

The Spiritual Light Switch

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One of my fondest memories of living in Israel as a yeshivah *bachur* was standing outside the doorway of our Yerushalayim apartment and lighting the Chanukah menorah. As there were quite a few of us, we had several menorahs, and it was truly a special sight. My roommate was very musical and had a beautiful voice. We would sit for a long while singing the Chanukah songs and prayers and, as time passed, we young American boys would be joined by many of the local Yerushalmi men. It was quite a scene!

As strange as it is to see American boys and Yerushalmi men singing together, the idea of lighting candles outside one's home would seem even stranger. We usually light the Shabbos candles in the dining room to benefit from their light while

eating the Shabbos meals. The idea of standing outside the Jewish home, the place of the Jewish family's sanctity, and doing the mitzvah in the street is very unique indeed.

In the *Shema*, we say that one should speak words of Torah "when you are sitting at home, traveling on the road..." (Deuteronomy 6:7). The home embodies the idea of sanctity and oneness with God. In fact, the Torah begins with the letter *BeiT* (ב) to signify that by fulfilling the Torah's commands, we become connected to the One who is the Master of the house (בית, *BayiT*).

On the other hand, the concept of travel is always fraught with danger. Just as Rachel passed away while traveling, "traveling on the road" symbolizes the inherent dangers and spiritual distancing of going outside the home. However, the *mitzvot* of the Torah help us even the playing field, so we can connect to God not only when we are sitting at home, in shul or yeshivah, but even as we travel outdoors. Through the *mitzvot*, every external and mundane act we do transforms us and elevates us to the highest place of God's unity.

Therefore the verse continues, "[when you are] going to sleep and waking up" (ibid.). One usually goes to sleep at night. Night is a time of darkness and uncertainty, when God seems hidden or disconnected from us. But we just proclaimed, "God is One!" (ibid. 6:4). We firmly believe that even when we perceive distance between us, we are always connected to Him. Therefore, we connect the darkness of night to the light of day, and extend the oneness of our homes to the distance of travel.

Chazal teach that the Divine Presence never descends below ten *tefachim* (handbreadths) (*Sukkah* 5a). Nevertheless, we place the menorah at this height to show that in this very place where God usually does not reveal Himself, there's no doubt that His unity embodies this space as well. Likewise, we light the menorah near the entrance of the house to symbolize that even as we navigate life's difficulties and feel removed from our natural place of sanctity, God is always with us. We begin lighting the menorah at nightfall to show that darkness is nothing but an illusion. Through our faith in God and the light of the menorah, "night will shine like day" (Psalms 139:12).

The nights of Chanukah are the longest of the year. Like the darkness and the cold weather that characterize this season, life can be bitter and spiritually challenging. But the simple light of a Chanukah candle descends from the greatest of heights to the lowest of places to demonstrate that God is always next to us. When we take a step back from everything that's going on in our lives and turn on this spiritual light switch, we awaken the Jewish spark within us so it can grow just a bit every night, eventually becoming a brilliant flame.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Shluchin 3