

Chanukah Candles for a Person with Fear of Fire
Performing *Mitzvos Under Duress*
Rabbi Micha Cohn

[This post is for educational and enrichment purposes only; not a final halachic decision.]

An elderly woman lives alone. Years before, she had a fire in her home, and is still afraid of open fire. She always goes away for Shabbos to avoid lighting Shabbos candles at home. How about Chanukah? What are her obligations with regard to lighting Chanukah candles?

In order to fully answer this question, we must explore the minimal requirements for this *mitzvah*, and the fundamental structure of the obligation to perform a positive *mitzvah* when it causes emotional duress.

While the prevalent custom is to light the number of lights corresponding to the night of Chanukah, the minimal requirement is one candle per night. The candle should remain lit for a half-hour. As such, it would be proper to explore the possibility of lighting a single light, perhaps a *yartzeit* candle, for a short period of time after nightfall. Being that this is a complete fulfillment of the obligation, she may make a *bracha* on the lighting as well. She does not need to do the actual lighting herself, and may ask a neighbor to light the candle for her. Even when somebody else lights for her, she should still say the *brachos*.

How about going to a neighbor's house to light the *menorah*? The Talmud says the *mitzvah* of the Chanukah lights is "*ner ish ubaiso*", or for a household. This is understood to mean that a person must light in their place of dwelling. Therefore, many *poskim* conclude that a one may not light in their car, since it is not considered their dwelling. That said, a guest can light where he or she is staying because for now this is their place of dwelling. However, it is questionable if people visiting family or friends for just a few hours can light there – especially if they plan on returning home afterwards. This is because it has not become their place of dwelling.

A patient in the hospital who has relatives at home fulfills his obligation with the *menorah* being lit in their home by others.

Poskim discuss if one fulfills the *mitzvah* by lighting on a train, or in a wedding hall. There is an argument that although it is not a regular place of dwelling, since they will be there for much of the night, and bought a ticket or rented the hall, it belongs to them for the time being and can be considered their temporary place of dwelling. (*Maharsham, Piskai Teshuva*)

As such, it is difficult to say that going to a neighbor for a short amount of time to watch the *menorah* being lit is a full fulfillment of this obligation. However, seeing a neighbor's *menorah* lit and listening to the *bracha* of "*she'asa nissim*" is a fulfillment of "*pirsumai nisa*" – publicizing the miracle, and should definitely be done.

What about an electric *menorah*? There is much discussion about electric lights concerning the prohibition to kindle a fire on Shabbos, and the obligation to light shabbos and Chanukah lights. While many *poskim* conclude that an incandescent bulb has the status of a glowing coal, which is considered a fire in respect to the prohibition of kindling a fire on shabbos, it does not meet the requirements for Chanukah which needs a *ner*, or a lamp. Being that a bulb does not have an actual flame, a wick, and a reserve of fuel, many *poskim* conclude that it is very questionable if one fulfills their obligation, and a *bracha* should definitely not be said. (*Be'er Moshe*, *Yabia Omer*).

When it comes to transgressing a negative prohibition (*lo saseh*), a person is obligated to give all of his or her wealth in order to avoid the transgression. However, for a positive commandment like buying an *esrog* for *Succos*, or *teffilin*, a person is only obligated to give up to a fifth of their wealth. Rabbi Shlomo HaKohein from Vilna (*Binyan Shlomo* 47) argues that immense anguish is comparable to giving more than a fifth of one's wealth, and therefore is not obligated to perform the *mitzvah* under such circumstances. Many *poskim* make this point in similar ways. As such, it would seem that this woman is not obligated to endure such anguish in order to fulfill the *mitzvah*, but should at least go to a neighbor at the time of lighting in order to partially fulfill the *mitzvah* by seeing the lights and hearing the *bracha* of *she'asa nissim*.