

Hanukkah Mailing

A woman goes to the post office to buy stamps for her *Hanukkah* cards. She says to the clerk, "May I have 50 *Hanukkah* stamps?"

The clerk says, "What denomination?"

The woman says, "Oh my. Has it come to this? Okay, then give me 6 Orthodox, 32 Conservative, and 12 Reform."

This joke has nothing to do with the Dvar Torah but I couldn't resist it. Have a great Hanukkah!

Tonight we begin the celebration of *Hanukkah*. Of all the customs for this holiday, the most well know and observed one is lighting the candles in our *Hanukkiah*, the menorah made specifically for *Hanukkah*. Tonight we place one candle on the right hand side of the *hanukkiah* and light it with our *shamas*. Tomorrow we place two candles again from the right hand side and light the one on the left first. We increase the number of candles as we celebrate the *Maccabees* victory over the Syrian Greeks more than two millennia ago. But this is the most basic information about *Hanukkah* so why am I telling you this?

Because 2000 years ago this was not the only way our *Hanukkah* candles were lit. Some people placed eight candles in the *hanukkiah* on the first night and decreased the number of candles each night until there was only one left on the eighth night.

During this time when our Sages created the laws we are still following, it was very common for there to be more than one opinion about how to perform Jewish law. Each Jew followed the teachings of his rabbi. And at one point there were two very famous and well-respected rabbis, *Hillel* and *Shammai* who always had two very different ways of doing things. In general *Shammai* was more strict and *Hillel* was more lenient. Even though official Jewish law then as well as now follows the rulings of *Hillel*, the rulings of *Shammai* were still considered equally valid Jewish law for his disciples. It was said that both made their decisions for the sake of Heaven, for holiness; they were not disagreeing to be disagreeable but because each had a holy reason for his decision.

We are so used to assuming that we increase the number of candles each night to offset the darkness around us. The increased light of the candles will help to increase the light of our spirit. But that was not the reason *Hillel* made his ruling.

In the *Talmud* in *Tractate Shabbat* we learn that both *Hillel* and *Shammai* based their decisions on how they saw the defeat of the Greeks. *Hillel* understood that defeating the Greeks represented the restoration of the Jewish worship in the Temple. The Greeks had desecrated the Temple during the war and the Jews had been forbidden to worship there. But with the victory of the *Maccabees*, the Jews were allowed once again to worship at the Temple. Adding another candle each night was equal to increasing the access of Jews to worship as Jews whenever they wanted to.

On the other hand *Shammai* saw the candle lighting as decreasing the power of the Greeks and Greek culture in the lives of the Jews. *Shammai* understood that not only had the *Maccabees* been fighting the Greeks, they had also been fighting the Hellenized Jews who had incorporated Greek culture into their lives. *Shammai*

thought that if Jews lit the candles in descending order, they would have a constant reminder to not take too much of another culture into their lives.

It's possible that Hillel's ruling is still followed so that we will put our attention in a positive way on increasing all things Jewish in our lives. It's also possible that his ruling actually reflects the need for more light at this time of year.

We don't really know. But we do know that today we still have the same set of issues to deal with that both Hillel and Shammai were facing. We have to carefully screen out the cultural forces that take Judaism out of our lives. At the same time we have to focus our attention on bringing as much Jewish practice as we can into our lives and the lives of our children. As we light our candles this year, let us think about both of those things.

Shabbat Shalom and Hanukkah Sameah.