

December 22, 2022
Weekly Message, Rabbi Peltz

Shabbat *Hanukkah* – Which candles do I light first?

Every year when Shabbat *Hanukkah* comes around, the same question arises in our house: Which do we light first, *Hanukkah* candles or Shabbat candles? Initially, it might seem that we would certainly light *Hanukkah* candles first, as lighting Shabbat candles signals the beginning of Shabbat, and consequently we would not be allowed to light another fire. On the other hand, there is the halakhic principle of "*mitzvah tadir ve'sheano tadir, tadir kodem*," which means that we do the *mitzvah* we perform most often first. An example of this is putting on our *tallit* before our *tefillin* every morning before prayer. Since we wear a *tallit* more frequently (seven days a week) than *tefillin* (six days a week), we always put on our *tallit* first. We could say the same would apply here. Since we light Shabbat candles every Friday night, and *Hanukkah* candles only eight nights a year, it would follow that when we need to light both on the same night, we would light Shabbat candles first, and then *Hanukkah* candles. So what is a Jew to do?!

Our quest to answer this question begins in 9th century Babylonia with the book *Halakhot Gedolot*, a work that summarizes *halakha* based on discussions from the Talmud. The author poses our exact question, and, for the reason cited above, decides that one should first light the *Hanukkah* candles. Problem solved, right? Not exactly.

According to *Tosafot* (12th century France), as well as three of the major scholars living throughout the 13th century in Spain, the Ramban, the Rashba, and the Rosh, one should definitely light Shabbat candles first. The Rashba and the Rosh agree that the principle of "*mitzvah tadir ve'sheano tadir, tadir kodem*" should apply. But what about the problem of creating a new fire after Shabbat candles have been lit? Both the Rashba and the Rosh reference a teaching from the Talmud (Shabbat 35b) which describes how the shofar was blown six times leading up to Shabbat, so people would know when to start Shabbat. This Friday afternoon our 10-12th grade students in Israel will experience the modern version of this custom when they hear the siren sound in Jerusalem signaling the beginning of Shabbat each week. However, unlike 21st century Jerusalem, it seems in the 2nd century they had more than one warning. In fact, we learn from that teaching that even though there is an argument as to which of the six shofar blasts would signal the time to light candles, people still finished grilling their fish and taking their challah out of the oven after the blasts were finished! As the Rosh writes, from this example in the Talmud, we learn that beginning Shabbat is not dependant on lighting Shabbat candles. Therefore, one would not be breaking Shabbat by lighting *Hanukkah* candles after Shabbat candles.

The next major work to deal with this question is the Tur, written by the Rosh's son, Jacob ben Asher, in 14th century Toledo. He stays out of the argument and simply cites both opinions on the matter. However, the Beit Yosef, a commentary on the Tur by Rabbi Joseph Karo (16th century Tzfat), who would go on to write an abbreviated version of this commentary called the Shulchan Arukh, begins to turn the tide of the argument. After citing opinions from both sides, he decides that it is most preferable to light Shabbat candles first, though one is permitted to first light *Hanukkah* candles. In his Shulchan Arukh, however, Karo cites his preference to light *Hanukkah* candles first. Rabbi Moshe Isserles, who wrote the Ashkenazi commentary to the Shulchan Aruch in 16th Poland, agrees with Karo.

Finally, the Mishna Berurah, a commentary on the Shulhan Arukh written early 20th century Eastern Europe by Yisrael Meir Kagan, takes a middle road. According to the Mishna Berurah, what matters most is our intention. If we light *Hanukkah* candles first, we follow the opinions of the great scholars cited above, but we still have not solved the problem of "*mitzvah tadir ve'sheano tadir, tadir kodem*." Yet, if we choose to light Shabbat candles first, then our intention must be to delay accepting Shabbat upon ourselves until after we have lit the Hanukkah.

So now that we sort of know which candles to light first, what's the point? What does it really matter which set of candles we light first this Friday night? These are often difficult questions to answer in dealing with picayune matters of halakha. For me, the purpose is threefold.

First, these details connect us to our past. It is amazing to me that a simple question of which candles we light first on Shabbat *Hanukkah* sends us off on a journey that begins in 9th century Babylonia, continues through Spain, Tzfat and Eastern Europe, and ends in front of my window in Cherry Hill today.

Secondly, it shows that we care. When I was first in Israel on Ramah Seminar, I remember spending one free Shabbat with a man in Jerusalem who had been one of the paratroopers that liberated the Kotel in the 1967 Six Day War. On Shabbat morning he took us to the Kotel for services, and along the way pointed out details on the buildings and along the streets that I never would have noticed on my own. When I told him I was impressed, he just looked at me and said, "When you really love something, you know every detail of it." If we really love our tradition, we take the time to study and practice it.

Finally, it is the idea of *mahloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven. Some of the greatest Jewish scholars in history differed in opinions, but they respectfully and thoughtfully disagreed with each other over the years. Take, for example, the latest opinion cited on our topic, that of the *Mishna Berurah*. He finds a way to legitimate both sides by presenting the idea of intention, as if to say that what matters most in this instance is not as much who you agree with, but that you know what you are doing, and why you are doing it.

In my house, we light the *Hanukkah* candles first, and then the Shabbat candles. There were a number of years when I stubbornly insisted that we light the Shabbat candles first, thinking that this was the more correct way to go. Eventually I was persuaded by Rachel and the kids that it just doesn't feel right to light the *Hanukkah* candles after the Shabbat candles. That's because of the powerful symbolism of the Shabbat candles. Once they are lit, our rest begins. May we enjoy that rest this Shabbat, along with the joy that comes from the *Hanukkah* candles too.

Hag Urim Sameah,

Rabbi Peltz