

Lighting the Way

Beis Shammai are of the opinion that the preferred method of lighting the Menorah is to light eight candles on the first night and reduce that number by one each consecutive night, whilst Beis Hillel argue that one should begin with one candle, adding a further candle each night. One explanation the Gemoro offers is that Beis Shammai holds their opinion because the lights of Chanukah represent the offerings of Succos, which ascended in number. In contrast Beis Hillel holds their opinion because of the principle of increasing holiness and not decreasing it.

The Ollolos Ephraim explains a deeper meaning behind these ideas. He begins with the principle that the soul and body are two opposites, and that perforce, as one ascends, the other descends. He elaborates on this, by explaining that the bodies' strength, from the perspective of the vitality that allows it to perform functions, wanes from the moment a person is born, as illustrated in the way people lose their desires for this world as they get older. This process continues until, as he describes, a person eventually says, "I have no time or wish for these earthly desires." This is a directly contrast to the strength and vitality of the soul. The soul begins in a situation not dissimilar to an animal; unable to think or achieve anything except in purely physical terms. However, as a person grows, his soul matures and he becomes a thinking being, who adds wisdom and perfection every day of his life. It was to parallel these two natures, continues the Ollolos Ephraim, that Hashem created Odom Ho'Rishon from the ground where the Mizbeach would later stand in the time of the Beis Hamikdosh, because the Mizbeach represents a combination of these aspects. The Mizbeach was the place where the seventy bulls of Succos were offered, the descending number of which represents the physicality of the world that lessens as time moves on. However, the ground next to the Mizbeach was also the place where the Sanhedrin sat, the leaders of the generation whose wisdom was always growing, thereby representing the continuous growth of spirituality in the world and the soul.

It was this question that generated the debate between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai, continues the Ollolos Ephraim. The question arose as to which point should be emphasised through the Chanukah lights; the downward slope of physicality, or the upward charge of spirituality. Physicality and it's futility, it can be argued, are crucially important for us to learn about. Whereas the ideas of spirituality and it's growth are so natural and instinctive that it would be unnecessary to create a Mitzvah to commemorate them (an argument used by the early commentators to explain why no mention is made in the Torah of the reward for Mitzvos-people are inherently drawn to Mitzvos and it is therefore more meaningful to warn people away from Aveiros). However, the opposing viewpoint argues that a person needs no recollection of something that is obvious to everyone; that physicality is futile as it wastes away, and as such, there would be no need for Mitzvos to recall this point. Rather, Mitzvos should endeavour to help a person keep his eyes focused on growth in spiritual terms, since whilst such growth might be built into a person, it can be easily forgotten.

This, concludes the Ollolos Ephraim, is the source of the debate between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai. Beis Shammai understood that that miracle of the lights that took place at the time was primarily to commemorate the physical redemption from an enemy. Therefore, just as the body begins life with its full vitality and immediately begins to decline, and the offerings of Succos recall this very point, so too Beis Shammai understood that the lights of Chanukah should begin at their full number and then decline, thereby giving a person the opportunity to contemplate the declining nature of human life. In contrast, Beis Hillel saw the miracle of Chanukah as one centred on the lights of Chanukah and their spiritual connotations. It was for this reason, they believed, that a single jug of oil was left untouched; to hint to the spiritual connection between Hashem and a Jew that can never be defiled. Beis Hillel therefore argued that the number of lights should go up, just as spirituality and holiness perpetually grow, to commemorate the spiritual nature of the lights and everything they stood for.

Sealant

The Dinover Rebbe cites the Gemoro which relates the story of Chanukah, and in particular, the point that, "One jug of oil was found, lying with the seal of the Kohen Godol." The Dinover asks on this Gemoro, that surely it is well known that the Kohen Godol did not take personal responsibility for the purity of the oil used for the Menorah. This type of job was left to a more junior Kohen, while the Kohen Godol performed his own duties. As such, it would be logical to presume that this more junior Kohen actually sealed each jug with his own seal rather than the seal of the Kohen Godol. Therefore, why does the Gemoro imply that this jug was found with the seal of the Kohen Godol on it?

The Dinover answers that it is the way of the world for the seal of a king or any other ruler to become valuable due to its status as a collector's piece. It would therefore seem logical, he asserts, to presume that the seal of the Kohen Godol, which was stamped with the words, "Raised up above his brethren," would have been a valuable find, particularly for an invader looking for a prize to take home to demonstrate his military prowess. Based on this, he suggests a novel understanding of the Gemoro. Perhaps, he writes, the Jews did not find a jug with the seal of the Kohen Godol on it, but rather they found a jug with the seal of the Kohen Godol, meaning the seal was alongside the jug rather than on it. Relying on this, the Kohanim presumed that no invader had come across this particular cache, as there was little chance that they would have left so valuable a collectible as the seal of the Kohen Godol behind!