

Dvar Torah for Chanukkah, *Ma Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

Sometimes, as a friend says, we deserve a standing ovation for just showing up. The truth is, even those of us who seem most passionate about our Jewish lives are not always “fired up” for every *mitzvah* or every religious occasion. Sometimes, the best we can do is just show up. Fortunately, our tradition recognizes this ebb and flow of human motivation.

In the midst of a discussion about Chanukkah, the rabbis in the Talmud (Bavli 22b) ask an essential question about the *mitzvah* of the Chanukkah candles. What exactly is the *mitzvah* of Chanukkah? “*Hadlakah osah mitzvah?*” Is the *mitzvah* of Chanukkah to actually light the candles, or “*hanacha osah mitzvah,*” is placing the Chanukkiah sufficient to fulfil the *mitzvah*?

The Talmud—and ultimately, Jewish law-- chooses *hadlakah* (lighting) as the *mitzvah*. In order to fulfil the *mitzvah* of Chanukkah, one must actually light the candles, as the blessing we say teaches us: “*lehadlik ner shel Chanukkah.*”

The beauty of Talmudic discussions, of course, is that even the defeated position takes on significance, and the question itself, about the essential *mitzvah* of Chanukkah-- becomes the centerpiece of a Chassidic teaching. For Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, the 18th century Kedushat Levi, both *hadlakah* (lighting the candles) as well as *hanacha* (placing the Chanukkiah) have their spiritual importance. The focus on *lighting* the candles reminds us that religious actions must be done with *hitlahavut*, enthusiasm, a kind of fiery passion and excitement, but placing the Chanukkiah (*hanacha*) also has its role in religious life.

Sometimes, suggests the Kedushat Levi, all we can manage is simply to place the Chanukkiah. Not every moment is fiery! Hopefully, we have many moments where we are kindled with excitement for Jewish life, where we have a strong desire to do the *mitzvot* with passion. But we also have times when we may feel a sense that the internal flame is not lit, where we may not be able to find the internal combustion that is required for the enthusiasm, the *hitlahavut*, of the lit candles. By recognizing the importance of *hanacha*, the Kedushat Levi acknowledges that in these moments, we can still do a religious act. Yes, the *mitzvah* is the lighting of the candles, but placing the Menorah in the window counts, too; showing up is halfway there.

The Chassidic text recognizes the reality of religious life. No matter how we may feel, we can access Chanukkah’s meaning and power, even outside of the *mitzvah* itself. In the *hanacha*, in setting up our Chanukkiah, we express faith in the potential for the candles to awaken the light within us. Our passion will come again; it will be rekindled. May the lights of Chanukkah (and this well-needed vacation!) help to fire up that inner flame for each of us. Chanukkah Sameach!