



The Miracle of Home

Carried into the Street

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One of the differences between the Hanukkah candles and the other significant candles in our religious practice, the Shabbat candles, is their location. While Shabbat candles are lit inside the house, in the private domain (or, the technical term: *reshut ha-yahid*), the Hanukkah lamps are ideally lit in the doorway that connects to the public domain (*reshut ha-rabim*).¹ But what is the significance of this difference? What is the meaning of the liminal space of the doorway? And what spiritual message does the invitation to illuminate it contain?

The Shabbat candles are meant to bring us joy (*oneg Shabbat*).² They do that by illuminating the space in which we dwell—our home.³ In general, Shabbat is very much about the home. The Torah (Exodus 17:29) commands, “Let no one go out from his place on the seventh day,” and the prohibition of carrying between domains carries out this idea of protecting the sanctity of the home space. Shabbat calls us inward, focusing our spiritual energies domestically. The candles twinkling at home are part of this. When the sage Rava explains why a poor person must prioritize Shabbat candles over Hanukkah ones, he explains it is

¹ Talmud Bavli Shabbat 23b; Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim 671:5.

² Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat 5:1; Shulhan Arukh OH 263:1.

³ Shulhan Arukh OH 263:2: “Both men and women must have in their **houses** an ignited lamp on the Sabbath.”



because Shabbat candles bring *shalom bayit* (peace at home).⁴ Their light brings harmony within the household.

Although we normally think of the Temple *menorah* as the model for the Hanukkah lamps, in fact in placement it is the Shabbat candles that match this historical model more closely. The Temple *menorah*, too, was lit within the Sanctuary itself, not at the gate or in the courtyard. Indeed, the very idea of the Temple expresses the belief that God's Presence requires boundaries: holiness contained in a particular, delimited space.

But Hanukkah lamps are totally different. In contrast to the Shabbat candles, Hanukkah challenges us to bring our inner light outward, to let the warmth of home press back the darkness of the street. Perhaps, just as the Shabbat lamp brings peace within the household, the Hanukkah lamp can bring peace to the street, making it beautiful, bright, and even intimate.

The Imrei Emet⁵ expresses this idea beautifully and connects it to the historical struggle of Hanukkah:

איתא (מעוז צור) ופרצו חומות מגדלי שהיונים רצו לעשות מרשות היחיד רשות הרבים וממילא היום הוא להיפך שיכולין לעשות מרשות הרבים רשות היחיד וזה הרמז במה שהמצוה היא על פתח ביתו מבחוץ.

It says in Ma'oz Tzur: "They breached the walls of my towers"—the Greeks sought to turn *reshut ha-yahid* into *reshut ha-rabim*. Therefore, today we do the reverse: we can

⁴ Talmud Bavli Shabbat 23b. Rashi's reading, "The light prevents stumbling," suggests a minimal and technical understanding, but many have understood it as promoting or symbolizing happiness and love between the members of the household. See for example Rosh Shabbat 2:21; Peninei Halakhah Shabbat 4:1.

⁵ R. Avraham Mordekhai Alter of Gur (Poland, 1866-1948), known after the name of his book, and son of the better known Sefat Emet. The following quotation is part of his teaching for the second night of Hanukkah.



transform *reshut ha-rabim* into *reshut ha-yahid*, and this is hinted at in the *mitzvah* to light the lamp at the entrance of one's house, outside.

The Imrei Emet observes that the Greeks' assault on Jewish life was, in its core, an attack on the private sphere,⁶ an attempt to erase particularism and the intimacy it brings. The Jewish response, he teaches, is not merely to rebuild walls and retreat inward, but to attempt something far bolder: to turn the *reshut ha-rabim* into a *reshut ha-yahid*—to make the impersonal personal, the cold warm, the dark illuminated. Hanukkah is the moment when this seemingly impossible transformation becomes possible, creating a world without walls that still retains the warmth of home. The prohibition of Shabbat becomes a *mitzvah* on Hanukkah.⁷ The Hanukkah candles banish the darkness not by quarrelling with an enemy, but by bringing the peace of the home to the world beyond its doors.

In a world like the one the Imrei Emet describes, genuine encounters between peoples and faiths can occur, moments when each of us brings our own domestic light into the shared public square, and together we make the street glow.

So, the light remains anchored in the home. But for eight days a year, we are invited to step into the threshold and share that light with the world. The doorway, still tied to the home yet opening to the street, is the perfect space for this act.

Although the *menorah* in the temple stood **within** the Sanctuary, it also stood right **outside** the Holy of Holies. A *midrash* about the *menorah* (found in the Talmud's discussion of Hanukkah) suggests that the meaning of its light is in its shining outward:

⁶ One can assume he is referring to the physical desecration of the Temple and the decrees aiming to erode Jewish distinctiveness by targeting core elements of Jewish identity (Shabbat observance, *kashrut*, *brit milah*).

⁷ "It is a *mitzvah* to place it at the entrance of one's home" (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 23b).



תלמוד בבלי שבת כב:

מחוץ לפרוכת העדת יערך, וכי לאורה הוא צריך והלא כל ארבעים שנה שהלכו בני ישראל במדבר לא הלכו אלא לאורו; אלא עדות היא לבאי עולם שהשכינה שורה בישראל.

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 22b

Does God need its [the *menorah*'s] light? For forty years in the wilderness, Israel walked by God's light! Rather, [it] testifies to the world that the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) dwells among Israel.

The light of the *menorah*, like the light of the Hanukkah candles, becomes an external expression of what transpires within. The Talmud explains that this testimony appeared through a miracle:

מאי עדות? אמר רב: זו נר מערבי, שנותן בה שמן כמדת חברותיה, וממנה היה מדליק ובה היה מסיים.

What was the testimony? The western lamp, filled like the others, yet from it they would light, and in it the lighting would end.

The resemblance to the Hanukkah miracle is striking, and obviously intentional.⁸ Here, however, the miracle of oil lasting longer than it should is not what is being publicized. Rather, it is used to publicize a different truth: that the Shekhinah rests among us.

Rashi understands the requirement to light the Hanukkah lamps in the doorway to be because of *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle. In light of the *midrash*, and in the spirit of the Imrei Emet, we can reread *pirsumei nisa*. The miracle of the Hanukkah stories are not ends in themselves, but means of revealing the true miracle: the miracle of home—of

⁸ On the connection between the stories see Vered Noam, "The Miracle of the Cruse of Oil: The Metamorphosis of a Legend," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 73 (2002), and my colleague R. Micha'el Rosenfeld's essay, "The True Story of Hanukkah," available at <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/true-story-hanukkah>.



intimacy, presence, and peace within the household—and the hope of its moving outward into the wider world.