

To Apprehend God

On the Aesthetic Through the Hannuka Candles

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הַנִּירוֹת הַלְלוּ אֲנִי מִדְּלִיקוֹן, עַל הַנְּסִים וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַנִּפְלְאוֹת, שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם
בְּזֶמַן הַזֶּה, עַל יְדֵי כְהֻנְיָהּ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים.
וְכָל שְׂמוֹנֵת יָמֵי הַחֲנֻכָּה, הַנִּירוֹת הַלְלוּ קֹדֶשׁ הוּא, וְאֵין לָנוּ רְשׁוֹת לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בָּהֶן, אֶלָּא לְרְאוֹתָן בְּלֶבֶד,
כְּדֵי לְהוֹדוֹת לְשִׁמְךָ, עַל נְסִיךָ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְעַל יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ.

((No I did not get confused with the date, but as I have said in the past, if they are selling sufganiot in Roladin, surely I can sell you a Hannuka drasha.))

This prayer said following the 2 blessings on the hannuka candles raises some interesting questions that are very telling about the meaning of lighting the candles. First, we note that the paragraph is composed of 2 sentences – the first tells of the symbolic value of the candles as representative of miracles; the second tells of the intrinsic value of the candles as holy. The second sentence also includes the strange directive that prohibits any utility be derived from the candles and then ends by explaining such is demanded “in order that we praise [God’s] name” over the miracles. Why is that?

In an effort to understand all this, we note that the Gemara (Shabbat 21a-21b) teaches the prohibition of benefiting in any way from the light of the candles. On this there is a mahloket rishonim:

- Rashi/Rosh answer: because it may not be noticeable that one lit the candles for the mitzvah.
- Ran/Rashba/BaalHaMaor: because the mitzvah parallels the lighting of the menorah in the mikdash through which the miracle occurred. So just as you can not benefit from the Menorah in the Mikdash, so too with the Menorah of Hannuka.

Rav Brofsky from YHE in his Hilkhos Moadim (p.374) explains that the machloket is over whether the hannukiah is for pirsumei nisa or has intrinsic kedusha.¹ I would like to suggest that there is not really a mahloket here but rather an emphasis on 2 differing aspects of the candle lighting. And, I propose that these aspects are given expression in the two blessings on the candles and the two sentences of the “haneirot Hallalu” prayer following them. Regarding the blessings: the first blessing that says “that we were commanded to light the hannukah candles” corresponds to the intrinsic holiness of the candles, whereas the second blessing that says “that you performed miracles for our forefathers” corresponds to the pirsumei nisa aspect of the candles.

¹ See p373-376 for discussion of all related halachic sources here.

Regarding the “haneirot halallu” prayer, let us first try to understand the prohibition against obtaining any benefit from the candles. The Shulhan Aruch explains that this prohibition commands that one neither count money in the light on the candles nor even read a holy book in their light.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות חנוכה סימן תרעג סעיף א
...אסור להשתמש בנר חנוכה בין בשבת בין בחול, ואפי' לבדוק מעות או למנותן לאורה אסור,
אפי' תשמיש של קדושה, כגון ללמוד לאורה, אסור; ויש מי שמתיר בתשמיש של קדושה; ...

On this the MA explains that there is room to be lenient, the custom is to forbid ALL USE (Similarly the Taz sk3 – see EXTRAS):

מגן אברהם על שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות חנוכה סימן תרעג סעיף א
ב לבדוק מעות. שצריך עיון יפה וידיו סמוכות לנר אבל תשמיש עראי שא"צ להיות ידיו סמוכות לנר שרי [ב"י ד"מ ורש"ל בתשו'] וב"ח פסק להחמיר וכ"כ הסמ"ק וסה"ת דאפי' לאכול אצלו אסור וכ"מ סי' תרס"ח/תרע"ח/ דאם לא כן יקנה נ"ח וידליקנה בביתו ויהיה גם שלום בית אלא ע"כ **כל תשמיש אסור והכי נהוג:**

But the most extreme stricture is that of the Ritva who holds that it is even forbidden to SPEAK with someone!

חידושי הריטב"א מסכת שבת דף כא עמוד ב
אמר רבא וצריך נר אחרת להשתמש לאורה. פי' כדי שלא ישתמש לאור [נר] חנוכה כלל ואפילו לשוח, מדאמרין ואי איכא מדורה לא צריך אלא היכא דהוי אדם חשוב, והא ודאי אפילו מי שאינו חשוב אינו אוכל לאור מדורה ואינו עושה כן אלא העני, אלא ודאי כדאמרן, וכן היה אוסר מורי הרב ז"ל לשום אדם לדבר עם חברו בפתח לאור הנר חנוכה. (א"ה, עי' חידושי המאירי).

So again, what is behind this prohibition of all use of the candles – even speaking!? The answer I propose is to be found in philosophy, or to be more precise, in aesthetics.

Now, on the one hand, aesthetics is often perceived as diametrically opposed to religion for, indeed, R. Soloveitchik explains that it is at the root of sin, both the original sin and every sin that is done on any given day:

“What caused man’s fall is his giving preference to the sensuous, delightful, and pleasing over the true, at both the intellectual and ethical levels.”

“מה שהביא לנפילת האדם הוא ההעדפה שנתן לחושני, למענג ולמשביע הרצון, על פני האמת, הן במישור האינטלקטואלי והן במישור האתי” (עבודה שבלב, עמ' 61).

On the other hand, R. Soloveitchik explains that the aesthetic actually holds great religious potential:

“G-d not only addresses Himself to man through the logos, by emanating wisdom and knowledge to the finite mind; not only through the ethos, revealing to natural man, driven by insensate desires and impulses, a great order of absolute values and ideals—but also through aesthesis—the immediate sensible apprehension of reality which is beautiful and grandiose.”

“Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalted may one apprehend G-d instead of comprehend Him...”

”רק באמצעות מגע עם היפה והנשגב אפשר לתפוס את ה' במקום להבין אותו...”

That is, we can open up a book and learn about God – to COMPREHEND Him, but we can only APPREHEND Him through the aesthetic experience. So there is clearly an important place for the aesthetic in religious experience.

Now, in order to appreciate the value (laarich et erech) in the aesthetic experience we need to understand how Kant taught that one is to appreciate the aesthetic.²

Kant taught that true appreciation of the beautiful is attained through appreciating the intrinsic aesthetic value in the object of one’s attention. That is, a purely aesthetic experience is one in which the object of attention serves no symbolic value (ain lo mesarim) and has no utilitarian value (ain lo shimush). Ideally, the beautiful is to engender a “play of the faculties” (משחק בין היכולות השכליות) in which the imagination (הדמיון) engages with the cognitive/rational faculty (התבונה) in an ongoing attempt to understand and appreciate that which is under one’s gaze. This definition fits most appropriately with abstract art (אומנות מופשטת), where you see a beautiful piece of art, but you don’t really get what you are looking at. This “not getting it” is the faculty of reason failing and thus it turns to the faculty of imagination and says, help me out here; the imagination attempts to find things the piece could be, could mean, and feeds those possibilities to the faculty of reason. The reason rejects them and turns back to the imagination. This ongoing “play of the faculties” is what gives the aesthetic experience its special quality of enjoyment.

Now, I suggest that this process can apply equally as well to the ever changing flame of a candle (יכול באותה מידה לחול על להבת הנר המשתנה ללא הרף).

Indeed, the beauty of the candle has been noted in art.³ And: “the famous scientist Michael Faraday in his celebrated 19th century lectures on “The Chemical History of a Candle” said in an 1860 address to the light: “You have the glittering beauty of gold and silver, and the still higher lustre of jewels, like the ruby and diamond; but none of these rival the brilliancy and beauty of flame. What diamond can shine like flame?””⁴

² <To expand see SEP quotes below in EXTRA; see my discussions on GoldenRatio and in Publications/HalachaEthicsAesthetics/EthicsAesthetics1.doc and related shuirim>

³ See for example:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/dec/28/candlelight-joseph-wright-el-greco> (copied below in EXTRAS)

⁴ <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-candle-flames-millions-tiny-diamonds.html>

Though some have noted that his description of beauty was in its scientific wonder: “Faraday makes an explicit reference to the idea of beauty, by saying that the phenomenon of candle burning is beautiful, not because of its flames (e.g., the prettiness of its colours or its shapes) but because of the fact that it taps all known laws of the universe: not the best-looking, but the best-acting thing. In other words, for Faraday, the aesthetic dimension of science, and specifically the beauty of the phenomenon of candle burning, is identified with his experience of wonder (i.e., his admiration toward the phenomenon of candle burning, which includes the awareness that all known physical laws are involved in this phenomenon)”

”יש לך [להבת הנר] את היופי הנוצץ של זהב וכסף, ואת הברק הגבוה עוד יותר של תכשיטים, כמו
ה אודם והיהלום; אבל אף אחד מאלה אינו מתחרה בזוהר וביופי של להבה. איזה יהלום יכול
לזרוח כמו להבה?

And that brings us back to the Hannukia.

On the one hand, we have the rule that we are not to make any use or benefit from the candles – so we are in Kant’s criteria of an object without use. On the other hand, the hanukkiah is most definitely a symbol – it is the symbol of the Temple Menorah, it is a symbol of the Hasmonaean victory over the Greeks (and the latter’s infatuation with the aesthetic), it is the symbol of the miracles that attended that victory.

So I suggest that there are two layers in appreciating the Hannuka candles. In the first, when we light the candles and say that we are doing so to remember the great miracles and salvation that God did for us – we thus *comprehend* God. But then we are to sit, quietly, focused solely of the flickering flames of the candles. It is here that we can *apprehend* God.

We watch the candles and enter the aesthetic experience that Kant spoke of, allowing the faculties of the mind to play. In so doing we also reach an appreciation for the wonder of creation and the creator. And indeed, it could be said that this is precisely what Michael Faraday had in mind when he described the aesthetic qualities of the flame because he actually is said to have been in awe and wonder at the flame which, according to him, includes all the laws of physics.⁵ So, indeed, through the aesthetic appreciation of the flame we can deepen our appreciation of the Creator.

And if, in the half hour that we are commanded to gaze at the candles, the flames, the light, we reach this apprehension, then we will be truly ready to fulfil the commandment of lighting the candles: “Keday lehodot lishmecha al nisecha val niflotecha val yeshuotecha”!

כְּדֵי לְהוֹדוֹת לְשִׁמְךָ, עַל נְסִיךְ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְעַל יְשׁוּעוֹתֶיךָ.

Hag Urim Samayach.

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323808683_Aesthetics_Art_and_Science_Their_Relationship_and_their_Implications_for_Science_Education).

⁵ see fn 4 above.