

Thoughts on Chanukah 5776/2015

The Obligation of Lighting the Chanukah Lights

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Therefore, the Sages of that generation decreed that the eight days that begin with the twenty-fifth of Kislev should be days of rejoicing and that the Hallel should be recited. And on these days, on each of the eight nights, we light candles at the doors of the houses in order to demonstrate and reveal the miracle... (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Chanukah 3:2)

Maimonides explains that the Sages established the celebration of Chanukah and the obligation to light the Chanukah menorah. He explains the reason for the lighting of the menorah. The Chanukah menorah demonstrates and reveals the miracle of Chanukah.

What is the miracle represented by the Chanukah menorah? The Chanukah lights commemorate the miracle of the oil. A small cruse of oil sufficed to fuel the Menorah of the Bait HaMikdash for eight days.

Maimonides writes that we light the Chanukah menorah in order to demonstrate and reveal this miracle. A careful analysis of this statement reveals that Maimonides outlines two objectives to be fulfilled through the Chanukah lights. First, the Chanukah lights demonstrate the miracle that took place in the Temple. Second, the Chanukah lights reveal this miracle.

We can understand the first objective. The Chanukah menorah is a reasonable representation of the Menorah of the Temple. Lighting the Chanukah menorah provides a depiction of the miracle of the Temple Menorah. However, the second objective is not very easily understood. What are we attempting to reveal? Furthermore, how does revealing the miracle differ from demonstrating the wonder?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik Zt"l offers a simple but insightful explanation of Maimonides' comments. He explains that the institution of the Chanukah lights serves two purposes. It demonstrates the miracle of the Temple. This objective assumes that the observer is aware of the miracle. Seeing the Chanukah lights reminds the knowledgeable observer of the miracle.

However, the miracle of the Temple Menorah was not widely observed. The Bait HaMikdash is sacred. Access to the Temple is limited. Only a small portion of Bnai Yisrael was permitted to enter the Temple and observe the wonder. The majority of the nation could not observe the miracle. When the Sages established the institution of the Chanukah lights, they wished to reveal the miracle to the entire

nation. One of their objectives was to publicize the wonder that took place in the Temple to those who were not permitted to observe the miracle.

Now we can understand Maimonides' comments. The Sages established the obligation to light the Chanukah lights with two objectives. Each objective was directed to a specific group. Some people knew of the miracles. For these individuals, the Chanukah menorah served as a reminder. Others did not know of the miracle. For these people, the Chanukah lights revealed that a miracle had occurred in the Bait HaMikdash.¹

¹ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, "Notes on Chanukah," Mesora, Adar 5754, p 73.