

## Hanukkah: Public or Private Observance?

by Rabbi Hillel C. Lavery-Yisraeli

The Conservative Yeshiva, Jerusalem

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Hanukkah is often celebrated as the holiday of "religious freedom." More accurately, it is a holiday celebrating our ability to practice Judaism unhindered, without pressure or influence to do otherwise. At the time, in the second century BCE, many Jews attempted to combine their ancient Jewish practices with newly popular Hellenistic ones; the Maccabees sought to put an end to this.

Though Hanukkah customs abound, such as eating oily foods, spinning tops, gambling, school plays and synagogue parties, the days of Hanukkah are halakhically distinguished from the others in two ways: changes in our regular daily prayers ("*Al HaNissim*" in *Amidah* and *Birkat HaMazon*, recitation of *Hallel*, and a special Torah reading), and the lighting of a special Hanukkah lamp (today called a *menorah* or *Hanukkiah*).

The main elements of the Hanukkah story are the miracles that happened at the time: the victory over the Syrian-Greek forces ("the few against the many"), and the little cruse of oil which burned for eight days – for which we light candles nowadays. A main theme of the Hanukkiah-lighting ritual is "*Pirumei Nisa*" – publicizing the miracle. This concept is often misunderstood and misused, for example when giant Hanukkiyot are set up in public spaces, as I will explain later. We shall analyze several passages in the Talmud to understand "*Pirumei Nisa*" better.

**[Source א:]** The Talmud (*Shabbat 23b*) deals with poor people who cannot afford to perform all the mitzvot incumbent upon them and therefore must choose which to perform (and which not). It gives preference to the mitzvah that will provide comfort for the family (Shabbat candles) over the Hanukkah lamp, from which no use or benefit may be derived. On the other hand, the rabbinic requirement of lighting on Hanukkah comes before the rabbinic requirement of saying Shabbat Kiddush over wine, since the Hanukkah light has the special quality of "*Pirumei Nisa*". For whom is this "*Pirumei Nisa*" done? If it were a need of *the community*, perhaps it would override one's family's needs, as communal needs usually take precedence. However, this is not the case here. The "*Pirumei Nisa*" only overrides a family's other *ritual* needs.

**[Source ב:]** The Talmud in *Shabbat 21b* determines that the Hanukkah lamp should be lit "from sunset until the streets are empty," a time period in which it will be seen, even if it is only by stragglers (the poor, non-Jewish wood-gatherers - Rashi). The discussion then raises two different interpretations of what this phrase means: 1) that it is *the time period during which it*

*must be lit* (without specifying how long the lights must burn), and accordingly, if the streets are empty, it's too late; or 2) that it fixes *the length of time it must be capable of burning*, regardless of when it's actually lit (even if late at night), which assigns less importance to it being seen.

**[Source 1:]** Like the time for lighting the Hanukkah, so too the location is very important. The Talmud in *Shabbat 21b* instructs that it be placed strategically so that it will be visible to others – outside one's doorway, or in a street-facing window if one lives above street-level. And the Hanukkah must not be placed too high (*Shabbat 22a*) – if it's more than twenty cubits (approx. 9.6 m) above street level, people won't be able to see it easily and one doesn't fulfil her/his obligation.\* The ability for the public to see the Hanukkah is an integral requirement.

Yet the public's viewing is not our only consideration. The Hanukkah must be recognizable as belonging to one's house (*Shabbat 21b*) – within a handbreadth of the doorway, or in the window. The Talmud (*Shabbat 23a*, *not* on the Source Sheet) indicates that one away from home should have someone else light there if possible; lighting on a bus, in an airport, on an airplane, in a public square, at city hall, or at a party does not discharge one's obligation, and a blessing recited over such a lighting would sadly be in vain. In times of danger (*21b*) when the balance of public-private observance – just outside one's residence – is not feasible, the Hanukkah is moved indoors; "*Pirsumei Nisa*" in such circumstances is limited to one's family. The only exception to the requirement that the lighting be at one's residence is the lighting in the synagogue before our evening prayers, also for "*Pirsumei Nisa*". Even so, the one who lights there has not fulfilled her/his obligation, and lights again at home with a blessing. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayyim, 671:7*. (Lighting candles in shul in the morning is a mere custom, no obligation is fulfilled and no blessing is said.)

Jews in the diaspora have clearly been influenced by the way our neighbors celebrate Christmas. Some Jews may feel a need to compete, using giant Hanukkiyot and public lightings attended by dignitaries. But this was not the intended nature of Hanukkah's "*Pirsumei Nisa*". In Judaism, Hanukkah is a minor holiday. "*Pirsumei Nisa*" is meant to be observed primarily with our families, and shared with our community but from within the family setting. It is to emphasize how Judaism is safe and strong when we safeguard it in our homes. This balance of public and private observance is what gives Hanukkah its special nature and should not be overlooked.

\* *One whose window is more than 10 meters above street level should, if possible, light at the entrance of the building, or in the hallway at the entrance to his/her apartment. Some say that if there are other windows level to and looking towards his/hers, then one's window can be used even if it's more than 10 meters above street level. When none of these is possible, one relies on the dispensation mentioned in Source 1 (originally for times of danger) and lights inside one's home.*