, those acts do not fully achieve the status of *miracles* without the cooperation of human beings who publicize them to the world at large.

The appropriate method for publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah is through the mitzvah of lighting candles in each household, allowing the flames to illuminate the surrounding world. The very fact that Boxing-week shoppers can glance up to our windows and see Jewish families devoutly observing the precepts of lighting the menorahs is an indispensable part of the Hanukkah miracle.

Therefore, in celebrating Hanukkah, we are not only remembering the miracle--we are participating in it.