

CHANUKAH: LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The festival of Chanukah celebrates the victorious battle of the Maccabees against the Hellenists and how a jar of uncontaminated olive oil miraculously burnt for 8 consecutive days in the Temple.

In what is described as a *mitzvah chavivah he ad meod*, "an exceptionally beloved mitzvah" (Rambam, Hilchos Chanukah 4:12), the universal practice to perform the rabbinic commandment to light the Chanukah lights for 8 days is performed *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, in the most glorious manner.

The minimal mitzvah, explains the Talmud, is to kindle 1 light each night per household. A more embellished manner (termed *mehadrin*) is for each member of the household to light 1 candle per night. But the most embellished method (called *mehadrin min hamehadrin*) is to add 1 light per night. According to the accepted view of Beis Hillel, this means lighting 1 candle on the first night, 2 candles on the second, and an additional light every night, culminating in the last night when a total of 8 candles are lit (Shabbos 21b).

Why this mitzvah is so highly regarded to the extent that it is celebrated in the most beautiful manner possible goes to the heart of what Chanukah commemorates.

In the ancient world, the influence of Greek philosophy imposed a new ideology upon human civilization: a homocentric structure. Man's physical body, his physique, his art and culture were adulated. His reasoning and intellect were to be the definer of reality. The cause and effect of the natural, physical world were critiqued according to his rational thinking which defined boundaries.

The Jewish nation agreed the universe "was" about man. Man is not a god; he exists in order to relate to G-d. The world has meaning only insofar as man relates his existence to the transcendental dimension to the service of G-d. G-d is the focus of his attention, not himself.

The laws of the natural world are constant, fixed and unchanging. Not so the spiritual world - where man consistently develops and improves his relationship with G-d.

In the triumph of Torah living over Greek culture, Chanukah affirms the supernatural existence of the Jewish people that shamelessly refuse to be curtailed by the natural. Their lives and reality are uniquely and forever bound with G-d, as defined by Torah and mitzvos.

Hence it is on Chanukah when Israel's affirmation to the system of mitzvah observance is enthusiastically played out. The mitzvah of Chanukah lights - although a rabbinic mitzvah - is

embellished. It is conducted *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, in the most optimal mode.

Furthermore, the practice of Beis Hillel of increasing 1 candle per night in an ascending order, is symbolic of how the Jew strives to enhance and raise his performance of a mitzvah on every subsequent occasion. Never satisfied to replicate a spiritual level he has already reached, he insists on "ascending" to attain new spiritual dimensions, to add onto his past achievements, to never be content with a constant level - which is symptomatic of the natural. - but to supernaturally strive higher and higher. A camera that captures a frozen image in the past is insufficient.

It is this beloved mitzvah that is a reassurance of the Jewish nation's constant mission. It is this light which vanquishes the darkness of our exile. It is the sight of this light that impells us into action - to a renewed vigor in our passionate observance of mitzvos enacted *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. The course material is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of "Set in Stone: The Meaning of Mitzvah Observance" (Targum/Feldheim), a writer and educator in London.