

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted December 6, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

Visit [Talmud: the Musical](#) or download a song! 

[Song 1 \(2409kb\)](#) [Song 2 \(4222kb\)](#)

(If you have trouble playing it as streaming audio, "right click" to download the entire file and then open it.)

Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

BH

LIGHT = PRIDE AND COURAGE OF HANNUKKAH©

The laws and stories about Hannukkah are really their own small tractate lodged in the major tractate of Shabbat. By relating the laws of Hannukkah to those about Shabbat, the gemara focuses on Hannukkah's spiritual nature. The lights of Hannukkah celebrate God's miracle, not an army's. By putting this material about Hannukkah with the mishnah that outlines how one may light candles for Shabbat, they are also linking the lights of Hannukkah with those of Shabbat. In other words, all light stems from the One who first spoke and light came into being. This is a decidedly spiritual approach to the holiday of Hannukkah.

Our sages taught [in a baraita]: The mitzvah of Hannukkah [requires only] one lamp for a man and his household. The zealous may [kindle] a lamp for each and every one [in the household]. [Concerning] the zealous among the zealous, Beit Shammai say: [On] the first day one lights eight [lamps] and from then on he continually minimizes [the number of lamps]. And Beit Hillel say: [On] the first day one lights one light and from there on adds [a light per day]....Two elders were on Tsidan [a coastal town]. One did according to Beit Shammai and the other did according to the ruling of Beit Hillel. (B. Shabbat 21b)

Note how, in this passage, sages are free to choose which leader they want to follow. There has always been diversity in Jewish practice!

The sugya metaphorically extends the idea of light to the concept of knowledge. As oil lights are continually lit for Hannukkah (and Shabbat and other holidays) so the light of knowledge can be kindled from generation to generation.

Said Rava: One who loves rabbis, his sons shall be rabbis. The one who honors the rabbis will have rabbis for sons-in-law. But if he is not fit for this [people will still] listen to his words as is he were a rabbi. And he who is in awe of the rabbis will himself become a student of a sage. (B. Shabbat 23b)

Clearly, having a son or a son-in-law as a rabbi is considered a prestigious thing. Today, of course, we would add that one's daughters and daughters-in-law might be rabbis. What's interesting here is that the Gemara acknowledges that

some people don't make such great rabbis but that people still listen to them.

Discussion Questions:

1. Marilyn Vos Savant writes that fire is a potent, and universal, symbol: "I believe we developed an awe of fire back when our only source was lightning, after which we would occasionally witness the great beauty and destructive power of flames. When our ancestors learned to control fire (from .5 million to 1.5 million years ago), we took an essential step on the road to civilization. However, not until around 700 B.C. (sic) did we develop dependable techniques for creating fire ourselves. Before that, we relied mainly on keeping an existing flame alive....[rituals work] by evoking the ancient spirit of the flame: precious and eternal. (Parade Magazine, October 28, 2001, page 7)." What do the lights of Hannukkah represent to you? How about the lights of Shabbat? What marks the difference?
2. Did you know that halakhically speaking you really only have to light one candle each night of Hannukkah? People often feel confused about how to correctly light the menorah (you put the candles in from the right and light from the left) but this is all behavior above and beyond the call of duty. Does this passage of Talmud change your ideas on this matter of how many candles to light and in what manner? Why or why not?
3. There has been an explosion, in recent years, of creativity in Jewish arts and there are many more kinds of menorahs available for purchase than there used to be. Given that Hannukkah is really a minor holiday, how much of this creativity do you think is driven by the "December dilemma"?

Happy Hannukkah!