



Rabbi David Silverberg  
Chanuka 2008

Toward the end of the section in *Mishneh Torah* dealing with the laws of Chanukah, Maimonides writes:

The *mitzva* of the Chanukah candle is an especially dear *mitzva*, and a person must exercise care with regard to it in order to make the miracle known and add praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty for the miracles He performed for us. Even if one has nothing to eat except from charity, he borrows or sells his garment and purchases oil and candles and lights. (Hilkhos Chanukah 4:12)

Maimonides rules that a poor person supported by charity must nevertheless do what he can to fulfill the *mitzva* of the Chanukah lights, even if this entails selling his possessions or begging.

This unique provision does not apply to most other *mitzvot*, and has no explicit source in the Talmud. The *Maggid Mishneh* commentary suggests that Maimonides inferred this ruling from the Mishna in Masekhet Pesachim (99b) which includes even the most destitute members of the nation in the obligation of *arba kosot* – drinking four cups of wine on Pesach night. Maimonides codifies that *halakha* in his presentation of the laws of Pesach (Hilkhos Chametz U-matza 7:7). Apparently, the *Maggid Mishneh* surmises, Maimonides understood that provision as extending beyond the narrow context of *arba kosot*, and applying to all *mitzvot* observed for the purpose of *pirsumei nisa* – publicizing a miracle. In Maimonides' view, anytime the Sages instituted an obligatory act intended to give public recognition to a miracle that God performed for the Jewish people – such as the Exodus and the Chanukah miracle – they imposed it unconditionally upon all members of the nation. Not even the poorest Jews can excuse themselves from such *mitzvot* on the grounds of poverty. Even if they must beg from their neighbors or appeal to their local charities, they must obtain the necessary materials for these *mitzvot*. (Of course, this also means that their fellow Jews must respond generously to their requests for assistance.)

In addressing this unique halakhic quality of *pirsumei nisa*, Rav Isser Yehuda Unterman (writing in the journal *Or Ha-mizrach*) noted another context where a *mitzva* is treated differently because it achieves this purpose. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (14a) raises the question of whether one may interrupt his recitation of *hallel* to greet important people, just as *Halakha* permits (in certain situations) interrupting the *shema* recitation for this purpose. Intuitively, of course, we might assume that *hallel*, whose recitation was ordained by *Chazal*, would be treated more leniently than the Biblical obligation of *shema*, and the Gemara indeed poses this argument. However, the Gemara also considers the reverse argument, namely, that we should approach *hallel* with greater stringency, and not allow any interruptions, because it is recited for the purpose of *pirsumei nisa* – to publicize the miracle. This Gemara viewed this quality as capable of

rendering an interruption during *hallel* a greater infraction than interruptions during *shema*!

Ultimately, the Gemara dismisses this argument. Nevertheless, that it even entertained such a notion testifies to the unique importance of *pirsumei nisa* and the halakhic expression of this importance.

Why is the need to publicize God's miracles so vitally important that it invites exceptions to standard halakhic principles in contexts of *mitzvot* serving this purpose?

Rav Unterman answered by drawing an association between *pirsumei nisa* and another area where far-reaching halakhic exceptions are made – *kiddush Shem Shamayim* (sanctifying God's Name). The obligation to sanctify God's Name entails extraordinary measures, and under certain conditions even suspends *piku'ach nefesh* – the concern for human life, which undoubtedly ranks among the highest religious values from the Torah's viewpoint. The Sages treated *pirsumei nisa* with such stringency, Rav Unterman suggested, because it serves the purpose of *kiddush Shem Shamayim*. We are to publicize miraculous events to demonstrate that the natural order runs under the control and authority of God, and not independently, thereby bringing about greater recognition of the Almighty among mankind – the very essence of *kiddush Shem Shamayim*. *Chazal* therefore followed the Torah's example and enacted strict guidelines for *mitzvot* such as Chanukah candle lighting, just as the Torah established extraordinary provisions with regard to *kiddush Shem Shamayim*.