

# Women and Chanukah lights

Dina Brawer

Although the Gemara records that the *mitzvah* of Chanukah lights is one of the few time-bound commandments that women are obligated to fulfil, the author explores the opinions of various *acharonim* as to why it does not seem to be the predominant custom among Orthodox Jewish women and girls today in terms of observance.

## Introduction

Women are generally exempt from any *mitzvot aseh she-ha-zman gerama*,<sup>1</sup> positive time-bound commandments. The assumption is that the roles of mothers and wives are to be prioritised. Any commandment that has to be fulfilled at a very specific time or place may therefore pose a conflict to women responsible for the maintenance of the household. This exemption is extended to all women, young and old, whether married or not. However, in the Talmud three positive time-bound commandments are singled out. These are the obligation of Chanukah lights, the 'Four Cups' and Megillah (reading).

Today, it is not uncommon for women (and girls) to perform many *mitzvot* which they are exempt from, such as listening to the blowing of the Shofar, eating in the Succah and reciting the blessing over the 'Four Species'. Bearing this in mind, it is surprising to find that most women do not kindle Chanukah lights, a *mitzvah* which they are obligated to fulfil.

This essay seeks to determine the reason for which the kindling of Chanukah lights is not common practice among women (and girls), who comply with the obligation through their husbands' (and fathers') lighting.

## Women and time-bound *mitzvot*

There are three statements in the Gemara by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, in which he places the obligation of a *mitzvah aseh she-ha-zman gerama* upon women. The first one is regarding Chanukah lights: 'Women are obligated in (the *mitzvah* of kindling) the

Chanukah light, for they too were (involved) in that miracle'.<sup>2</sup> The second statement concerns the drinking of four cups of wine as part of the Passover ritual: 'Women are obligated in (the *mitzvah* of drinking) these 'Four Cups', for they too were (involved) in that miracle'.<sup>3</sup> The third statement relates to the recital of the Purim Megillah: 'Women are obligated in the reading of the Megillah, for they too were (involved) in that miracle'.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately we notice that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi attaches the same justification to his statements. Perhaps he aims to explain the burden of a positive time-bound commandment being placed on a woman, something that is out of the ordinary. The reason given, '*for they too were (involved) in that miracle*' is vague, and the commentaries that examine it understand it in two ways: the women (too) were *saved* by the miracle, alternatively the women *brought about* the miracle.

Rashi on Shabbat 23a explains that the Greeks had decreed that every virgin about to marry had to first submit to the Greek commander. Thus women too were affected by the Greek oppression, and were *liberated* by the miracle of Chanukah. He adds that the miracle was *performed* by a woman. Rashi is presumably referring to the story of Yehudit.<sup>5</sup> Rashi seems to understand '*they too were in the miracle*' as a combination of the women being *saved* by and *causing* the miracle.

In Megillah 4a, Rashi explains that Haman's

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decree targeted women too. Because they were *saved* by the miracle of Purim, they must hear the reading of the Megillah. Here Rashi's only reason is that women were *saved*.

However, when explaining women's presence in the miracle of Passover, Rashi cites: 'In the merit of the righteous women of that generation, our ancestors were redeemed'.<sup>6</sup> Rashi understands the inclusion of women in the *mitzvah* of 'Four Cups' to be due to their role in *effecting* the miracle, and he goes on to say that the same applies to Megillah reading (Queen Esther induced the miracle of Purim), and to Chanukah lights.

It must be pointed out that in Megillah 4a, where Rashi explains 'they too were in the miracle', no mention is made of Esther bringing about the miracle; he only says that they were included in Haman's decree. Further, when explaining the obligation of Chanukah lights, Rashi seems to believe that being *saved* is the primary reason, and he adds the element of Yehudit just as an additional possibility. It is very strange then, that in Pesachim,

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Rashi leaves out his first argument completely, and discusses *inducing* the miracle, and not *being saved* by the miracle as the main reason.

Rashbam explains that women were instrumental in the miracle of Purim, as well as in that of Chanukah and Pesach. Thus the miracle happened through them.<sup>7</sup> Tosafot<sup>8</sup> objects to Rashbam's explanation because the language 'they too were in the miracle' puts the women in a secondary position. If Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi meant that women had a primary role in the miracle, he would have used a different language. Tosafot points out that women were also *saved* from danger in the story of Purim (as well as in that of Chanukah and Pesach), and that is the meaning of '...they too were in the miracle

According to Tosafot,<sup>9</sup> the common thread between Chanukah lights, Megillah and the 'Four Cups' seems to be the element of *salvation* the miracle effected on women.

If this is indeed what defines the women's requirement in these positive time-bound commandments, the same logic would seem applicable to the *mitzvah* of Succah,<sup>10</sup> yet we see that women are exempt from eating in a Succah. Tosafot resolves this seeming contradiction by pointing out that the *mitzvah* of Succah is a positive *biblical*

commandment, whereas the 'Four Cups' are a rabbinical institution. Hence, women are exempt from Succah, but the rabbis included them in the obligation of the 'Four Cups' considering that *they too* were miraculously redeemed (presumably, this same argument can be applied to explain women's obligation in kindling Chanukah lights and reading Megillah).

Having established a woman's requirement in the commandments of Chanukah lights, Megillah and the 'Four Cups', we would expect women to perform all the three *mitzvot* equally. However, while (Orthodox) synagogues are crowded with women during Megillah readings throughout the day of Purim, nowadays many (observant) women and girls do not kindle their own Chanukah lights,<sup>11</sup> but rather find exemption from this obligation through their husbands' and fathers' performance of this *mitzvah*.<sup>12</sup> This seems out of character, particularly since present-day Jewish women routinely perform many positive time-bound commandments, such as eating in a Succah, reciting the blessing on the 'Four Species' and Shofar, which they are exempt from.

In an attempt to determine the reason for which women do not kindle their own Chanukah lights, a careful exam of halakhic sources is required.

### The sources

In the laws of the kindling of Chanukah lights,<sup>13</sup> we find the Shulchan Arukh follows Tosafot's opinion, that no matter how many individuals live in the house, only one Chanukah light is lit on the first night, two on the second and so on.

The Rema cites the opinion of the Rambam, who says that Chanukah lights are kindled for each *ben-bayit*.<sup>14</sup> The Rema seems to understand the Rambam to say that each family member kindles his own set of lights. The Shulchan Arukh<sup>15</sup> states unequivocally that a woman kindles (is fit to kindle) Chanukah lights, since she too is obligated in the *mitzvah*.<sup>16</sup>

From the above, it appears that where the custom is for each *ben-bayit* to kindle his own Chanukah lights, women would do so as well, particularly because of their own requirement to fulfil the *mitzvah*.

However, the Mishnah Berurah, differs in his opinion with regard to women. To the Rema's suggestion of a custom where each person kindles a set of Chanukah lights, he notes that this excludes one's wife because she is *ke-gufô*, one with her husband.<sup>17</sup> Further,<sup>18</sup> he understands the Shulchan

rakh's statement, 'A woman kindles', to mean that she can perform the *mitzvah* and absolve her husband and household from the obligation, rather than she indeed has to perform the kindling herself in order to fulfil her own obligation.<sup>19</sup>

The Be'ur Halakhah, expanding on the above Mishnah Berurah, quotes a talmudic statement, 'A man recites a blessing for his father, and a woman recites a blessing for her husband. But the sages said: Let a curse come upon a man whose wife and sons recite blessings in his stead.'<sup>20</sup> In the Be'ur Halakhah it is therefore specified that the Mishnah Berurah's statement, 'a woman can kindle' (and thus exempt her husband), applies only when her husband is not home.<sup>21</sup>

From all the above, it appears that a woman's obligation in kindling Chanukah lights can be fulfilled through her husband's performance, and in his absence she can perform the *mitzvah* and absolve him of his exemption. In this respect, the *mitzvah* of Chanukah lights is similar to other commandments. However, we must consider the aspect of '*mehadrin*', '*Mehadrin*' denotes observance of the commandments in the best possible way, rather than merely seeking exemption from the obligation.

One of the ways that a *mitzvah* is performed *mehadrin* is when the individual does it himself, rather than fulfilling his obligation through another's action. What remains to be clarified is whether, in order to carry out the *mitzvah* of Chanukah lights to a *mehadrin* standard, a woman would kindle her own set of lights.

The Talmud<sup>22</sup> relates: 'Our sages taught – the obligation of the *mitzvah* of Chanukah is one light (or) a man and his household, and the *mehadrin* kindle a light for each one'.<sup>23</sup> Rashi<sup>24</sup> clarifies that one candle each night suffices for a man and the *b'nei beyto* (lit. sons of his house, i.e. his household) to satisfy the requirement, and the *mehadrin* *mitznot* kindle one light for each of the *b'nei bayit* each night.<sup>25</sup>

The P'ri Megadim<sup>26</sup> understands '*b'nei beyto*' (in *ashi*) to exclude one's wife, hence she does not have to kindle her own lights, to fulfil the *mitzvah* *mehadrin*.<sup>27</sup> Thus, a married woman fulfils the *mitzvah* *mehadrin* through her husband's action, because she is *ke-gufo*, her fulfilment of the *mitzvah* identical to that of her husband.

We have thus clarified why married women do not customarily kindle their own set of Chanukah lights. However the same reasons cannot be applied to unmarried women and girls, and although they

can be exempt from the *mitzvah* through another person's action, in order to fulfil the *mehadrin* requirement they would have to kindle their own lights.

The Hatam Sofer, in his novellae to Tractate Shabbat (21b), addresses the question of women performing the *mitzvah* of Chanukah lights *l'mehadrin*.<sup>28</sup> He explains that since Chanukah lights were originally kindled outdoors, it was considered immodest for women to be outside, among men, in the evening. (Only when there was no man in the home, and the *mitzvah* was incumbent on the woman, she would have no choice but venture out.) Thus women did not light for themselves, but fulfilled their obligation through their husband's performance. This custom was retained even when

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people started lighting indoors.<sup>29</sup> The Hatam Sofer's approach leaves no room for single women's fulfilment of Chanukah lights to a *mehadrin* standard.

Rav YY. Fuchs, in *Halichos Bas Yisroel*,<sup>30</sup> cites an opinion brought by the Mishmeret Shalom: 'Single girls forgo the extra beautification of the *mitzvah* to avoid slighting a parent, since it might appear disrespectful for them to light, when their mothers do not'.<sup>31</sup> According to this opinion, girls are denied the opportunity of performing the *mitzvah* *l'mehadrin*, so that it should not appear as if they are performing a *mitzvah* that their own mothers do not. In reality, their mothers' performance of the *mitzvah* is *l'mehadrin* through their husbands', and the girls would not be outdoing them when kindling their own Chanukah lights.

In *Sefer HaMinhagim Chabad*,<sup>32</sup> the late Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that the above suggestion, that it is improper for girls to kindle their own lights when their mothers do not, is highly improbable. He prefers the Mishmeret Shalom's own observation, that since many women were unable to recite blessings, it became the general

custom for women to fulfil this obligation through others.<sup>33</sup>

The issue of women kindling their own Chanukah lights is widely debated. From the questions addressed in the halakhic literature it appears that, in spite of women's obligation in the *mitzvah*, and the concept of *mehadrin*, it was not common for women to light.

Writing in the seventeenth century, Rav Ephraim HaCohen asks why indeed women do not kindle their own lights. He finds this particularly difficult in light of their obligation in the *mitzvah* and the fact that they can exempt men from the same obligation.<sup>34</sup> He cites the Trumat HaDeshen who states the opinion of the Mehaber (author of

Shulchan Arukh) which indicates that women did not perform the *mitzvah* like the *mehadrin*, and according to Tosafot's opinion, one candle suffices for a man and his household.

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Rav Ephraim HaCohen is not satisfied with the above reasoning and, taking in consideration the Rambam's view and Rav Zeira's statement, he concludes that there is a *hiddur* when a man and his wife light separately.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

In seeking to ascertain the reason for which women and girls do not generally kindle their own Chanukah lights, we have obtained four main arguments.

The first, '*ishto ke-qufo*', applies exclusively to married women. Although according to the P'ri Megadim it means that women do observe the *mitzvah l'mehadrin*, it raises another question: why then, is the concept '*ishto ke-qufo*' not applied to other mitzvot that women perform for themselves?

The second, the pretext of women's modesty, suggested by the Hatam Sofer, applies equally to married and unmarried women. Despite the fact that this reason no longer applies, he believes this to be a *minhag* (custom) that should be preserved.

The third suggestion we explored, cited by the Mishmeret Shalom, resolves the question of girls whose mothers fulfil their obligation through their husbands. It leaves the impression that girls living outside the parental home, as well as those whose mothers perform the *mitzvah* for themselves, can light their own candles.

Last, the Mishmeret Shalom ascribes the lack of (active) women's participation in the *mitzvah* of Chanukah lights to their ignorance. This is rather apologetic, and does not indicate why of all mitzvot this one did not become popular among women.

None of the above motives resolves our initial question satisfactorily. I wonder if in the next generations, with women seeking to integrate more Jewish observance into their daily lives, the kindling of Chanukah lights will become common practice.

### Notes

1. See b. Berachot 20b and Kiddushin 34a.
2. b. Shabbat 23a.
3. b. Pesachim 108a/b.
4. b. Megillah 4a.
5. Daughter of Jochanan the High Priest, Yehudit met the Greek governor's advances by cunningly feeding him cheese, which made him thirsty; she, in turn, offered him wine. The gastronomic combination induced the Greek into a deep slumber, and Yehudit was quick to seize the opportunity and kill him. When the Greek army saw the skull of their leader being marched to Jerusalem, they fled and disbanded.  
The Kaf HaChayim and the Ben Ish Chai cite opinions that the story of Yehudit occurred at a different time, and it is celebrated together with the miracle of Chanukah because it took place under Greek oppression. Cf. Y.Y. Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael* (Jerusalem 1985) pp.175-6, n1.
6. b. Sotah 11b. Cf. Rashi on b. Pesachim 108b.
7. b. Pesachim 108b.
8. b. Megillah 4a d.h. 'Sheaf'.
9. b. Pesachim 108b d.h. 'Hayni'.
10. Women too were protected by the Succot (huts made of clouds) God made for the Israelites in the desert.
11. This is my personal observation. In modern Orthodox circles and among women who are taking a pro-active role in Judaism, kindling Chanukah lights is more widespread, and very often women will light for the entire household (including their husband) or take turns (with their husbands) to light.
12. See *Sefer Hamishulachin - The Book of Chabad-Lubavitch Customs* (Brooklyn 1991) p.157.
13. See Shulchan Arukh O.H. 671:2. Magen Avraham quotes Rashi who talks about people who perform the *mitzvah le-mehadrin* and each light their own Chanukah lights.
14. This would seem to include women as well. The Taz and the Baer Heytev (O.H. 671:2) point out that in this instance, Ashkenazic Jews follow the view of the Rambam and Sephardi Jews follow the opinion of the Tosafot, which is to kindle one set of Chanukah lights per household.

This is a departure from the norm, where the Sephardi customs generally follow the Rambam's ruling and the Ashkenazi, the Tosafot. The Rema observes that in our situation, where every *ben-bayit* kindles his own Chanukah lights, children of the age to be educated should light too. The Be'ur Halakhah O.H. 675:3 points to the Magen Avraim (677:8) who cites the Shiltei Gibborim saying that even where the custom is for each person to light, children are exempt, since the obligation of *hinukh* applies to those mitzvot that every individual has to perform, but in the case of Chanukah lights, this is only a *hiddur*. The Arukh HaShulchan mentions the opinion of 'one of the greats' that disagrees with the Rema's view: This opinion states that when each member of the household kindles his own set of lights, the blessings are recited *l'vatalah* (in vain). According to this anonymous view, the Rambam was misunderstood, as he did not intend for each person to kindle, rather for the *baal ha-bayit*, the head of the house, to light the number of candles equivalent to the people in his house. Moreover, it is pointed out that the Gemara (b. Shabbat 21b) says: '...and the *mehadrin* kindle a light for each one', rather than saying 'each one kindles a light'. This leaves the man of the house with the duty to kindle a light for each of his *b'nei bayit*, and the Rambam illustrates this in his words '...if he has ten children, he kindles ten lights on the first night and twenty on the second, and so on'.

By clarifying the Rambam's opinion, the source cited by the Arukh HaShulchan also clarifies the discord with Tosafot (see note 23 below). If the Rambam held that each person lit their own set, they could place them in separate places, and there would be no confusion as to what day of Chanukah it was. Then Tosafot's objection to Rambam would not hold. If Rambam indeed advocates that only the *baal ha-bayit* lights, but in the number of his *b'nei-bayit* multiplied by the day of Chanukah, as above, then Tosafot's objection is clearly identifiable. Since only one person is lighting, the candles would have to be placed together, and the onlooker would not be able to clearly recognise which day of Chanukah it is. (Cf. Arukh HaShulchan, Hilchot Chanukah, 671:15.)

15 O.H.675:3.

16 Taz 675:4 cites the Agudah: 'if a woman is knowledgeable she may recite the blessings, and thus exempt her husband'.

17 This is what the Olat Shemu'el, the MaHaRshal, and Elah Rabah write. Cf. Shaar Tzion on Mishnah Berurah O.H. 675:3-10. Also see Mahatzit haShekel O.H.675:4 who cites the Sifri on *isho kegufa*. The source for *isho kegufa* is in b. Menachot 93b.

18 In O.H. 675:3-10.

19 If a woman desires to light, she can do so with a blessing,

according to the Mishnah Berurah O.H. 675:3-13.

Chanukah lights would be no different, in this respect, to any of the other positive time-bound commandments.

The P'ri Hadash (675:3) cites the Mordechai (who writes in the name of Tosafot) – A woman kindles and can even discharge others, even though this is not the case with Mikra Megillah – the P'ri Hadash suggests that the difference between Chanukah lights and Megillah is that 'Chanukah lights are *kilali*' (something we are lenient with).

He also points out that some authorities hesitate to rule that a woman may discharge others of their obligation, because the Rambam, in his compendium, omitted the law of 'A woman kindles'. In his opinion, however, there is no doubt that the law is such, since 'everyone who is obligated in Mikra Megillah, is obligated in Chanukah lights'. Thus a person who has an obligation can discharge another of the same command.

20 b. Berachot 20b.

21 This is what R. Zeira refers to when he says: '... after I married my wife I said – now I'm certainly not required (to contribute a few coins toward the purchase of the Chanukah lights), since they are kindling for me in my house' (b. Shabbat 23a).

22 b. Shabbat 21b.

23 Tosafot disagrees with the view that *l'mehadrin* each person should kindle a set of lights, because it would not be clear to the observer which day of Chanukah it is. It may be the first day, but since there are four people in the house lighting each their own, one may think it is day number four. Cf. Arukh HaShulchan Hilchot Chanukah, 671:3.

Seemingly Tosafot's interpretation of what would be *mehadrin min ha'mehadrin* is to light one set per household, and add one light on each night, following the view of Beit Hillel.

24 b. Shabbat 21b.

25 The *mehadrin min ha'mehadrin* would light in descending order starting from eight according to Beit Shammai and in ascending order according to the view of Beit Hillel (this is the view we follow today). b. Shabbat 21b.

26 Cf. Mishbetzot Zahav (O.H. 671:1).

27 Or else she is not included in what is written about those who perform mitzvot *l'mehadrin*.

28 It is interesting that the question posed was 'why women do not follow the custom of *mehadrin*?' which indicates that no women lit Chanukah candles.

29 Cf. Getzel Ellinson, *Serving the Creator* vol. 3 (Israel 1986) p.68. Rav Yosef Hayim Sonnenfeld says that a girl who has reached the age of twelve and a half and wishes to light her own candles rather than fulfil her obligation through her father may do so. But because this is an outdoor *mitzvah*, it is preferable that she does not, in order to retain her modesty. He understands this to be the underlying motive

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- in the lack of participation of women in the *kiddush levanah* (sanctification of the moon) and *kiddush ha'hamah* (sanctification of the sun). *She'elat u'Teshuvot She'emat Hayyim* (B'nei Brak 1982) O.H. 259, p.101.
- 30 *Halichos bes Yisroel*, vol. 2, p.177, n3.
- 31 Rav Fuchs says that according to this view, a girl whose mother is a widow or divorcee, and therefore lights her own Chanukah lights, should do so too.
- 32 Uri Kaplun (trans.), *Sefer HaMinhagim – The Book of Chabad-Lubavich Customs* (Brooklyn 1991) p.157, n623.
- 33 Women's ignorance is often cited to justify their exclusion from certain rituals. However, I don't understand it entirely. If women were unable to recite blessings, does that mean that they relied on men to recite all other blessings on their behalf? I find it quite improbable that women were able to recite the blessings for Shabbat candles and *mikveh* immersion, but the blessing for Chanukah lights (which are not much different, just vary in the last few words) were beyond their abilities.
- 34 This is relevant because, in *halakha*, only a person who has a specific obligation can absolve with his/her action another of the same ones.
- 35 See *She'elat u'Teshuvot Shaar Ephraim* (Zultzbach 1688) siman 42. He does not mention *isho ke-yefe*, therefore we could conclude that the same *hiddur* would be found in girls lighting their own menorah.