1. The menorah is one of the most readily recognizable symbols of Judaism, easily identified by even the non-Jewish population as a necessary tool to fulfill the requirements of Chanukah. However, according to the Talmud (Shabbos 21b), the menorah is actually not necessary. Strictly speaking, the halachah only obligates “ner ubeiso” – one candle, regardless of what night it is, per household. One who wishes to do the mitzvah in a particularly beautiful fashion, and is thus classified as one of the “mehadrin”, should light one candle for every member of the household. The menorah only comes in for the third, highest level – the “mehadrin min ha-mehadrin”. This level requires an additional candle for each night of the festival. In Beit Shammai’s view, the candles descend in number, with eight on the first night and one on the last. The dominant view, though, is that of Beis Hillel, that the candles ascend in number, from one on the first night all the way up to eight.

This third level is the subject of a well-known dispute between the Ri, cited in Tosfos, and the Rambam. According to Tosfos (s.v. mehadrin), this plan assumes that only one set of candles is being lit, regardless of the number of residents; thus building only on the base level, and skipping the second level of “mehadrin”. This is because multiplying the two factors, nights and number of residents, will result in a new number that does not represent anything, and onlookers will be unable to discern any message in the candles that they see. The Rambam (Hil. Chanukah 4:1-2), however, is apparently unconcerned with this, and recommends lighting according to both nights and residents. In an unusual inversion of the normal process of halachic development, the Shulchan Aruch follows the view of Tosfos, and the Rama seems to follow the Rambam.

2. Some of the suggested explanations for this debate center on the relationship between “mehadrin” in the realm of Chanukah and the general Torah concept of “hiddur mitzvah.” For example, R. Ya’akov Betzalel Zoltý (Mishnas Yá’avetz, O.C. 74) suggests that Tosfos perceives the Chanukah “mehadrin” as being a subset of the general “hiddur”, and thus subject to the rules of that concept, which include a requirement (according to many) that the hiddur be visible and perceptible. If the Rambam is unconcerned with perception, it would then be because he understands the “mehadrin” of Chanukah to be a unique category, separate and distinct from the “hiddur mitzvah” generally discussed.

However, it must be noted that in both versions, the “hiddur” will be visible; the only question is will the pattern of the lighting be discernible. Thus, it might be suggested that both the Rambam and Tosfos agree that the hiddur of Chanukah is unique. This can be proven from a number of unusual rules that pertain to the Chanukah candles in their “mehadrin” version. For example, hiddur mitzvah normally demands only an additional expenditure of a third; adding candles to satisfy “mehadrin” would, by definition, cost many times the price of the base mitzvah, which is one candle. Further (according to the Ohr Sameach’s reading of the Rambam, 4:12) one is required to go to extraordinary lengths to light Chanukah candles, not just the basic single candle but even the extra candles of “mehadrin”.

3. These compelling points suggest that there is an undeniable emphasis placed on hiddur in regard to Chanukah that is not present in other mitzvos. Hence, the difference between the Rambam and Tosfos would be as follows: both presumably recognize a hiddur that is more fundamental to the mitzvah than is generally the case. The point of divergence is whether this hiddur acts in a completely unusual fashion, or is a special hiddur that presents itself in a more standardized form. Thus, the Rambam, who prescribes what is essentially a larger flame, is following the path of a standard “hiddur”, where mitzvos are performed in a quantitatively more impressive fashion.

Tosfos, who demand that a particular message be discerned in the display, are advocating a unique hiddur. The Ri’s focus of an ability to discern the pattern affects other issues as well. R. Shlomo Kluger rules that there is no harm in adding to the relevant number of candles (based on a ruling of the Rama, O.C. 263, regarding Shabbat Candles.) The Resp. Mishneh Sakhir (II, 199), among
the debate between the Rambam and Tosfos. It has been pointed out that it is possible that the issue of their debate is actually the question of what was the true miracle of Chanukah – the military victory, or the long-lasting oil. As Tosfos insists on a recognizable scheme for the candles, they are apparently asserting that the miracle of “eight days” is the focus. The Rambam, by not concentrating on that element, is perhaps emphasizing another miracle, that of the military victory.

The Maharal of Prague suggests that the two miracles work in tandem. In reality, the important miracle (as indicated by the text of Al HaNissim) was the military victory. However, it is possible for one to view that reality and miss the hand of G-d; to assume that it was merely the skill and efforts of the human soldiers that carried the day. Thus, the story ends with an undeniably supernatural event, to serve as G-d’s “signature” on the victory, a reality no less miraculous than the oil lasting seven extra days.

4. It emerges, then that Chanukah is unique in the central role that is given to the concept of hiddur mitzvah. The assumption that the hiddur of Chanukah is unique and central to the mitzvah affects other questions as well, including: the position of the Shulchan Arukh (676:5) that the lighting should start from the newest candle; reciting the berakhah of “ha-roeh” on the additional candles; training children in lighting with the additional candles; the question of reciting the berakhah when only lighting additional candles; someone giving up his hiddur so another can light the base mitzvah; and weighing the value of the additional candles against that of performing mitzvos expeditiously (zrizin makdimin l’mitzvos).

5. Perhaps this is related to the fact that hiddur plays a key role in the miracle of Chanukah. Many achronim raise the question of why it was necessary to obtain pure oil, in light of the principle that “tumah hutrah b’tzibur”, which apparently would allow impure substances tp be used on behalf of the tzibur. Some answer simply, that while impure oil would have been valid, it was a desire to perform the mitzvah with hiddur that was dominant. Thus, the miracle itself was motivated by hiddur.

Other sefarim note additional aspects of the miracle which were driven by hiddur. The Beis HaLevi points out that there is no minimum size requirement for wicks; thus, they could have used very thin wicks and made it through with the oil that they had. However, such a thin flame would not have been a “hiddur”. Further, the Ra’avad asserts that that the additional time was necessary specifically to obtain oil that was farther away, but more of a hiddur.

6. In understanding this centrality, it is instructive to go back to the debate between the Rambam and Tosfos. It has been pointed out that it is possible that the issue of their debate is actually the question of what was the true miracle of Chanukah – the military victory, or the long-lasting oil. As Tosfos insists on a recognizable scheme for the candles, they are apparently asserting that the miracle of “eight days” is the focus. The Rambam, by not concentrating on that element, is perhaps emphasizing another miracle, that of the military victory.

However, there is a fundamental difference. When one makes an effort to go “the extra mile”, to go above and beyond that which is required, one is making a statement: that the world is not simply a well-oiled machine that works when all the right buttons are pushed, but that there is Someone watching, Someone who cares and knows the difference whether something is done or done well.

That acknowledgment is central to the message of Chanukah. The battle against Hellenism, against the influence of Greek culture, might seem strange to us who are part of a university, and who actively study the culture and the messages of the broader society. However, there is a fundamental difference. When we encounter the wisdom of science and of art, we appreciate them not as disembodied sources of interest, but with an awareness that they emanate from and reflect the Divine guidance that created the world and all of its treasures. It is this awareness that makes all the difference.

Notes

1. The Taz writes that is not found in other places. R. Shmaryahu Shulman, Shomer Mitzvah, 3.
2. It is questionable if the Rama is actually following the Rambam, because there is an important difference between them: the Rambam rules that the head of the household should light candles corresponding to the number of residents, while the Rama writes that all the residents should light their own set of candles. See Resp. Binyan Shlomo, II, 58; Chiddushei HaGriz to the Rambam, and Avi Ezri; Gevurot Yitzchak to Chanukah and Purim, 10; Shaarei Torah, 12; Zichron Shmuel, 19; Knesses Avraham, 6 and 8.
3 See Kokhvei Yitzchak, I, 7; Resp. Binyan Av, I, 26; Resp. Shavei Tzion, 28.

4 See Yoma 70a. Accordingly, some rishonim believed that the parshiyos of tefillin, which are always covered, have no requirement of hiddur (see Mordechai, Hil. Tefillin; Tosfos, Menachos 32; Darkhei Moshe, O.C. 32:1.)

5 Bava Kama 9a-b.

6 See Pnei Yehoshua; Resp. Mishneh Sachir, II, 195; Resp. Hod Tzvi, 6; Tiferet Torah, 18.

7 See also Resp. Moznei Tzedek, I, 75.

8 Chokhmat Shlomo 671 and Resp. HaElef Likh Shlomo, 380.

9 See also Resp. Shevet HaKehati, I, 208.

10 Again, a comparison to Sefirat HaOmer; see Shiltei Giborim, Shabbos II, 5; Resp. Riv vos Ephraim I, 444)

11 See Beis HaLevi al HaTorah; Mishnah Berurah, 675:5; Avi Ezri; Resp. Kin yan Torah B’Halakhah, VI, 50; Resp. Ksav Sofer, O.C. 133.)


13 See Biur HaGra; Resp. Chasam Sofer, O.C. 187; Resp. Ber Sarim, III, 72:8; Mishnas Ya’avetz.


15 See Mishnah Berurah, 675:14, and Birkas Shimon, glosses to Shulchan Arukh.

16 See Resp. R. Akiva Eiger, II, 13; Pri Chadash, and Eliyah Rabbah, 672; Birkhat Mordechai, II, 40; Resp. Binyan Shlomo, II, 59.

17 See Da’as Torah, 671:2; Resp. Torah L’Shmah, 162; Migd’nos Eliyahu, 200:4.


19 See, for example, R. Yochanan Fried in the journal Ohr HaKollel, and R. Chananyah Berzon, in the journal HaDarom, #41 p. 83.