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Festive Meals on Chanuka

Question: Is one supposed to celebrate Chanuka with festive eating? How and why is it different from Purim?

Answer: There is no set obligation to have a meal in honor of Chanuka,¹ as there is on Purim.² Let us begin by discussing why there is such a difference.

The broadly accepted general distinction between the two holidays in this regard is based on the difference between the types of danger that were involved. In the Purim story, there was danger of physical annihilation. In contrast, in the Chanuka story, the Jews' ability to

keep the Torah was attacked, but had they agreed to forsake the Torah, there would not have been a physical danger. According to the Taz's³ understanding of the Levush,⁴ the Chanuka salvation was therefore less important and thus did not warrant as much festivity. The Taz, however, disagrees based on the idea that one who causes someone else to sin is worse than one who kills him.⁵

The Taz himself argues that physical salvation, which relates to "this world", is most appropriately celebrated with physical celebration, whereas spiritual salvation is to be celebrated in a spiritual manner (i.e., the Chanuka lights). However, this idea seems inconsistent with other sources. For example, a festive meal is required on Shavuot because it is the day on which the Torah was given.⁶ Furthermore, the Rama⁷ writes that there should be some festivity on Chanuka and gives as the reason that it was the time of the dedication of the mizbe'ach (altar), which was a spiritual event, and the Taz himself⁸ seems to agree. Perhaps the Taz meant that the preservation of life

¹. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 670:2.

². Ibid. 695:1.

³. Orach Chayim 670:3.

⁴. Orach Chayim 670:2.

⁵. Bamidbar Rabba 25:4.

⁶. Pesachim 68b.

⁷. Orach Chayim 670:2.

⁸. Ad loc. 4.

deserves physical celebration; regarding spiritual matters, one celebrates physically only if there is something new, as occurred on Shavuot and in the dedication of the mizbei'ach.

Mishnat Ya'avetz⁹ adds halachic reasoning to explain why there actually could be a preference not to have a full obligation of a festive meal on Chanuka. He points out that a full obligation could have caused a problem of bal tosif (the prohibition of adding on to the mitzvot of the Torah) for creating a day significantly akin to Yom Tov.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there are sources that seem to indicate that there is a mitzva of having festive eating on Chanuka. The Rambam¹¹ refers to the days of Chanuka as “days of simcha (joy) and hallel (songs of praise)”, and the former term usually relates to festive eating.¹² At the very least, this includes a prohibition of fasting during Chanuka.¹³ The Shulchan Aruch,¹⁴ who rules that there is no obligation to have festive meals,

implies that there does indeed exist a practice to have them, but that they are reshut (voluntary). The Rama,¹⁵ as mentioned, cites an opinion that there is a slight mitzva to have special meals for Chanuka, with the reason relating, as above, to the dedication of the mizbe'ach.

The Rama adds that the practice is to sing and praise HaShem at special meals made in honor of Chanuka, and if one indeed does so, then the meal is a seudat mitzva. The status of seudat mitzva can mean one of two things: One is that there is a mitzva to have the meal; the other is that the meal has religious significance when one has it, even if it is not required. For example, on Yom Tov¹⁶ or after a brit mila,¹⁷ one is required to have a festive meal. In contrast, if one completes a unit of learning that warrants a siyum, he is not obligated to make a celebration, but if he does celebrate, the celebration has a special status – which, for example, allows one to eat meat during the Nine Days.¹⁸ On Chanuka, there is no

⁹. *Orach Chayim* 79.

¹⁰. See *ibid.* regarding how Mordechai and Esther dealt with this issue regarding Purim.

¹¹. *Chanuka* 3:3.

¹². *Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kama* 7:37.

¹³. *Shabbat* 21b

¹⁴. *Op. cit.*

¹⁵. *Orach Chayim* 670:2.

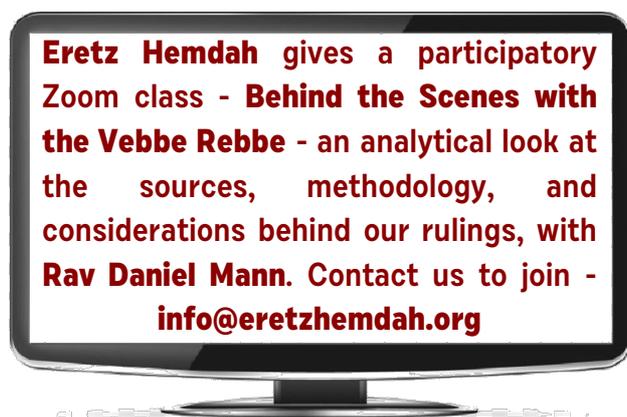
¹⁶. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 529:1.

¹⁷. See *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 265:12.

¹⁸. Rama, *Orach Chayim* 551:10.

requirement to have a seuda; there is simply an obligation not to fast. However, if one does have a special seuda, it is quite clear that he has fulfilled a mitzva by so doing.¹⁹

This makes sense particularly when there is some sort of praising of HaShem at the seuda. After all, if one does not praise HaShem, then what makes it a Chanuka party? Since, as the Rambam writes, these are days of simcha and hallel, a simcha that is not accompanied by some sort of hallel lacks significance. It is possible that mentioning or having in mind that one is eating a little more or nicer food in honor of Chanuka suffices, but going beyond this is at least appropriate.



¹⁹. See *Torat HaMo'adim* (Rav David Yosef), *Chanuka* 9:(10).