

תנא דבי אליהו, כל השונה הלכות בכל יום מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא

IT WAS TAUGHT IN THE ACADEMY OF ELIYAHU, WHOEVER STUDIES TORAH LAWS  
EVERY DAY IS ASSURED THAT HE WILL BE PRESENT IN THE 'WORLD TO COME'

### *Neirot Hanukkah - the "place-bound" mitzvah!*

A renowned English poet from the early 16th century once said: *'There's a time and a place for every thing.'*<sup>1</sup> This famous proverb echoed such meaning in the hearts and minds of people that it was forever quoted in countless literary writings to come until it eventually became a commonly used figure of speech in our homes and streets. Indeed it seems that even the gentiles of the world can grasp the concept of everything having its designated time and place! In Judaism this message rings very close to home. The practice of performing certain mitzvot at specific times of the Jewish year is one of the main characteristics of our faith. One would be wasting his time if he conducted a 'Seder' on Rosh Hashanah, and if one was caught shaking a Lulav on Purim he would no doubt be frowned upon (well maybe on Purim it would not be such a bad idea!). So we can very much relate to the nature and importance of our *time-bound* mitzvot. What is interesting is that even though the concept of a time-bound mitzvah is well known to us, what is far less familiar is the idea of a *'place-bound' mitzvah*, i.e. a mitzvah that can **only** be performed in a specific place. Nowhere do we find that one can only eat their matzah by the windowsill on Pesach. Nor do we ever learn that one can only build their Succah at the entrance of their home! But when it comes to the festival of Hanukah suddenly there is a change - a novelty - a place-bound mitzvah enters the spotlight of our religion... it is the precious mitzvah of *Neirot Hanukah* (the Hanukah lights)! On Hanukah we have a mitzvah to light candles for an eight day period to commemorate the miracles that Hashem performed for us in our battle and ultimate defeat of the Syrian-Greek Empire during the Second Temple era. The Hanukah lights can only be lit in a specific place and it is this distinct feature of *Neirot Hanukah* that forms the basis of our discussion and begs us to ask the following questions: **Where exactly must one place the Neirot Hanukah? What is the deeper significance of Neirot Hanukah being a place-bound mitzvah?**

1. Based on a saying by Shlomo HaMelech, קהלת ג

In order to answer our first question let us look into the earliest sources for the mitzvah of *Neirot Hanukah* and observe exactly how and why this Rabbinic mitzvah was instituted.

The first source for this practice is found in the Talmud, in tractate Shabbat:<sup>2</sup>

ת"ר נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ.

אם היה דר בעלייה מניחה בחלון הסמוכה לרה"ר

ובשעת הסכנה מניחה על שולחנו ודיו.

*The Rabbis taught: The Hanukah candle - it is a mitzvah to place it on the entrance of one's home, from the outside. If one lives in an attic one should place it in the window that is next to the public domain. And in times of danger one should place it on one's table and that is sufficient.*

We learn from the Talmud the following four caveats regarding this unique mitzvah:

1) The candles must be placed **within the entrance** or doorway of one's home. 2) The candles must be **placed outside**. 3) If one cannot place them outside within a doorway, then they should be placed on the windowsill or in any other place from where they can be **seen from the public domain**. 4) In times of '**danger**' one should not put the candles in a place that is visible by the public, but rather they should be lit inside the house.

HaRav Yosef Caro in the Beit Yosef<sup>3</sup> (his commentary on the Tur) quotes both Rashi's and Tosefot's interpretation of the Talmud above. Rashi says that the main reason why this mitzvah was instituted to be performed specifically outside was for the sake of **פרסומי ניסא** *publicising the miracle* of Hanukah and this is also the opinion of Tosefot. Tosefot however adds that the reason why the Talmud discusses the case of lighting the candles in the entrance of one's home is because it is dealing with a scenario where one has no חצר - *front courtyard* - but rather a house facing the public domain. Tosefot continues to explain that if one does have a front courtyard then it would be better to place the candles at the entrance of the courtyard bordering the public domain, because from there it would be even more visible to passersby.

2. מסכת שבת, דף כא:

3. סימן תרעא, סעי' ה'.

We have partly answered our first question. The proper place for *Neirot Hanukah* is within the entrance of one's front courtyard or front door **bordering the public domain**. If one cannot do so then one has to at least position them in a place where they are visible from the public domain, e.g. the windowsill. It seems at this stage that **publicising the miracle** of Hanukah is the most important factor in the fulfillment of this mitzvah. If that is the case then why did the Sages institute that the candles should be placed specifically within the entrance of a home or a courtyard? Why not simply position them on the courtyard fence bordering the public domain? The great Amora, Shmuel, gives us a *seemingly* cryptic reason in the Talmud, in tractate Shabbat:<sup>4</sup>

כדי שתהא נר חנוכה משמאל ומזוזה מימין

*In order that the Hanukah Candle will be on the left and the Mezuzah on the right.*

This may at first be difficult to understand. What benefits would a person reap by having their Hanukah candles on the left and the Mezuzah on the right of a doorway? The Ben Ish Hai<sup>5</sup> explains that the mitzvah of placing the candles specifically within an entrance fulfills a deep mystical *inyan* (concept). He explains that when one enters the house he would ultimately be surrounded by three mitzvot... the wearing of his **Tzitzit**, the **Mezuzah** on the right and the **Hanukiah** to the left. The source of this *inyan* is from HaRav Ahai Gaon<sup>6</sup>, one of the *Geonim*, who seems to imply that a person who surrounds himself with mitzvot will be spiritually strengthened and protected. The Ben Ish Hai then introduces his own novelty on this mitzvah. He reveals that the first letters of the three mitzvot of **ציצית מזוזה חנוכה** spell the word **צמח Tzumah**, which is one of the names of Moshi'ah. We know this from the following verse by the prophet Zechariah:

ואמרת אליו לאמר כה אמר ה' צבאות לאמר הנה איש צמח שמו ומתחתיו יצמח ובנה את היכל ה'.

*And say to him, Thus says Hashem, Master of Legions: Behold, there is a man, Tzumah is his name, and he will flourish from his place; and he will build the Sanctuary of Hashem.*

The Ben Ish Hai continues to explain that in the merit of fulfilling this mitzvah one would hasten the arrival of Moshiach and end this terrible dark exile we are living in.

4. מסכת שבת, דף כב.

5. וישב, הלכות חנוכה, אות ד.

6. עיין כף החיים סימן תרעא, אות חן.

There is a fair question one may ask regarding the inyan of "צמח" mentioned above. We said that in order to fulfill the concept of צמח one would need to be surrounded by three mitzvot, one of them being the mitzvah of tzitzit. However, according to the Shulhan Aruch, the Ben Ish Hai and most other halachic authorities, the mitzvah to light the Hanukah candles must be performed precisely at **nightfall**,<sup>7</sup> and there is a well known debate between the Rambam and the Rosh whether one is obligated to wear tzitzit at night!<sup>8</sup> The Rambam says there is no mitzvah to wear tzitzit at night, whereas the Rosh holds there is still an obligation to. Therefore, according to the Rambam and those opinions like him, how could the Talmud imply that a person would be performing the *mitzvah* of tzitzit at the time of lighting the Hanukah candles at night? Behold, he would not be performing the mitzvah of tzitzit at that time!

The Ben Ish Hai would not have had a difficulty with this question. We know that the Ben Ish Hai followed the mystical teachings of the Holy Ari z'l and the Ari z'l says clearly that one is obligated to wear his tzitzit **at all times - even at night**, except for in the bathroom, etc.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, according to the Ari z'l, the Ben Ish Hai, etc. one would still be fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit at night.<sup>10</sup>

We would have thought that the matter is clear now. The correct place for the mitzvah of Neiroi Hanukah is within a doorway, and bordering a public domain or at least visible by the public. However, there is an evidently clear minhag in practice today that does not follow this ruling. We see many people having the custom to light the Hanukah lights indoors and completely concealed from the public eye. Surprisingly, this also **seems** to have been the practice of the Ben Ish Hai in Baghdad, who writes the following:<sup>11</sup>

**מצוה להניחה בטפח הסמוך לפתח, אפלו בזמן הזה שמדליקין בפנים.**

*The mitzvah is to place it (the Menorah) within 10cm next to the entrance, even in these times where we light within (our homes).*

7. מרן בסימן תרעב סעי' א, וע"ע כף החיים אות ב שם, וע"ע בא"ח שם אות ז.

8. הובא גם בבא"ח לך לך אות טז.

9. עיין שער הכוונות דף ז וגם דף נב.

10. עיין בא"ח בראשית אות ט.

11. שם.

So even according to the Ben Ish Hai, if someone lights their candles indoors it seems it is preferable to place them within a doorway and not on the windowsill facing a public domain! However, one can interpret the words of the Ben Ish Hai as referring to lighting inside the house at the front door, rather than lighting at the entrance of a courtyard.<sup>12</sup> This may have indeed been the practice of Baghdad where there was a fear from the non-Jews and in this way one could light their candles indoors (at the front door) and fulfill the inyan of צמח, as well as publicizing the miracle, i.e. whenever the front door was opened passersby would be able to see the Neiroth Hanukah inside.

The minhag to light indoors began long ago where Jewish communities were in constant danger from their non-Jewish neighbours. A famous example of how the Hanukah lights were unfortunately used as an excuse by the non-Jews to harm Jewish communities occurred during the Roman conquest of Judea and is recorded by Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov:<sup>13</sup> The incident is told of the wife of Trajan (the wicked Roman Commander of Legions) who gave birth to a baby boy on the night of Tisha B'Av when all the Jews were sitting in mourning. The baby then died on Hanukah. The Jews of the time all asked one another: "What shall we do? Shall we kindle the Hanukah lights or not?" They decided to light, come what may. Their enemies went and slandered the Jews to Trajan's wife, saying: "The Jews mourned when your son was born and kindled lights when the baby died!" Trajan's wife was so distort that she sent a letter to her husband: "Instead of fighting barbarians, return and fight the Jews who have rebelled against you!" Trajan set sail to Eretz Yisrael and he estimated the voyage would take him ten days, but a strong wind enabled his ship to arrive in five days. He entered the study hall and heard the Torah scholars studying the following verse:<sup>14</sup> "*G-d shall bring a nation upon you from afar... like the eagle flies.*" Trajan screamed out: "I am the eagle! For I thought I would arrive in ten days and the wind brought me in five!" His legions killed the men and women of that entire town R'L.

At this stage we have to ask ourselves an important question. Are we living in times of danger today? How does one define 'danger' in this regard?

12. כך שמעתי מפי אבי מורי הרב הדיין ר' אברהם דויד שליט"א, ויש לו דיוקים טובים מלשון של הבא"ח שם.

13. The Book of our Heritage, Vol.3, The Destruction

14. Devarim 28:49

The Tur<sup>15</sup> gives us a clear definition of how one defines 'times of danger', and this is also the opinion of the Shulhan Aruch:

**ובשעת הסכנה שאינו רשאי לקיים המצות מניחה על שולחנו ודין.**

*And in times of danger where one is not allowed to fulfil the mitzvot one can place it on his table and that is sufficient.*

It is clear that today we are certainly not living in times of danger b'H. Most Jewish communities of Europe and the West live in democratically run societies, which are inherently multi-cultural with various races, religions and practices all around us.

Thankfully, in these countries we are free to practice our religion as we please. Therefore, we can finally conclude the answer to our first question is as follows:-

The mitzvah to light Neiroi Hanukah was instituted in one place and one place only - a place that is visible to the public eye in order to publicise the miracle of Hanukah. In order to do this one should light their Neiroi Hanukah at the entrance of their front door, just outside the doorway. If one lights them outside the doorway then they should ensure the candles are lit in a glass box to protect them from the elements. If for whatever reason it is not convenient to light the candles by a front door then they should be at least be lit by a windowsill facing the public domain. If someone lives in an area where there is a fear or danger from neighbours they should then ensure the candles are lit in an inner doorway (inside the house) opposite the mezuzah in order to fulfil the concept of צמח as discussed above.

We would like to offer the following possible answer to our second question. Why is the festival of Hanukah so unique that for the first time in our religion we find the institution of a place-bound mitzvah? The answer to this lies deep inside the spiritual battlefields of the Jews and the Greeks of the Second Temple era. The Greeks of that period were great philosophical thinkers. Unlike most of our other adversaries of the past, the Greeks did not initially wish to annihilate the Jewish nation. Instead their agenda was to annihilate our religion! The Greeks set out with one goal and one goal only - to make the world adopt their philosophy of Hellenism.

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15. טו

Interestingly, the philosophy of Hellenism did not deny the existence of G-d as the creator of the world. The Greeks very much believed that there is a G-d who created the universe. Their downfall was that they failed to understand or accept that G-d is involved in the day-to-day running of the world and everything therein. They believed very much that Hashem had created the world and then left it to run under the governing and influence of celestial beings or emissaries, which the Greeks worshipped - otherwise known today by modern thinkers as the 'Laws of Nature.' The Greeks preached that G-d is not present in the world anymore and it is thus futile to worship Him or attempt to relate to Him in any way or form (chas v'Shalom!)

This philosophy strongly opposed that of Judaism. It is a clear axiom of our faith that Hashem is involved in every aspect of the world. We believe that all the laws of nature, even the slightest movement of a leaf by the wind, is governed and performed directly by Hashem. It is this belief of Hashem's involvement in the 'physical' that makes our religion so unique from others. We believe there is spirituality in the most mundane of physical acts, and that Hashem's presence manifests in all corners of the world. This is hinted to in the Zohar HaKadosh,<sup>16</sup> which reveals that one of Hashem's Names is none other than **המקום** *The Place*, for Hashem is the very 'place' of the world! This could well be the deeper meaning behind the saying from Pirkei Avot:<sup>17</sup>

**אין לך דבר שאין לו מקום.**

*There is no thing that does not have its 'Place.'*

The Greeks could not accept this. Whilst they could certainly relate to a 'G-d in time,' they failed to relate to G-d's *presence* in the world. In other words they could not relate to a 'G-d in space!' This in essence is why *Neirot Hanukah* were established. A mitzvah that is bounded specifically by time and space... **the time-bound and place-bound mitzvah** of our religion! This would be the ultimate nemesis to Greek philosophy for time to come.

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16. פנחס, דף רכו. 16.

17. פרק ד. 17.

When we light those miraculous candles for eight days, year after year, we publicise to the world that Hashem's presence is forever **fixed** and **present** in every corner of our world! In every Jewish home, in every Synagogue, in the private domain as well as the public.

There is no place that is void of His Being!

**Rabbi Yosef Haim David**

This document contains divrei Torah. Please treat it with the necessary respect.