



Towards the beginning of his exposition of the laws of Chanukah in *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides recounts the primary events of the Chanukah story and then tells, "For this reason, the Sages of that generation enacted that these eight days... should be days of rejoicing and praise, and that candles should be lit on these days in the evening by the entrances of the houses..." (Hilkhot Chanukah 1:3).

A number of writers have noted that Maimonides' description of Chanukah as a time of "rejoicing and praise" differs from the description presented in the Gemara. In the famous discussion of the Chanukah miracle ("*Mai Chanukah*") in Masekhet Shabbat (21b), the Gemara defines Chanukah as "festival days for praise and thanksgiving." Rashi explains that the word *hallel* ("praise") of course refers to the *hallel* recitation which is required on each of the eight days of Chanukah, whereas *hoda'a* ("thanksgiving") means the recitation of the *Al Ha-nissim* section in the prayers during Chanukah. Maimonides, by contrast, defines Chanukah not as days of "praise and thanksgiving," but rather as days of "rejoicing and praise." Apparently, Maimonides was not content in confining the Chanukah observance to the formal recitations of *hallel* and *Al Ha-nissim*. In his view, Chanukah is intended as an occasion of general celebration and festivity; these days require not only formal expressions of praise and thanksgiving, but also a general aura of celebration.

In fact, it could be argued that the obligation of the Chanukah candles, too, constitutes but a function of the general requirement of festive celebration. According to Maimonides' description, the notion of *pirsumei nisa* – publicizing the miracle – is not a goal unto itself, but rather part of the general effort to lend these eight days a festive quality. We celebrate this joyous occasion by making a public spectacle of the miracle this holiday serves to commemorate, thereby generating an overall atmosphere of festivity.

There is considerable discussion among the halakhic authorities as to whether *Halakha* requires festive meals on Chanukah, and both views have been attributed to Maimonides. The *Ma'aseh Rokei'ach* commentary to *Mishneh Torah* claims that the generic term *simcha* (rejoicing) used by Maimonides in describing this festival is meant in its broadest sense, and thus Maimonides referred merely to a general atmosphere of celebration, and not to actual meals. However, the *Bayit Chadash* (commentary to the Tur, O.C. end of 670) cites a number of writers who claimed that to the contrary, Maimonides specifically employed the term *simcha* to indicate that one bears an obligation to conduct festive meals throughout this holiday.

Either way, it seems clear that Maimonides required general celebration, beyond the specific act of candle lighting and the formal recitations of *hallel* and *Al Ha-nissim*. The essence of Chanukah is defined not in terms of merely "praise and thanksgiving," but also in terms of "rejoicing." The reason, perhaps, relates to Maimonides' famous comments at the end of Hilkhot Lulav (8:15) regarding the importance of rejoicing in the

performance of *mitzvot*, whereby one demonstrates his sincere and genuine love for the Almighty. On Chanukah we celebrate our religious freedom, the regaining of the opportunity to serve our Creator, the opportunity that the Greek oppressors sought to deny us. It is thus befitting that we commemorate this event with joy and fervor, in order to demonstrate our love for the Almighty and our desire to be His faithful and devoted servants.