

# WANING OR WAXING

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

Beis Shamai maintains: On the first night of Chanukah eight lights are lit and thereafter they are gradually decreased! Beis Hillel say: On the first day one candle is lit and thereafter they are progressively increased... Beis Shamai's reason is that it should correspond to the (Parei HaChag) Sacrificial Cows of the Holiday of Sukkos while Beis Hillel's reason is because of the principle (Ma'alin b'kodesh v'ain moridin) that "we go up in holiness but do not go down". (Shabbos 21B)

Here's a famous fundamental dispute about how we light the Chanukah Menorah. In the end we all know that we are in alignment with Beis Hillel and we all light from one candle all the way up to eight on the last night of Chanukah.

The question remains though, "What is the basis of the dispute?" Yes, it's listed that one is following the precedent of the sacrifices of Sukkos which is also eight days and decreases daily. The other is attached to the notion of going up and not down in matters of holiness. However, what is the meaning behind the dispute? Can both be right? You bet!

I once asked a young Rosh HaYeshiva a serious question based on a curious observation. Rashi in Chumash declares, "All beginnings are hard!" If that's so, then how come we see with our eyes at the beginning of the Zman, at the start of a new period of learning, there's a lot of enthusiasm and as the time goes on there may tend to be a slowing of energies?

He gave what I would consider to be a "Kotzker-esque" answer that was almost too sharp. He said, "For many that's not the beginning. That's already the end!" Ouch! How true! Too true!

It could be that the corollary to this story is that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter zt"l once noticed an elderly shoe-maker working late into the night by the light of a small flickering flame. Reb Yisrael approached him and after engaging in conversation eventually registered his criticism.

The old Jew understood that it looked as if work had overtaken his life but he answered back and said, "As long as the candle is burning there's still time to work and repair!" When Reb Yisrael heard these words they went into his heart like an arrow. Here he came to offer a rebuke and he was struck with a powerful aphorism in disguise. He was heard for weeks afterwards pacing in his room crying and repeating the words, "As long as the candle is burning there is still time to work and repair."

There are two ways to look at a candle. One way is to notice how the fuel source is melting away.

The other is to focus intently on the value of the light.

Beis Shamai is a realist's realist. When it comes to excitement about new things, enthusiasm wanes. The first can of soda is refreshing and highly pleasurable but the second and third are increasingly less so. The initial excitement, like the "cows of the festival" represent tend to dim and diminish. That's how material life is experienced.

The ideal of idealism is to be found in the approach of Beis Hillel. Sure the fuel is going down but there is an accumulation of light, of wisdom, of spirituality when the light is the centerpiece. Light seems to fly away and disappear but the Maharal pointed out centuries ago it never ceases. It continues on a ray of eternity. Wisdom is cumulative. As the radiance continually runs off the edge of the candle dispelling darkness at the speed of light, so we will tend to go up in holiness and not go down.

That may be the philosophical basis of the dispute between Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel. Both are true. One is mandatory, though. Together they beg the question: What's going on with these candles and we the people over the course of Chanukah? Is it a bodily or soulful experience? Are we focused on the Bar or the Mitzvah, the latkes or the light? Is this the beginning of something great or a dramatic conclusion? Are we growing or shrinking? Are we **waning or waxing?** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](http://Torah.org).