

December 2018 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

In a world that seems so filled with darkness, we couldn't need the light of Hanukkah more than we do right now!

As is the case so often with Jewish ritual, even though we may perhaps take it for granted that there is a proper way of kindling the lights of our hanukkiyot (Hanukkah menorahs), the truth is that our rabbinic sages had differing opinions on how it should be done. For example, while Shammai (50 BCE – 30 CE) held that we should kindle the lights in decreasing numbers (8 lights the first day, 7 the second day, 6 the third, etc.), his slightly older contemporary, Hillel, taught that we should do the opposite and **increase** the number of lights each day. Of course, as we all know, Hillel's opinion is the one that prevailed.

Additionally, there is a second practice regarding the manner in which the lights of Hanukkah are kindled that merits attention. After arranging the lights from right to left, we are instructed to kindle them from left to right.

Though it might be easy to look at these ritual guidelines and shrug them off as more complicated than necessary, they are, I would say, neither small nor arbitrary in their spiritual significance. The manner in which we fulfill the mitzvah of bringing light to the world during Hanukkah truly does matter. Had Shammai's approach become the accepted practice, had we been more faithfully reenacting the dwindling supply of oil that so concerned our ancestors two millennia ago, we would have taken on a tradition that celebrates the reduction of light. As heirs to Hillel, however, we do the opposite.

By going from 1 to 8 rather than 8 to 1, we take opportunity to increase the lights of hope and love and perseverance each and every night for eight full days. In a world so lacking in spiritual optimism, why would we ever choose to do otherwise?

Still, though, this begs the question: How? How do we reach our goal of bringing more and more light to our darkened world? For that, let's consider the direction in which we kindle the lights.

With apologies to the left-handed among us, I offer a teaching from Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, better known as the Chofetz Chaim (1839-1933), who pointed out that the natural positioning for us to take when reaching our (right) hand to kindle the lights would be to stand slightly to the left of the *chanukkiya*. Therefore, if we start lighting from the left rather than from the right, we kindle the closest light to us that is not already burning each time. If we start from the right, we are forced to reach over unkindled lights each time.

This may seem unimportant, but, according to the Chofetz Chaim, it makes all the difference in the world, because there is a fundamental Jewish concept that says we

should never ignore an opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah. In this case, passing our hands over the lights without setting them aflame would be akin to ignoring the opportunity to perform a mitzvah when presented with the possibility. And that, I believe, is how we fulfill Hillel's directive to bring increasing amounts of spiritual light to our darkened world. We must strive to do all we can, never to ignore the possibility of fulfilling a mitzvah.

As we continue to bask in the light of Hanukkah, I encourage each and every one of us not only to fulfill mitzvot when the opportunities present themselves, but to go out of our way to seek those opportunities even when they don't present themselves so clearly. For some, that means fulfilling more of what Jewish practice asks of us in the realm of ritual. For others, it may lead us to seek more opportunity to help our fellow human beings (or animals or nature). For all of us, however, I pray it will mean recognizing that as important as each and every one of us is, none of us is **all** there is. As we seek to bring more and more light to our darkened world, let us do so by seeking opportunity to fulfill our own obligation of doing whatever we can to offer thanks and gratitude by thinking and acting beyond our own selves.

Chag Urim Sameach, A Happy Festival of Lights to All!

Rabbi Dubin

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