

To Apprehend God

On the Aesthetic Through the Hannuka Candles

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הַנִּירוֹת הַלְלוּ אֲנִי מִדְּלִיקוֹן, עַל הַנְּסִים וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת וְעַל הַנִּפְלְאוֹת, שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם
בְּזֶמַן הַזֶּה, עַל יְדֵי כְהֻנְיָהּ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים.
וְכָל שְׂמוֹנֵת יָמֵי הַחֲנֻכָּה, הַנִּירוֹת הַלְלוּ קֹדֶשׁ הוּ, וְאַיִן לָנוּ רְשׁוֹת לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בָּהֶן, אֶלָּא לְרְאוּתָן בְּלֶבֶד,
כְּדֵי לְהוֹדוֹת לְשִׁמְךָ, עַל נְסִיךָ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְעַל יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ.

((No I did not get confused with the date, but as I have said in the past, if they are selling sufganiot in Roladin, surely I can sell you a Hannuka drasha.))

This prayer said following the 2 blessings on the hannuka candles raises some interesting questions that are very telling about the meaning of lighting the candles. First, we note that the paragraph is composed of 2 sentences – the first tells of the symbolic value of the candles as representative of miracles; the second tells of the intrinsic value of the candles as holy. The second sentence also includes the strange directive that prohibits any utility be derived from the candles and then ends by explaining such is demanded “in order that we praise [God’s] name” over the miracles. Why is that?

In an effort to understand all this, we note that the Gemara (Shabbat 21b-22a) teaches the prohibition of benefiting in any way from the light of the candles. On this there is a mahloket rishonim:

- Rashi/Rosh answer: because it may not be noticeable that one lit the candles for the mitzvah.
- Ran/Rashba/BaalHaMaor: because the mitzvah parallels the lighting of the menorah in the mikdash through which the miracle occurred. So just as you can not benefit from the Menorah in the Mikdash, so too with the Menorah of Hannuka.

Rav Brofsky from YHE in his Hilkhos Moadim (p.374) explains that the machloket is over whether the hannukiah is for pirsumei nisa or has intrinsic kedusha.¹ I would like to suggest that there is not really a mahloket here but rather an emphasis on 2 differing aspects of the candle lighting. And, I propose that these aspects are given expression in the two blessings on the candles and the two sentences of the “haneirot Hallalu” prayer following them. Regarding the blessings: the first blessing that says “that we were commanded to light the hannukah candles” corresponds to the intrinsic holiness of the candles, whereas the second blessing that says “that you performed miracles for our forefathers” corresponds to the pirsumei nisa aspect of the candles.

¹ See p373-376 for discussion of all related halachic sources here.

Regarding the “haneirot halallu” prayer, let us first try to understand the prohibition against obtaining any benefit from the candles. The Shulhan Aruch explains that this prohibition commands that one neither count money in the light on the candles nor even read a holy book in their light.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות חנוכה סימן תרעג סעיף א
...אסור להשתמש בנר חנוכה בין בשבת בין בחול, ואפי' לבדוק מעות או למנותן לאורה אסור,
אפי' תשמיש של קדושה, כגון ללמוד לאורה, אסור; ויש מי שמתיר בתשמיש של קדושה; ...

On this the MA explains that there is room to be lenient, the custom is to forbid ALL USE (Similarly the Taz sk3 – see EXTRAS):

מגן אברהם על שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות חנוכה סימן תרעג סעיף א
ב לבדוק מעות. שצריך עיון יפה וידיו סמוכות לנר אבל תשמיש עראי שא"צ להיות ידיו סמוכות לנר שרי [ב"י ד"מ ורש"ל בתשו'] וב"ח פסק להחמיר וכ"כ הסמ"ק וסה"ת דאפי' לאכול אצלו אסור וכ"מ סי' תרס"ח/תרע"ח/ דאם לא כן יקנה נ"ח וידליקנה בביתו ויהיה גם שלום בית אלא ע"כ **כל תשמיש אסור והכי נהוג:**

But the most extreme stricture is that of the Ritva who holds that it is even forbidden to SPEAK with someone!

חידושי הריטב"א מסכת שבת דף כא עמוד ב
אמר רבא וצריך נר אחרת להשתמש לאורה. פי' כדי שלא ישתמש לאור [נר] חנוכה כלל ואפילו לשוח, מדאמרין ואי איכא מדורה לא צריך אלא היכא דהוי אדם חשוב, והא ודאי אפילו מי שאינו חשוב אינו אוכל לאור מדורה ואינו עושה כן אלא העני, אלא ודאי כדאמרן, וכן היה אוסר מורי הרב ז"ל לשום אדם לדבר עם חברו בפתח לאור הנר חנוכה. (א"ה, עי' חידושי המאירי).

So again, what is behind this prohibition of all use of the candles – even speaking!? The answer I propose is to be found in philosophy, or to be more precise, in aesthetics.

Now, on the one hand, aesthetics is often perceived as diametrically opposed to religion for, indeed, R. Soloveitchik explains that it is at the root of sin, both the original sin and every sin that is done on any given day:

“What caused man’s fall is his giving preference to the sensuous, delightful, and pleasing over the true, at both the intellectual and ethical levels.”

“מה שגרם לנפילתו של האדם הוא העדפתו לחושני, למענג ולמענג על פני האמת, הן ברמה האינטלקטואלית והן ברמה האתית.”

On the other hand, R. Soloveitchik explains that the aesthetic actually holds great religious potential:

“G-d not only addresses Himself to man through the logos, by emanating wisdom and knowledge to the finite mind; not only through the ethos, revealing to natural man, driven by insensate desires and impulses, a great order of absolute values and ideals—but also through aesthesis—the immediate sensible apprehension of reality which is beautiful and grandiose.”

“Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalted may one apprehend G-d instead of comprehend Him...”

”רק באמצעות מגע עם היפה והנשגב אפשר לתפוס את ה' במקום להבין אותו...”

That is, we can open up a book and learn about God – to COMPREHEND Him, but we can only APPREHEND Him through the aesthetic experience. So there is clearly an important place for the aesthetic in religious experience.

Now, in order to appreciate the value (laarich et erech) in the aesthetic experience we need to understand how Kant taught that one is to appreciate the aesthetic.²

Kant taught that true appreciation of the beautiful is attained through appreciating the intrinsic aesthetic value in the object of one’s attention. That is, a purely aesthetic experience is one in which the object of attention serves no symbolic value (ain lo mesarim) and has no utilitarian value (ain lo shimush). Ideally, the beautiful is to engender a “play of the faculties” (משחק בין היכולות השכליות) in which the imagination (הדמיון) engages with the cognitive/rational faculty (התבונה) in an ongoing attempt to understand and appreciate that which is under one’s gaze. This definition fits most appropriately with abstract art (אומנות מופשטת), where you see a beautiful piece of art, but you don’t really get what you are looking at. This “not getting it” is the faculty of reason failing and thus it turns to the faculty of imagination and says, help me out here; the imagination attempts to find things the piece could be, could mean, and feeds those possibilities to the faculty of reason. The reason rejects them and turns back to the imagination. This ongoing “play of the faculties” is what gives the aesthetic experience its special quality of enjoyment.

Now, I suggest that this process can apply equally as well to the ever changing flame of a candle (יכול באותה מידה לחול על הלהבת הנר המשתנה ללא הרף).

Indeed, the beauty of the candle has been noted in art.³ And: “the famous scientist Michael Faraday in his celebrated 19th century lectures on “The Chemical History of a Candle” said in an 1860 address to the light: “You have the glittering beauty of gold and silver, and the still higher lustre of jewels, like the ruby and diamond; but none of these rival the brilliancy and beauty of flame. What diamond can shine like flame?””⁴

² <To expand see SEP quotes below in EXTRA; see my discussions on GoldenRatio and in Publications/HalachaEthicsAesthetics/EthicsAesthetics1.doc and related shuirim>

³ See for example:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/dec/28/candlelight-joseph-wright-el-greco> (copied below in EXTRAS)

⁴ <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-candle-flames-millions-tiny-diamonds.html>

Though some have noted that his description of beauty was in its scientific wonder: “Faraday makes an explicit reference to the idea of beauty, by saying that the phenomenon of candle burning is beautiful, not because of its flames (e.g., the prettiness of its colours or its shapes) but because of the fact that it taps all known laws of the universe: not the best-looking, but the best-acting thing. In other words, for Faraday, the aesthetic dimension of science, and specifically the beauty of the phenomenon of candle burning, is identified with his experience of wonder (i.e., his admiration toward the phenomenon of candle burning, which includes the awareness that all known physical laws are involved in this phenomenon)”

”יש לך { להבת הנר} את היופי הנוצץ של זהב וכסף, ואת הברק הגבוה עוד יותר של תכשיטים, כמו
ה אוֹדָם והיהלום; אבל אף אחד מאלה אינו מתחרה בזוהר וביופי של להבה. איזה יהלום יכול
לזרוח כמו להבה?

And that brings us back to the Hannukia.

On the one hand, we have the rule that we are not to make any use or benefit from the candles – so we are in Kant’s criteria of an object without use. On the other hand, the hanukkiah is most definitely a symbol – it is the symbol of the Temple Menorah, it is a symbol of the Hasmonaean victory over the Greeks (and the latter’s infatuation with the aesthetic), it is the symbol of the miracles that attended that victory.

So I suggest that there are two layers in appreciating the Hannuka candles. In the first, when we light the candles and say that we are doing so to remember the great miracles and salvation that God did for us – we thus *comprehend* God. But then we are to sit, quietly, focused solely of the flickering flames of the candles. It is here that we can *apprehend* God.

We watch the candles and enter the aesthetic experience that Kant spoke of, allowing the faculties of the mind to play. In so doing we also reach an appreciation for the wonder of creation and the creator. And indeed, it could be said that this is precisely what Michael Faraday had in mind when he described the aesthetic qualities of the flame because he actually is said to have been in awe and wonder at the flame which, according to him, includes all the laws of physics.⁵ So, indeed, through the aesthetic appreciation of the flame we can deepen our appreciation of the Creator.

And if, in the half hour that we are commanded to gaze at the candles, the flames, the light, we reach this apprehension, then we will be truly ready to fulfil the commandment of lighting the candles: “Keday lehodot lishmecha al nisecha val niflotecha val yeshuotecha”!

כְּדֵי לְהוֹדוֹת לְשִׁמְךָ, עַל נִסֶּיךָ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְעַל יְשׁוּעוֹתֶיךָ.

Hag Urim Samayach.

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323808683_Aesthetics_Art_and_Science_Their_Relationship_and_their_Implications_for_Science_Education).

⁵ see fn 4 above.

SOURCES

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/dec/28/candlelight-joseph-wright-el-greco>

The timeless wonder of candlelight, a glimmer of love in our dark world

[*Jonathan Jones*](#)

The evocative image of a flickering candle, celebrated by Joseph Wright and El Greco, is charged with spiritual power – we need it now more than ever



An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump, by Joseph Wright of Derby, 1768. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

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Why is candlelight so beautiful? At this time of the year candles burn brightly to celebrate Hanukkah or Christmas, casting a subtle, ever changing light into the long, dark midwinter nights. We love this magic and ancient form of light – but why?

Art can illuminate that – take the French 17th-century painter Georges de La Tour, entranced by the complex poetry of candlelight. In his paintings people hold, gaze at or are revealed by pale white candles and burning lamps. The ethereal brightness of the candlelight painted by De La Tour suggests both time passing – as the flame gutters – and the light of holy truth. In his painting [The Education of the Virgin](#) (1640) a book is illuminated by a single candle flame. The Virgin Mary's reading is spiritual, as pure and luminous as that candle. In another painting by him, [Job Mocked by His Wife](#), the candle reveals the timeworn body of an old man, and [in another](#), a repentant Mary Magdalene sits contemplating a skull by the flickering light of a candle.



Job mocked by his wife by Georges de La Tour, c. 1650. Photograph: DEA /G Dagli Orti/Getty Images/DeAgostini

Setting aside their religious meanings, these paintings – as well as many more by the same artist – clarify candlelight's beauty. Paradoxically, the candles painted by Georges de La Tour do not look hot. The small flame of a candle is more a source of light than heat, and that takes it out of the carnal realm. It seems to come from some other place, to be a piece of pure magic light: a sacred flame.

It's not easy to separate aesthetics and spirituality when it comes to candles. But there is another aspect of this source of light that fascinates De La Tour: its gentleness. Cast on a naked body or a contemplative face, it is soft, humanising, and forgiving. Then again, candles go out: their light is precious and time bound. Since no candle burns forever, it is always a memento mori. In De La Tour's paintings of Mary Magdalene with a skull and

candle (or sometimes an oil lamp), it is not only the skull that warns of life's brevity. The candle flame, too, is mortal. Electric light is steady, long lasting and banal. The light from candles ebbs and flows, flickers and smokes, must be carefully lit and tended, and casts a light at once ethereal and kind.

Georges de La Tour is far from the only artist to love it for those reasons. In El Greco's painting [An Allegory](#), painted in about 1580 to 1585, a monkey and two boys gather round a silvery candle flame whose pale light casts enigmatic, wondrous light on their faces. This is a supernatural light, casting its grace on the world.

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In [Joseph Wright of Derby's](#) painting [The Orrery](#) (about 1766), a candle has been positioned at the centre of a clockwork model of the solar system. It lights up the model as the sun lights up the solar system. Yet it also casts its kind glow on the watching faces, revealing the joy of understanding as children are told about Copernicus. Wright's painting [An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump](#) similarly shows faces by candlelight in an atmosphere of mystery and revelation. Wright reveals that science can have a spiritual power and beauty, a poetry – and candlelight lets him show this.



Enigmatic, wondrous light ... [An Allegory \(Fábula\)](#) by El Greco. Photograph: National Galleries of Scotland/Getty Images

There are two fundamental reasons for the unique beauty of candles, according to these artists: ethereality and kindness. The apparently bodiless being of a candle flame, passing constantly into nothingness, warms the faces that it shines on. It is a subtle, atmospheric, and loving light. When candles are burning we feel better about the world. They light the soul.

2.1 What is a Judgment of Beauty?

The first section of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment”, the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” aims to analyse the notion of a judgment of beauty or judgment of taste, describing the features which distinguish judgments of beauty from judgments of other kinds, notably cognitive judgments (which include judgments ascribing goodness to things), and what he calls “judgments of the agreeable.” Kant is not explicit about the pretheoretical conception of judgments of beauty which is the subject of his analysis, and there is room for controversy about what does and does not count as a judgment of beauty in Kant's sense. Not every predicative use of the word “beautiful” signals the making of a judgment of beauty, at least in the paradigmatic sense with which Kant is concerned (for a useful discussion, see Savile 1993, ch. 1). For example, at §8 Kant denies that the judgment that roses in general are beautiful is a judgment of beauty or judgment of taste proper: it is not an “aesthetic” but an “aesthetically grounded logical judgment.” There is also room for debate about whether the intuitive notion of a judgment of beauty, for Kant, allows for negative judgments of beauty (see [2.3.6](#) below). However, at a first approximation, we can say that it is the mental activity or content typically expressed by, or manifested in, a sincere utterance of “that's beautiful” in reference to a perceptually presented object.

Kant analyses the notion of a judgment of beauty by considering it under four headings, or “moments,” as sketched below:

First Moment (§§1–5)

Judgments of beauty are based on feeling, in particular feelings of pleasure (Kant also mentions displeasure, but this does not figure prominently in his account; for more on this point, see [Section 2.3.6](#) below). The pleasure, however, is of a distinctive kind: it is disinterested, which means that it does not depend on the subject's having a desire for the object, nor does it generate such a desire. The fact that judgments of beauty are based on feeling rather than “objective sensation” (e.g., the sensation of a thing's colour) distinguishes them from cognitive judgments based on perception (e.g., the judgment that a thing is green). But the disinterested character of the feeling distinguishes them from other judgments based on feeling. In particular, it distinguishes them from (i) judgments of the agreeable, which are the kind of judgment expressed by saying simply that one likes something or finds it pleasing (for example, food or drink), and (ii) judgments of the good, including judgments both about the moral goodness of something and about its goodness for particular non-moral purposes.

Second Moment (§§6–9)

Judgments of beauty have, or make a claim to, “universality” or “universal validity.” (Kant also uses the expression “universal communicability”; this can be taken as equivalent to “universal validity.”) That is, in making a judgment of beauty about an object, one takes it that everyone else who perceives the object ought also to judge it to be beautiful, and, relatedly, to share one's pleasure in it. But the universality is not “based

on concepts.” That is, one's claim to agreement does not rest on the subsumption of the object under a concept (in the way, for example, that the claim to agreement made by the judgment that something is green rests on the ascription to the object of the property of being green, and hence its subsumption under the concept *green*). It follows from this that judgments of beauty cannot, despite their universal validity, be proved: there are no rules by which someone can be compelled to judge that something is beautiful (Kant expands on this point in §§32–33). More strongly, judgments of beauty are not to be understood as predicating the concept *beauty* of their objects: as he puts it later, “beauty is not a concept of the object” (§38, 290). Still later, in the “Antinomy of Taste,” Kant seems to go back on this strong claim by saying that a judgment of beauty rests on an “indeterminate concept” (§57, 341); however, by “concept” here he diverges from the standard use of the term “concept” as referring to a kind of representation which can figure in cognition.

The fact that judgments of beauty are universally valid constitutes a further feature (in addition to the disinterestedness of the pleasure on which they are based) distinguishing them from judgments of agreeable. For in claiming simply that one likes something, one does not claim that everyone else ought to like it too. But the fact that their universal validity is not based on concepts distinguishes judgments of beauty from non-evaluative cognitive judgments and judgments of the good, both of which make a claim to universal validity that *is* based on concepts.

Third Moment (§§10–17)

Unlike judgments of the good, judgments of the beautiful do not presuppose an end or purpose [*Zweck*] which the object is taken to satisfy. (This is closely related to the point that their universality is not based on concepts). However, they nonetheless involve the representation of what Kant calls “purposiveness” [*Zweckmässigkeit*]. Because this representation of purposiveness does not involve the ascription of an purpose, Kant calls the purposiveness which is represented “merely formal purposiveness” or “the form of purposiveness.” He describes it as perceived both in the object itself and in the activity of imagination and understanding in their engagement with the object. (For more on this activity, see the discussion of the “free play of the faculties” in [Section 2.2](#); for more on the notion of purposiveness, see [Section 3.1](#).) The Third Moment, in particular §14, is the main evidence for Kant's supposed formalism in aesthetics; for more on Kant's formalism, see [Section 2.4](#).

Fourth Moment (§18–22)

Judgments of beauty involve reference to the idea of necessity, in the following sense: in taking my judgment of taste to be universally valid, I take it, not that everyone who perceives the object *will* share my pleasure in it and (relatedly) agree with my judgment, but that everyone *ought* to do so. I take it, then, that my pleasure stands in a “necessary” relation to the object which elicits it, where the necessity here can be described (though Kant himself does not use the term) as normative. But, as in the case of universal validity, the necessity is not based on concepts or rules (at least, not concepts or rules that are determinate, that is, of a kind which figure in cognition; as noted earlier in this section,