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The validity of artistic chanukiyot

Question: We, in the community of Judaica artists, are confused about the “kashrut” of chanukiyot. Do the lights really have to be in a straight line in and be the same height?

Answer: Many people subscribe to an “absolute fact” that the lights of a chanukiya (Chanuka menorah) must be in a straight line. However, there is no fundamental description of the required formation of a chanukiya that mandates this. Rather, its purpose is to prevent problems.

The gemara¹ says that one may put two wicks into one oil bowl (ner), and, thus, it may be used for two people. However, if one puts several wicks

around the circumference of a bowl and leaves it uncovered, no one fulfills the mitzva because it looks like a medura (bonfire) rather than a flame. It follows from the gemara that if one would solve the problem of looking like a medura, it would not be a problem that the candles are in a circular position.²

How does one obviate the problem of medura? Several Rishonim say that it is sufficient that there be a finger's breadth between the wicks, but others require that the wicks should be separated by a partition.³ The Rama's⁴ opinion is even more stringent. He says that even if the wicks are in different cups, they should not be in a circular configuration because it could still look like a medura. The Magen Avraham⁵ extends this stringency to a zigzag pattern. This is the source of the common practice that the candles should be in a straight line. However, the Rama himself continues that it is acceptable to use candles in a candelabrum because, not only are they separate nerot, but they also are far away from each other.⁶ Thus, there shouldn't be a

¹ *Shabbat* 23b.

² See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 671: 3, 4, from which it is clear that the same halachot that apply to single candles of different people also apply to multiple candles of one person.

³ See *Tur, Orach Chayim* 671.

⁴ *Orach Chayim* 671:4.

⁵ Ad loc.:3.

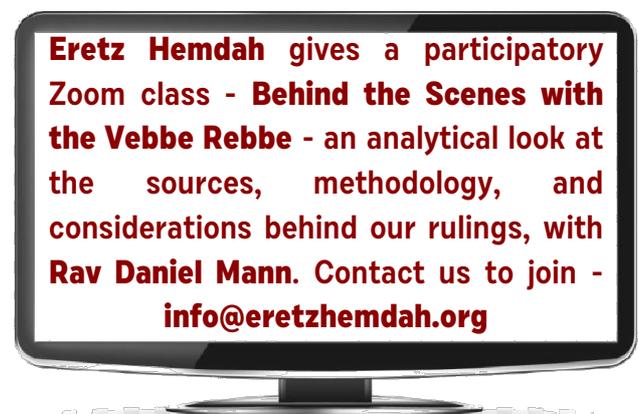
⁶ See *Terumat HaDeshen* 105 and *Pri Megadim, Mishbetzot Zahav* 671:2.

problem, even according to the Rama, if the candles are far enough from each other that they do not resemble a medura by any stretch of the imagination. If this is so, zigzags of different types, which are just an extension of the stringency of a circle, should not be worse than a circle and should be acceptable as long as the lights are not too close together.

The other “fact” – that wax candles must be of the same height and, similarly, that the candles’ bases must be on the same level, is also perplexing. Apparently, the first source for this requirement is the Chayei Adam,⁷ who lived in the early 19th century. He mentions it in a matter-of-fact manner when discussing the requirement of a straight line. It is unclear if this too is somehow related to the medura issue or if there is a different reason.⁸ Several later poskim⁹ cite this stringency without disagreeing. However, the Mishna Berura does not mention it.

If an individual were to ask whether to light a standard shaped chanukiya or an innovative one, we would suggest that he conform to the standard practice. You, however, are

coming from the point of view of an artist. Most observant people who buy an artistic chanukiya use it for decoration, not for lighting. A God-fearing artist, though, would not want a potential user of his chanukiya to forfeit the proper performance of the mitzva. Nevertheless, one who follows the letter of the law in designing the chanukiya (presumably, even if he does not conform to the Chayei Adam’s description) need not be concerned that some purchasers may not want to be as conservative on the matter as most of us like to be.



⁷ 154:10.

⁸ The issue might be that it is hard to see that they belong to the same lighting. However, we should remember that, according to the basic law, one candle per household is sufficient.

⁹ *Kaf HaChayim*, *Orach Chayim* 671:29; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 139:9.