

Hanukkah and Peace



Judaism is not just a philosophy, but a practical way of life. Consequently, the sages frequently provided practical laws to offer guidance in our daily lives. At times, they established priorities and preferences when faced with dilemmas involving conflicting commandments or values. Decisions such as "preserving life overrides Shabbat" (Yoma 85a) reveal a complex, vibrant, and ethical world of Jewish values. In this unit, we will explore a noteworthy halachic dilemma: Shabbat candles or Hanukkah candles—which takes precedence and why. Here, too, we will discover a world and its entirety and expose the centrality of peace in Judaism. In our ethical journey, we will intricately examine the significance of Shabbat, the essence of peace, and uncover an additional dimension of the Hanukkah celebration. Throughout this unit, it may be necessary to revisit and recall previously studied sources and concepts, a characteristic feature of our spiral study program .

Our initial encounter is with a source that concludes the paragraphs discussing the laws of Hanukkah as outlined by Maimonides:



(12)"The obligation of lighting Hanukkah candles is significant and requires careful attention.. Its purpose extends beyond the mere act of kindling; it serves to publicize the miraculous events and express gratitude to the Almighty for His wondrous deeds. Even in times of financial hardship, when one relies on charity for sustenance, the obligation stands firm. In such circumstances, individuals are encouraged to go to great lengths, whether by seeking assistance or selling personal belongings, to acquire oil and candles for kindling . . . (14) Where a choice must be made between a candle for the household and a Hanukkah candle, or between a household candle and the Kiddush of the day, precedence is given to the candle for the household. This prioritization is grounded in the value of 'shalom bayit' (domestic harmony), recognizing the immense importance of domestic harmony. Such peace holds profound significance, aligning with the overarching principle that the entire Torah was bestowed to promote peace in the world, as articulated in the verse, 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace' (Proverbs 3:17) "

(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Hanukkah, Chapter 4, Halacha 12-14)

With these words, Maimonides concludes the laws of Hanukkah.



We want to focus on three questions about these two paragraphs:

1. How is the concept of peace related to the laws of Hanukkah? If there is indeed a connection, why did Maimonides choose the laws of Hanukkah to explain the importance of the theme of peace in all of Judaism?
2. It is understandable that commandments between people aim to bring peace among individuals, but how are commandments between a person and the Divine related to the theme of peace?
3. In Halacha 12, Maimonides mentions the importance of the mitzvah of lighting Hanukkah candles due to publicizing the miracle. So, if they are so crucial, why are Shabbat candles more important?

We will strive to answer these questions.

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To understand this matter, we need to read the opening paragraphs of the laws of Hanukkah:



"In the Second Temple, when the kings of Greece issued decrees against Israel and nullified their religion, and did not allow them to engage in Torah and mitzvot and seized their property and their daughters, and entered the Temple, perpetrated wanton acts within it, and made it impure, and caused great distress to Israel, until the God of our fathers had mercy on them and delivered them from their hands, and the Hasmonean priests overcame them, and slew them, and delivered Israel from their hands" . . .

(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Hanukkah, Chapter 3, Halacha 1)

The laws of Hanukkah begin with war. Therefore, Maimonides sought to conclude his words with peace, in the context of Judaism. It is essential to show that peace is above all, and that the Torah does not encourage war. And if we are already dealing with peace, Maimonides wanted to take the opportunity to highlight the centrality of peace in Judaism.