Hannuka Lights and Light Amongst the Nations
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And He said, "It is too light for you to be My servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the besieged of Israel, but I will make you a light of nations, so that My salvation shall be until the end of the earth."

The prophet Isaiah encapsulates the mission statement of the Jewish people in the famous words: Ohr Goyim – A light of nations. I recently read a very interesting analysis of this expression by Rabbi Gil Perl in which he points out that Isaiah does NOT say Ohr LE-Goyim – a light UNTO the nations – which is how we normally understand it, but rather Ohr Goyim – a light of nations. The reason that this is so important is because being a light UNTO the nations can imply that we are the light without which there is none. This is, of course, not true as Hazal long ago taught, “If they tell you there is no wisdom amongst the nations don’t believe them” (Eicha Rabba 2:9). So there is wisdom among the nations, there is light among the nations. However, we are to be A LIGHT AMONG the nations – we are to bring our special light – the light of Torah, the light of divine purpose and divine morality.

That is why Hannuka is so important – we make our light known to the world – the light of an involved Creator, the light of the miraculous within the mundane. We call this Pirsumei Nisa – making the miracle known.

Perhaps that is why the RMBM calls this mitzvah of Hannuka candles the most beloved mitzvah (haviva ad me’od) – because it is the expression of our very purpose, our very light in the world. That is, at the core of this very beloved mitzvah lies the raison d’etre of the Jewish people – to be a light among the nations (Ohr Goyim).

Now, as a result of this extreme symbolic value of the Hannuka candles, there are some rather “extreme” halachot regarding the mitzvah of lighting Hannuka candles. The RMBM explains that so critical is this mitzvah that a poor person who has no money for food other than by begging, must sell his clothes to buy candles!

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Interestingly, there is no earlier source for this halachah and so the Magid Mishna explains that the RMBM learns this halachah from a Kal Vehomer (KVH) on the 4 cups which demand that one sell his clothes (kesuto) to buy the wine:

במדבר וסימן תרעא מודע המרשה לחנוכה פסק דحلצה יב

משתתף חנוכה. וכאשר ימכור הריגה בכר חנוכה ויהיו חפצים ובוות הדים

ומימינו רבי יואל ואילו הוא ישלוח פסק פיצול חפציםתחת מחזיקה

שאפילו בני בשומרי אל מחバンド, חסותו, ותפיטה ומשפט (1 פסוקים

וישכון) (2 ב콤 ביתי משכן:

מקדוש היהם, כ 若要ת緩ב ספוגו:

I understand his KVH in that since the 4 cups effects Pirsumei Nisa IN THE HOME, the KVH for Hannuka candles is because Pirsumei Nisa for THE WHOLE WORLD.

Interestingly, while there is no other earlier source for this halachah, both the Tur and Shul”A quote it as halacha lemaaseh.

ועריך אותו חלוץ חנוכה סימן תרעה

וייתכוד האנשים בחנות חנוכה רוחב כל ילדה כימיה חמש וריח כי אם לאו ליהוה מברך

ומאיו יאמר על הממחרים מחרצחה שלוא ואמר מברך כל חלוק שמי חלוקי

כר כמו ובזמן תליה

ишלה פרゅא ערכו אותו חלוץ חנוכה סימן תרעה שיעוף - ערכו ליוו מברך בהלוק

כר חלוק, ואדרים על הממחרים מחרצחה שלוא ואמר מברך כל חלוק שמי חלוקי.

Interestingly, the Tur ends the halachah with the extra encouragement that “the one who is careful in lighting candles will have wise children – talmidei hachamim.

And that brings us to an interesting question on this halachah. The Hashukei Hemed (see source below) asks: What if there is a Talmid Hacham who has only 2 suits, one clean and nice, and one permanently stained. He cannot sell the stained suit because no one will buy it; and if he sells the nice suit, he will have to walk around in stained clothing. This is a BIG problem because the Gem Shabbat 114 says that Talmid Hacham with stained garment is liable to the death penalty [because he represents God and if he walks around with stained clothing it is not only a disgrace to himself (bizyon) but a disgrace of God (Hillul Hashem)]. What is the Talmid Hacham to do?

So, explains that HH, if the community knows that the man is a TH who sold his only good suit for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah of Hannuka lights, then this act becomes a KIDDUSH HASHEM. However, in the usual case when one’s actions are not well known, then the TH is exempt (PATUR) from the mitzvah of Hannuka candles since he is considered to be in a situation of duress (annus) – i.e., has no way of fulfilling the mitzvah.

But why should a stained garment override this “greatly beloved mitzvah” that strictly called for a poor person to sell his clothes to fulfill? The answer, I suggest, is in the very mission statement that brought us to consider Pirsumei Nisa so valuable in the first
May we be zoche to always light our Hannuka candles in clean clothes, and spread the light of the miraculous involved Creator throughout the world, until that day when this light will be spread across the globe, as God said to Isaiah:  

And He said, "It is too light for you to be My servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the besieged of Israel, but I will make you a light of nations, so that My salvation shall be until the end of the earth."

So, from this one special halacha we have learned yet again the great importance or our role as a light among the nations.