

# Thoughts on Chanukah

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## So Many Candles!

### I. Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel

One of the most well-known disputes concerning the *mitzvah* of the Chanukah lights concerns the number of lights that are kindled each night. We follow the practice of Bait Hillel. On the first night, we kindle a single light. Each following night, we add a candle. This process culminates with kindling eight candles on the eighth night. However, Bait Shammai suggests an alternative and opposite procedure. According to Bait Shammai, eight lights are kindled on the first night and one light is subtracted on each subsequent night. On the eighth night, a single candle is kindled.

Table1. Number of lights kindled each night according to Bait Hillel and Bait Shammai

	1 <sup>st</sup> night	2 <sup>nd</sup> night	3 <sup>rd</sup> night	4 <sup>th</sup> night	5 <sup>th</sup> night	6 <sup>th</sup> night	7 <sup>th</sup> night	8 <sup>th</sup> night
Bait Hillel	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Bait Shammai	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

### II. The Talmud's first explanation

The Talmud offers two explanations of this dispute. The first is rather simple. According to Bait Shammai, the number of lights kindled represents the number of days of Chanukah that remain. On the first night, all eight days remain; eight lights are kindled. On the last night, only a single day remains; a single light is kindled. Bait Hillel maintains that the number of lights kindled represents the number of days that have passed –

including the current night. On the first night, no days have yet passed. However, we kindle one light – corresponding to the current night. On the second night, we kindle two lights – corresponding with the day that has passed and the current night.

Although this is a reasonable explanation of the dispute between Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel, it presents a problem. Both agree that the number of lights kindled corresponds with the night of Chanukah. In other words, we are counting the nights of Chanukah through the number of lights that we kindle. However, it seems that Bait Hillel's method of counting is more reasonable. It is straightforward and simple. Bait Shammai's method is somewhat convoluted. Why does Bait Shammai require that we indicate the night of Chanukah through demonstrating how many nights remain?

### III. Numbers and messages

Rav Yisroel Chait offers an insightful explanation of Bait Shammai's opinion. He begins by asking a simple question. How does one determine how many lights one will kindle on any night? One considers which night it is and then subtracts from eight. So, on the third night, two days of Chanukah have passed. These two days are subtracted from eight and six lights are kindled. Each night, the number of lights kindled reflects two quantities – the number of days that have passed and the total number of days of Chanukah.

This analysis demonstrates that according to Bait Shammai, the number of lights kindled must reflect both of these quantities. The opinion of Bait

Shammai is that it is not adequate for the number of lights to merely reflect the number of days that have passed. The lights must also reflect that Chanukah is an eight-day celebration.

Table 2. Calculation of number of lights kindled each night according to Bait Shammai

	1 <sup>st</sup> night	2 <sup>nd</sup> night	3 <sup>rd</sup> night	4 <sup>th</sup> night	5 <sup>th</sup> night	6 <sup>th</sup> night	7 <sup>th</sup> night	8 <sup>th</sup> night
(a) Total days of Chanukah	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
(b) Number of days that have passed	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(a-b) Number of lights	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Now, we understand the dispute between Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel. According to Bait Hillel, the number of lights kindled reflects only a single quantity – the number of days that have passed. But according to Bait Shammai, the number of lights kindled reflects the number of days that have passed and the total number of days of the celebration. For example, on the third night, Bait Hillel’s lights communicate only one message; it is the third night of the celebration. Bait Shammai’s lights communicate that it is the third night of an eight-day celebration.

#### IV. Priorities on communication

This raises a new question. According to Bait Shammai, why is it necessary to communicate through the lights kindled, that Chanukah is an eight-day celebration? Why is it not adequate to simply indicate – through the lights – the number of days of the celebration that have passed?

Rav Chait suggests a simple answer to this question. He explains that the Chanukah lights are more than a method for counting the nights of Chanukah. The lights are designed to communicate and recall the miracle of the *Menorah*; a container holding enough oil for a single day sufficed for eight days. In this context, we can understand Bait Shammai’s position. According to Bait Shammai, we must communicate that Chanukah is an eight-day celebration commemorating a miracle that extended over eight days. Each night, we declare which day we are celebrating of an eight-day celebration that commemorates an eight-day miracle.

Now, we can better understand the dispute between Bait Hillel and Bait Shammai. Both agree each night the candles communicate the number of the day of Chanukah and the corresponding number of days the miracle had extended. As noted, Bait Hillel’s method of lighting is clear and straightforward. It communicates to the observer the current night of the miracle and the Chanukah celebration. Bait Shammai’s method is not as straightforward. But it communicates more information. It communicates the current night of Chanukah and the corresponding miracle. It also communicates the total length of the miracle and celebration. Both methods communicate the miracle of the *Menorah* but they prioritize different aspects of the communication. Bait Hillel's method emphasizes the clarity of the communication. Bait Shammai's emphasizes the quantity or completeness of the information communicated. Therefore, Bait Shammai sacrifices some clarity to communicate a more complete message.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *P'nai Yehosua, Commentary on Mesechet Shabbat 21b.*

## V. The Talmud's second explanation

The Talmud offers a second explanation of the dispute between Bait Shammai and Bait Hillel. According to this explanation, Bait Shammai maintains that the number of lights kindled each night is patterned after the sacrifices offered on Succot. These are described in Parshat Pinchas. Thirteen bulls are offered on the first day and on each subsequent day one less bull is offered. On the final day – the seventh day of Succot – seven bulls are offered.<sup>2</sup> In other words, just as the number of bulls offered decreases with the passing of each day of Succot, so too, the number of lights kindled decreases with the passing of each day of Chanukah. Bait Hillel maintains that the number of lights increases each night. This position is based upon a general principle in *halacha* – we are required to bring about ascension in sanctity and not descent. This principle is expressed in various laws. For example, if we sell an object that has sanctity, then we are required to use the funds to purchase an object of greater sanctity. We cannot use the funds for the purchase of an object of lesser sanctity.<sup>3</sup> Based on this principle, Bait Hillel reasons that we are required to increase the number of lights and we cannot decrease them. Therefore, we add a light each night.

This answer presents an obvious problem. What is the connection between Succot and Chanukah? Why should the pattern of sacrifices on Succot be the model for the number of lights kindled on Chanukah?

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<sup>2</sup> Sefer BeMidbar 29:12-34.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Tefilah 11:14.

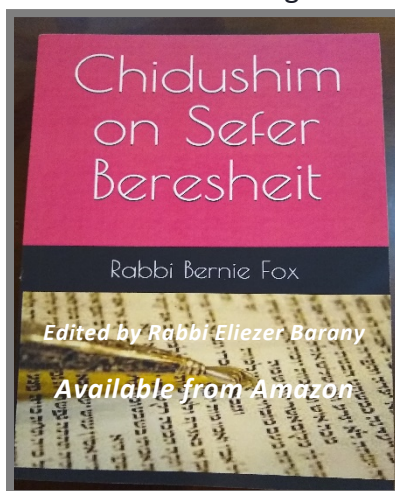
<sup>4</sup> Sefer BeMidbar 28:18-24.

<sup>5</sup> Mesechet Erechin 10b.

## VI. Hallel of Succot and Pesach

To answer this question, it is useful to begin with a related issue. As we have explained, there is a general principle in *halacha* of *ma'alin ba'kodesh ve'ayn moredin* – we are required to cause ascension in sanctity and not descent. However, the number of bulls offered on Succot does decrease. Why does the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* not apply to these sacrifices?

There is an interesting discussion in the Talmud



that seems to answer this question. The Talmud explains that we are required to recite the entire *Hallel* on each day of Succot. However, on Pesach, we are only required to recite the

entire *Hallel* on the first day. The Talmud explains that we recite the full *Hallel* in each day of Succot because the number of bulls offered differs on each day. Their different sacrifices distinguish the days of Succot from one another. Because the days are differentiated through their sacrifices, the complete *Hallel* is recited each day. In contrast, on Pesach the same daily sacrifices are offered on each of the seven days.<sup>4</sup> Because its days are not differentiated through their sacrifices the complete *Hallel* is recited only the first day.<sup>5</sup>

What is the connection between the differentiation of the days of Succot through their various sacrifices and the recitation of a complete *Hallel*? The different sacrifices offered on each day endow each day of Succot with a unique sanctity. Because each day of Succot has a unique sanctity, it requires a complete *Hallel*. In contrast, the days of Pesach are not differentiated by their sacrifices. Therefore, they all partake of a single extended sanctity. This single sanctity extends through the entire seven days of Pesach. The single sanctity of Pesach requires a single recitation of the complete *Hallel*.

This discussion suggests that there is a fundamental difference between Succot and Pesach. The festival of Succot is composed of a sequence of seven unique but separate days. Each day has its special sanctity. Pesach is a single sanctity that extends over seven days.

## VII. The days of Chanukah

Now, we understand why the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* does not apply to Succot. The principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* only applies when there is a relationship between a prior and later sanctity – generally, through both relating to a single object. In our above example, the funds received for the sale of an object of sanctity cannot be used to purchase an object of lesser sanctity.

This is because the funds would descend from their association with a higher level of sanctity to association with a lesser level. This principle cannot be applied to Succot. The various sacrifices endow each day with a unique and separate sanctity. The sacrifices of one day are not associated with the sacrifices of the next. Therefore, the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* is not applicable.

This helps us understand the Talmud's second explanation of the dispute between Bait Hillel and Bait Shammai. According to Bait Hillel, the eight days of Chanukah are patterned after the seven days of Pesach. The eight days share a single designation as Chanukah. Because all eight days partake of a single designation, the principle of *ma'alin ba'kodesh* applies. Bait Shammai contends that eight days of Chanukah are patterned after the seven days of Succot. Each day of Chanukah has its own separate identity. To create and communicate each day's uniqueness, the lights are kindled in the pattern of the Succot sacrifices. The lights of Chanukah differentiate the days of the celebration – much as the sacrifices of Succot differentiate the days of the festival. The pattern in which the lights are kindled communicates that, like the days of Succot, the various days of Chanukah are separate from one another.

Banner art: Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, Israel

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