

shema bekolah · hear her voice  
שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

**The Beauty of *Hiddur*  
*Mitzvah***

by Rosh Kehilah Dina Najman

Deborah Wenger, Editor

*In honor of our RKDN who inspires us to keep working to create an Orthodox world  
in which all of us, men and women, boys and girls, will be able to live fulfilling and  
meaningful religious lives.*

*- the Board of the Kehilah of Riverdale*

# The Beauty of *Hiddur Mitzvah*

Rosh Kehilah Dina Najman<sup>1</sup>

The *Gemara* in Shabbat 21b is the only place where our Sages choose to speak in depth about Hanukkah. In this section, the Rabbis teach about the lighting of the Hanukkah menorah and discuss its connection to the miracle of Hanukkah. Regarding the obligation to light candles for Hanukkah, the *Gemara* states:

תנו רבנן: מצות חנוכה נר איש וביתו

The rabbis taught: the mitzvah of Hanukkah is a candle for a person and his or her household.

In an uncharacteristic fashion, the *Gemara* then describes two additional levels of performing this mitzvah. Each additional level is a *hiddur*, beautification, above and beyond the minimum requirement of one flame per household. The level of *mehadrin* adds one flame per member of the household, and by adding flames for each day we achieve the ultimate level of *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*, two greater levels of performing the mitzvah. This custom of *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* has become the standard practice. To be clear, on Hanukkah, to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting the Hanukkah candles, one fulfills his or her obligation by participating in lighting of one flame per household.

The *Gemara* then asks, “*Mai Hanukkah?*” What is Hanukkah? In a very brief statement, the *Gemara* explains that Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday. After the Greeks defiled the Temple oil and the Hasmoneans were victorious they checked and only found one vessel that still had the seal of the high priest. The *Gemara* continues that there was only enough for one day and there was a

miracle which allowed them to light the menorah for eight days.

Finding the last small jug of the purest olive oil, the *shemen zait zach*, was certainly a miracle and even more so that this small jug lasted for eight complete days. However, the question can be asked, “Why did the Hasmoneans even bother to look for this jug of untouched oil?” They had cleaned out the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple, and removed the idols. They were ready to rededicate it and needed to light the menorah and its eternal flame, the *neir tamid*. The Hasmoneans could have relied upon the halakhic principle that impurity is permitted for the community “*tumah hutra b’tzibbur*.” When the majority of the community has the status of *tameh*, ritual impurity, *tumah hutra b’tzibbur* permits communal offerings which are *tameh* to be brought by people who are *tameh*. This principle allows for offering the *Korban Pesach*, Pascal Offering, by those that are impure if the majority of Israel is *tameh* even when there is the possibility to offer it a month later on *Pesach Sheini*. Similarly, it would have allowed the Hasmoneans to light the menorah with impure oil in that time immediately following the war. Most of those who fought in the war were not *tabor* due to *tumat meit*, ritual impurity acquired from contact with the dead. Therefore, certainly, most of Israel was surely ritually impure. In this situation, they were not obligated to light the menorah using pure untouched oil. They could have relied upon the principle *tumah hutra b’tzibbur*. However, the Hasmoneans chose to seek out the *shemen zayit zach* which still bore the seal of the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, and then to light it, knowing that they did not have enough to last for more than one day. This choice represents a fundamental aspect of the struggle and subsequent victory of Hanukkah. At this moment of triumph over the spiritual oppression of the Greeks and threat of assimilation, the Hasmoneans intended to accentuate the spiritual distinctions of sacred and profane, pure and impure against the Hellenist culture which denied these concepts. They would

<sup>1</sup> Rosh Kehilah Dina Najman is the Marta d’Atra, spiritual and halakhic leader of The Kehilah in Riverdale, NY. She is also the head of the Gemara department at SAR Academy where she has been educating students for over twelve years.

perform the commandment of the lighting of the menorah in its pristine form, with only the purest of oils.

This choice was also an act of *hiddur mitzvah*, the beautification of the mitzvah. Rashi offers a unique explanation of this concept of *hiddur*. In his commentary on the *Gemara* in *Sukkah*, Rashi explains that the commandment to take *pri etz hadar*, a beautiful fruit, the *etrog*, requires *hiddur mitzvah*. He directs us to the verse from the Song of the Sea, “*Ze Keili v’anveihu*.” This is my God and I will glorify God. Rashi on that verse offers two explanations. First he cites Onkelus who translates *v’anveihu* as “I will build God a sanctuary.” Rashi then offers a second understanding and says that *v’anveihu* means that, “I will declare God’s beauty and praise to everyone.” According to Rashi, performance of *hiddur mitzvah* means that the mitzvah is done in a way which establishes a closer connection with the *Shechinah*, with God’s Divine Presence and which glorifies and exalts God.

Striving to rededicate the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple, and light the menorah in the prescribed manner, rather than rely on a leniency was a form of *hiddur mitzvah*. Certainly, according to Rashi, it was a way to exalt the God who had saved them from oppression and a means to reaffirm their relationship through the Temple service.

On a deeper level, the *hiddur mitzvah* of using the pure *shemen zayit zach* was a statement of the values of Judaism in contrast to those of Hellenism. Rav Joshua Shmidman *zt”l*, who taught Talmud at McGill University, suggested that the *Gemara*, when speaking of the *etrog* gives us some insight into the Jewish concept of “beauty.” The *hadar* quality of the *etrog*, its “beautiful” nature and essence, lay specifically in its constancy, in its endurance, in this property of *ha-dar be-ilano mi-shana le-shana*, the beauty (the fruit) endures from year to year. Rav Shmidman explains that in Jewish thought, beauty “means the indomitable power of life, the determination to live on despite

all difficulties, the affirmation of the victory of life over death, the drive for eternity.” An object that can live continuously and endure under even the harshest of circumstances is “beautiful” in the Jewish sense of the term.

Similarly we can understand another mitzvah in the Torah using the same *shoresh*, the same root of *hadar*, concerning the obligation to honor the elderly. In *Vayikra*, in Parshat *Kedoshim*, the Torah commands: *V’hadarta p’nei zakein*. This verse is usually translated, “honor the face of the old person.” But, the word *hadar* literally means beauty. The verse requires us to ascribe beauty to the old face. This notion contradicts a basic attitude of Western civilization. Since ancient Greek culture, beauty has always been associated with youth. The Torah ascribes *hadar* to the old face because, says Rav Shmidman, “it expresses the ongoing triumph of a life which endured and persisted throughout the arduous passage of time.” In an old face, we observe determination, courage and the will to live.

In Aramaic, the root *hay, daled, raysh* means to return. When a student completes a tractate of Talmud he or she declares, “*hadran alakh*.” We will return to you. There is a conceptual connection to this Aramaic use of *hadar* the Hebrew word *hadar*. The “beauty” of *hadar* describes that which is not lost, and which endures forever. When we conclude a tractate of the Talmud we proclaim that we will continue to go back and review that which we have just concluded. We also “beautify” our learning by ensuring the eternal continuation of Torah. Unlike the Greeks, and I may add contemporary culture, beauty is judged in terms of instantaneous but fleeting appeal. Judaism teaches that beauty lies in that which can endure and is everlasting.

Our desire to light the candles with of *hiddur mitzvah*, in the best possible manner, parallels the Hasmoneans’ lighting of the oil that led to the miracle. Implicit in this *hiddur* is our desire to extract the most meaning from the mitzvah and

to praise God through our actions. *Mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* is our statement of the beauty of our survival, the continuity of our tradition, our praise to God and our attempt to establish a place for *Shechinat Hashem*.

Chag Urim Sameach.



520 Eighth Avenue, Fourth Floor • New York, NY 10018  
212-679-8500 • [www.jofa.org](http://www.jofa.org)

JOFA's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

---

# BORROW A SEFER TORAH FOR YOUR NEXT SIMCHA OR TEFILLAH!

BAR/BAT MITZVAH | SHABBAT KALLAH | AUFRUF | PARTNERSHIP MINYAN |  
WOMEN'S TEFILLAH | SIMCHAT BAT | BRIT MILAH | ROSH CHODESH | AND MORE!

JOFA's Joan S. Meyers Memorial Torah Lending Program bolsters the activities of girls and women seeking ritual inclusion in Jewish life. The Sefer Torah is available to borrow for smachot, lifecycle celebrations, and special events in the New York metropolitan area. Visit [jofa.org/TLP](http://jofa.org/TLP) for information about how to borrow the Torah.

*"We at Minyan Tiferet are very grateful to Jofa for lending us a sefer torah for our partnership minyan on the second day of Sukkot. The turnout was so great that it became necessary for us to move the davening outside to accommodate all the participants. It would not have been possible without your generosity."*

Mark Schwartz  
Sarah Adler  
Co-Chairs of Minyan Tiferet

*"It has meant so much to me and the other women in our group to be able to have a Sefer Torah to lain from and have contact with several times each year. I feel like a more complete Jew."*

Jennifer Seligman, Fair Lawn