

As we prepare to light the third candle of Hanukkah, I would like to share this thought with you.

One of the great rabbinic debates of our tradition takes place between Rabbi Hillel and Shamai and focuses on the proper way to light the hanukkiah. The question is, should we light one candle on the first night and add a candle on each subsequent night so that on the eighth night of Hanukkah we have a fully lit hanukkiah or should we light eight candles on the first night of Hanukkah and light one less candle every night, so that we have one candle burning on the final night of Hanukkah.

We are all aware that Jews around the world follow Rabbi Hillel's position of beginning with one candle and adding another candle each night of Hanukkah. We often quickly dismiss Shamai's position of counting down, but if we pause to consider it for a moment it makes a lot of sense. The miracle of Hanukkah is that the oil lasted for eight days. I could imagine right now that on the day the Temple was rededicated, there was a big flame burning and then as the oil began to dwindle the flame decreased in intensity, until there was a tiny flame that finally went out after eight days. Shamai's position thus takes on historical significance and reflects the miracle of the holiday.

However, the rabbis were very clear. We are to follow Hillel. We must light one candle the first night and add to it each night of Hanukkah. In choosing Hillel's position, the rabbis teach us a very important lesson. Hanukkah is celebrated during the shortest days of the year. It is dark and cold outside and yet it is right now that we are commanded to increase the light.

While the candles provide us with physical light, the flames represent so much more; they become a symbol for improving the world we live in. Throughout our world there is so much darkness. War, disease, poverty, hatred, and racism still ravage so much of our world. Hanukkah is the time for us to work on increasing the light in the world. The brokenness is evident, but just as the increasing light of the hanukkiah gives us hope in the darkest days of the year, Hanukkah is designed to propel us to bring more light and hope to the entire world.

Our rabbis taught us that our Hanukkah candles are meant to increase the light each and every day, and like the candles we too should be increasing the light in the world each and every day. As we light the third candle tonight, we need to ask ourselves how can we increase the light in our world. May we all represent Hillel and the hanukkiah by bring more light into the world tomorrow and every subsequent day, week, and year.

Hag Urim Sameach,

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