

Seeing the Me'orei Ha'Aish

The Intentions Necessary at Havdalah

In Order to Recite the Bracha of Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish

Note: some of the ideas raised here may trigger a knee-jerk dismissal of 'this isn't how its always been understood/done!'; please only proceed to read this with an honest, open mind

Background Halacha

It's clear from the Gemara and Halacha that it's only possible to recite the bracha of 'Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish' on Motzai Shabbos upon a flame whose purpose is to illuminate, to give light¹, as opposed to any other purpose such as showing honor to a living or deceased person. And it's not enough that the person *also* intends for the illumination—that needs to be a primary motive as to what the candle is lit for².

Contemporary Problem

This is all nice and beautiful, but in our age of electricity it seems to be very problematic...

Unless you're stuck somewhere without any electricity, it seems impossible to say that we are lighting the candle with a primary intent of providing illumination—if and when we want illumination, we always flick on a switch! Being honest, the only reason why we light a candle at Havdala today is because of our heritage of making a 'Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish' on Motzai Shabbos, but that's tragically circular: we're not allowed to make the Bracha just because we want to make the Bracha; it can only be recited upon a candle that was actually lit for the sake of illumination! And it doesn't even help at all to turn off the electric lights in the house when you make Havdalah—that doesn't change this reality that your motive for lighting the candle is not at all for its light—if it was, then you would just use the electric ones!

¹ It's worthy to note that terms like 'for illumination' etc. don't appear at all in Chazal in this context, and in fact, Chazal never provide *any* sort of formulation as to what the purpose of the Havdala candle needs to be; all we find is certain cases they provide as *disqualifications*: when done to honor a living or deceased person, or when done for cooking food or raw materials. We will see soon how this point is significant.

² This is seemingly clear from what the Gemara says about a candle lit by a funeral: if they would not have lit a candle for the deceased had it been during the day then you could make a bracha on it, as clearly it was for illumination; if they would've lit it even if the funeral would have been in the day then you can't make a bracha on it because it was done for the honor of the deceased—even though everything else in the scenario is the same and quite likely it's illumination is also being appreciated by the people there, yet that's not sufficient since it wasn't a *primary* intention.

The Shemiras Shabbos Ke'hilchasa³ cites Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach ztz"l saying that it's a 'chiddush gadol/huge novelty' that we still make this bracha in our times, and that 'lechora nireh/seemingly it would be appropriate' to use a candle that was lit with real intentions of illumination (if and when you'll ever find such a candle today). Although Rav Shlomo Zalman didn't say to discontinue the common practice—somehow we can still consider it as if we are doing it for the illumination, as that's critical for the Bracha which we want to make—he was essentially begging for a better justification for it [see footnote as to why this is different and more difficult than the similar question that's commonly raised regarding Shabbos candles⁴].

Suggested Solution

The following is a humble suggestion of how even (and actually, *especially*) in our age of electricity we can properly make this bracha—in a very 'Mehadrin' way (literally):

True, our intentions when lighting a candle today is not for illumination in the *functional* sense, that the candlelight should help us see things around the room, but we *can* truly have a genuine motivation of illumination—provided that we stop to realize and appreciate this—in the very real sense of appreciating the *inherent beauty, awe, depth, etc. of natural candlelight itself!* [see footnote for a general breakdown of many different types of inherent benefit one can glean from the light, for all different personality types⁵]

³ פרק כ' הערה קנ"א'

⁴ A similar but different question is asked regarding lighting Shabbos candles: if we understand that the basis for lighting them is to illuminate the house so as not to bump into things and impinge on your enjoyment of Shabbos (which itself is not a simple assumption), then it would seem to be moot in our age of electricity? There, however, we don't find any Halachic requirement regarding the intent/motive of *the one lighting* the Shabbos candles—its just a matter of what *Chazal's* intent/motive was when enacting this Rabbinic Mitzvah; thus, the issue there is not as terrible, as Rabbinic enactments don't simply fall away even if their initial reasoning falls away (and especially there, where its not at all a given that the reasoning for Shabbos candles did indeed fall away due to the presence of electricity in our homes).

There is however a specific scenario of lighting Shabbos candles that is indeed subject to a question very similar to the one raised by Havdala: when Yom Tov falls on Friday, and we rely on the Eiruv Tavshilin to light the Shabbos candles at the end of Yom Tov—the Halachic setup of the Eiruv is such that it only permits work which is 'le'tozrech'/necessary, so here we may likewise ask: how can we justify the 'necessity' for having Shabbos candles in our age of electricity? There may be additional answers question to that question, but the solution offered here can apply there as well.

⁵ Light is so full of various wonders, there's literally something for everyone, for every character-type: for the aesthetic—the beauty and elegance of the flame itself, the way things look more graceful in its natural light, the general ambiance it creates in the room, etc.; for the intellectual—the numerous scientific wonders of flames, and of light in general; for the 'positivity-person'—the joy and love that light evokes; for the self-improvement-oriented soul—the nuggets of inspiration to be gained from the flame's unique traits, such as working against gravity, constant rejuvenation, etc.; for the spirituality-oriented soul—the deeper feelings/thoughts/sensitivities aroused by the hardly-physical flame (in line with the Torah's

As mentioned though, a person has to actually *appreciate* (at least one of) these inherent values in the light of the candle, *and to actually light it for that reason*, in order for that to serve as his justification for reciting the Bracha upon it.

And it actually makes sense that this point was apparently not considered by Rav Shlomo Zalman ztz"l—he grew up in the Old Yishuv of Yerushalayim where they viewed candles as day-to-day (or more accurately, night-to-night) functional utensils⁶! Specifically we, who hardly ever use them for that reason, are more in position to appreciate the inherent values in candlelight!

Supports

There are a good number of arguments to make in defense of this suggested idea (although it may be that none of them are absolute proofs, they all arguably add significant support of validity)

- 1) as mentioned in footnote 4, Chazal's formulation of the Bracha calls attention specifically to the fact that there are multiple lights/colors within the flame; this gives a strong impression that this phenomenon is fundamentally related to the Bracha, or else it wouldn't deserve to get such a central spotlight, 2) Chazal say in Pesachim 53b that the reason why we make this Bracha specifically on Motzai Shabbos is because that's when fire was first created; this is elaborated upon in the next page, 54a, where it says that at the end of Shabbos, Hashem 'gave Adam a Divine level of knowledge/understanding, through which he rubbed two rocks together and produced fire'. The strong implication here is that we are dealing not only with practical, worldly matters but just as much (if not more so) with profound, wondrous ones [see footnote⁷ for further elaboration on this point,

teaching: 'the human soul is a Candle of Hashem'); for the religious-law-oriented soul: the religious feelings/thoughts/sensitivities aroused by the flame (in line with the Torah's teaching: 'for a candle is [like] a Mitzvah, and Torah [like] light').

Perhaps the most amazing, beautiful feature of all is this very fact that it's so universally attractive! And that's even reflected in the wonder of all the colors/sub-lights within it blending/dancing together holistically, which is exactly what we highlight in the Bracha: 'Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish/One who is creating the many lights of the flame'! (And truthfully, everyone is surely capable of relating to all of the above aspects of natural light, at least to some degree, no matter what orientation you do or don't have).

⁶ According to the Gabai at 'Beit HaRav Kook', Reb Yitzchak Marmorstein, when that house of the first Chief Rabbi was built in 1923—when Rav Shlomo Zalman was just around Bar Mitzvah—it was the first building in Yerushalayim built with electricity.

⁷ A similar but slightly different idea is expressed by Chazal in Pirkei d'R' Eliezer Perek 20 (cited in Tur 296) which can shed a great deal of light here. There it says that at the end of that first Shabbos, when Adam realized that his time in Gan Eden was coming to an end, he became afraid that the snake would attack him again. Hashem sent him a 'pillar of fire' *להאיר לו ולשמרו*—to make light for him and to guard him from anything bad' and when Adam 'saw the pillar of fire' he was 'happy in his heart and said, 'now I know that Hashem is with me'; he stretched his hands towards the fire and said the Bracha of Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish'. Here too, while its possible for a person to read this on a superficial level, as if it was just a matter of being

able to see if the snake was coming, it seems quite clear that there was more depth to the light—it was a heaven-sent pillar of fire, which guarded him from *all* forms of bad and gave him light, and thus made him feel inner joy and a sense of Hashem's Presence being there with him (ala 'behold, here is the G-d of my salvation, I will be calm and not afraid— הנה קל ישועתי אבטח ו'לא אפחד', the first verse we customarily cite at the beginning of our Havdala). See the next footnote for an additional argument that's closely related to this one.

and see footnotes ⁸ ⁹ for additional related points of support], 3) as mentioned in footnote 1, Chazal never provide any sort of formulation as to what one's motive

⁸ There is another Halacha taught in the Mishna regarding the usage of the Havdala candle, distinct but closely related to the one we are dealing with: 'we don't recite the Bracha on the candle until we *אוֹרוֹ לְאוֹרוֹ*'. That key term of 'yay'os'u le'oro' is generally understood here to refer to deriving some sort of benefit from the light, meaning to say that it's not enough to initially light the candle for the sake of illumination, as discussed above, rather there must be some element of getting a benefit from the candlelight once its lit (before the Bracha is recited). This concept would be understandable, but what is incredibly odd here is the word choice of 'yay'os'u'—it doesn't seem to appear anywhere in the literature of Chazal in this sense of deriving benefit. And what we do find throughout the literature of Chazal is that this root-word is often used in the sense of 'fitting/proper/graceful', and this seems to be indeed supported by how it's used in Tanach, in Yermiah 10:7, "because it is fitting for You—*כִּי לֵךְ יֵאָתֶה*". But before discussing how that would theoretically read into our Mishna, Chazal here—not the Babylonian 'here' but the Israeli 'here', in the Talmud Yerushalmi on our Mishna—actually provide an even more primary source/linkage from the Torah, in Parshas Vayishlach: "with this shall they acquiesce/be appeased to us—*בְּזָאת יֵאָתֶה לָנוּ*" (34:22). The exact word of our Mishna is used there, in the context of Dena's abduction by Shechem, where his father, Chamor relayed to his townspeople that Dena's family would acquiesce/be appeased to let Shechem marry her if they all do a Bris Mila. The root-word actually appears two more times in that same story (and nowhere else in the Chumash!), all usages clearly having the same meaning. Now, how does *this* fit into the Halacha of our Mishna regarding the Havdala candle?!

In light of the teachings above from Chazal regarding the very first 'Havdala candle' of Adam HaRishon (which the Gemara in Pesachim clearly says is the basis for ours, as cited above), there seems to be a clear message and meaning, albeit subtly conveyed: just as Adam worried about leaving his Edenic setting at the end of Shabbos, and the only thing that made him be *appeased/acquiesce* to settle for a lower, 'darker' lifestyle outside of Gan Eden was seeing the 'me'orei ha'aish' of the light which Hashem showed him/guided him to create, so too we undergo a similar series of feelings each week at the end of Shabbos: we wish to stay in Shabbos-mode forever, never to return to the lower, mundane realms of our weekday-lives, and so Hashem enlightened us to create a fire and see the wondrous 'me'orei ha'aish' (in all the of the ways listed in footnote 5, and more!)—in order to appease/gladden our hearts, and help us feel that His Enlightening Presence continues to be with us.

Thus, the words of the Mishna shine so beautifully: we only make the Bracha on the candle once we are appeased by it's light! (the preface 'ל' is often used in conjunction with light in this way, meaning 'by its light'). So yes, the Halacha of 'yay'os'u le'oro' does practically translate into a matter of getting benefit, as Rashi and other Rishonim say, and it could be any level of benefit such as physical/practical ones, as is clear from the Gemara, but certainly we would say that a psychological/soulful benefit from the flame is just as much (and probably more so) of a fulfillment of this Halacha! (This argument will be further elaborated upon in footnote 10) [The reader is invited to explore different ways of how the first/common meaning of 'ya'os'u' cited above—fitting/proper/beautiful—could also potentially fit into both the Halcha of the Mishna and the conversation between the Shevatim & Chamor]

Now, as mentioned at the beginning of this footnote, these two Halachos are distinct—one addresses the *motive one had for lighting the candle*, and the other addresses the need for a person to *get some usage from it after its lit*—but clearly they are closely related to one another, and if we establish that the latter Halacha can be fulfilled with this psychological benefit, then it makes for a very strong argument that the same would go for the first Halacha as well [this

for lighting the candle needs to be; all we find is certain cases they provide as *disqualifications*¹⁰. Thus, the burden of proof would lie on the view which seeks

same point would go for the argument of the next footnote as well, which brings out another support from this second Halacha of 'עד שיאותו'.

⁹ In the Yerushalmi referenced in the previous footnote, a 'source' is cited as to that additional Halacha of the Mishna regarding 'עד שיאותו': "as we find in the pesukim in Bereishis—first it says 'וירא אלוקים את האור כי טוב', and only then it says 'ויבדל אלוקים'". Putting aside for a moment the seemingly-wild connection between our Havdala & the 'Havdala' of Day 1, we can at least see from here that Chazal are clearly considering Hashem's 'seeing the light, that it was good' to be an exemplification of this concept of 'yay'osu'; in other words, *seeing goodness* in light is the very illustration Chazal give us for this Halacha of being 'yay'os' from the light before reciting the Bracha of Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish!

Two more interesting, related points to note: 1) Chazal are speaking out the clear but subtle connection here between 'Day 1'—when a tremendously Holy light was first brought into the world, but then only a small remnant of it was *separated/נבדל* and kept in our world to enlighten it—and 'Day 8'/Motzai Shabbos/the reiterating 'Day 1' of the week—when the supernal, Holy DeLight of Edenic Shabbos departed from Adam, but then a lower manifestation of light/fire was brought out to fill the void (and we ourselves go through the same steps on our micro level every Motzai Shabbos, as discussed above). 2) A similar 'light is good to look at'-sentiment is expressed from the human perspective as well, by Shlomo HaMelech in Koheles (11:7): 'and the light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun—*ומתוק האור, וטוב לעיניים לראות את השמש*'. (No liability taken here for anyone who tries staring at the sun... the truth is though, 'שמש' can also refer to the light which emanates from it, not necessarily the ball of gas itself, and 'אור' refers at times to candlelight [as in *כי נר מצוה ותורה אור*] as is possibly the case here).

¹⁰ We do find a positive formula for the other related Halacha in the Mishna, discussed in the footnotes above, regarding the need for 'yay'osu' from the flame once it is lit, before reciting the Bracha: 'אין מברכין על הנר עד שיאותו לאורו'. This is actually spelled out more clearly in the Braisa (ג:) which states: 'One doesn't bless [Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish] until he sees the flame and is served/benefited by its light—*אינו מברך עד שיראה שלהבת וישתמש לאורה*'. While it's not definite that this Halacha parallels the main point of this essay which deals with the type of *motive* one must have *when lighting* the candle, it is certainly related, and quite possibly does parallel it exactly, as we will try to concisely elaborate on now.

As a general one-line overview of the sugya: there are two opinions in the Gemara (שם) as to the practical meaning of this line of the Braisa/Mishna regarding getting usage from the Havdala candle, and there are a number of Rishonim on either side of the psak.

Rav (the earliest Amora) says that the terms 'yay'osu' & 'mishtamesh' in this context do not mean to say that one must get benefit from the Havdalah candle 'mamash—literally/practically', but just that in theory it is capable of providing someone benefit—if they would be standing close to it. Ravah and other later Amoraim take these keywords literally: one must actually derive benefit from the candle in order to recite the Bracha.

There are some perplexing things going on in this discussion of the Gemara: 1) Why/how would the later Amoraim argue against Rav, a semi-Tana, without any other Tanaim or early Amoraim to rely on? 2) From the opposite end—why did Rav feel compelled to *not* take the Mishna in its simple understanding: 'we don't recite the Bracha until we *have* 'yay'osu' by its light'—what is the grounds for making things not literal over here? Furthermore, the Halacha itself seems a bit odd according to Rav: if there is significance here to the light providing benefit of illumination, why should it only be 'half-way'—that it's capable of providing the person benefit but he doesn't actually have to get the benefit?

One thing does seem clear from this: the latter questions seem to answer the first one—this is what compelled Rava (who in general is especially sensitive to making words of Tannaim ‘lav davka/not literal’) and the other later Amoraim to uncharacteristically argue on Rav. What really begs for an explanation then is the peculiar opinion of Rav.

But lo and behold: Rav was the one in the Yerushalmi (see footnote 8) who explained the highly peculiar phrase of the Mishna, ‘yay’osu’, to be in the sense of ‘appeasement/acquiescence’, just as it’s used three times in the story of Shechem & Dina (and nowhere else in the Chumash!). It follows that Rav likely was convinced that this highly unique word-choice of Chazal—which we don’t seem to find anywhere else when they want to describe ‘getting benefit/הנאה’—must be integral to the understanding and application of this Halacha. How so exactly?

Seemingly, Rav could have theoretically understood the Mishna *literally* in light of the ‘yay’osu’ idea, i.e. that it would have required the person to actually feel a sense of appeasement from the light; what sort of appeasement—regarding the transition explained above (footnote 8), from Shabbos-Bliss-Mode to weekday-work-mode! He clearly did not go to this extent however, and seemingly because it’s not at all reasonable that Chazal would require every man, woman and youth to be on the mental/spiritual level of understanding/feeling all of this whenever they are to recite the Bracha. At the same time however, he felt compelled not to go to the other extreme of interpreting the Mishna in the more simple/easy sense of *actually* needing to derive some sort of illuminative benefit from it—as the other Amoraim interpreted it—because that would not only be *ignoring* the amazing idea of ‘yay’osu’ which Chazal are trying to convey here, it would *actually render it almost entirely irrelevant here*, because once a person would be *required* to get some illuminative benefit, which would typically be fulfilled by most people in the physical sense, that would become the primary intent when lighting and using it, all but wiping out the beautiful depth of what it’s really supposed to be about (according to Rav). So how *did* Rav interpret the Mishna in light of the ‘yay’osu’ idea?

It seems that he saw two levels of meaning in the Mishna, *both* of them being valid on the practical/Halachic level: 1) the Mishna is teaching a baseline Halacha that the flame must be capable of providing physical/practical illumination, as long as a person would be standing next to it—this is what’s clearly expressed in the Gemara cited above as the Mishna’s prerequisite for making the Bracha according to Rav. 2) The Mishna is conveying an additional message—more subtly, through the highly peculiar word-choice of ‘yay’osu—that the *ideal* form of illuminative-benefit one should be deriving from the candlelight (although not required) is on the *psychological* plane of post-Shabbos-appeasement, as explained above based on other sources in Shas & Midrashim.

Message #2 is of course what justifies the fact that Message #1 only goes ‘half-way’—both on account of the Mishna’s words being not fully literal, and on account of it’s Halacha being not fully ‘strict’ and allowing for the light to be just *capable* of providing practical illuminative benefit and not that one actually gets that benefit—as this is all necessary in order to make room for the ‘yay-osu-depth’ of Message #2, as explained above. And of course, the outcome of Point #2 is that it shows the validity (even as a Mehadrin!) of this subtler form of illuminative benefit when it comes to the Bracha of Borei Me’orei Ha’Aish. Thus, there should be no doubt that according to Rav, if one’s motive when lighting the Havdala candle was for this type of ‘yay’osu’-benefit, he may make the Bracha on it!

Now, the question becomes: does the dissenting opinion of Rava and co. agree with the validity of this form of subtler benefit? The answer to this seems to be: safek—unclear. On the one hand, they clearly don’t understand the Mishna in the whole elaborate manner ascribed above to Rav; rather, they require a person to actually stand near the candle to receive illuminative benefit from it, and the *example* they even provide is regarding discerning similar objects from one another—a matter of practical illuminative benefit. On the other hand, it seems fair and reasonable to argue in the other direction as well: even this opinion never expressed any such

to disqualify the above motives, especially since they seem very reasonable, fitting, and even implied by the words of Chazal's Bracha.

Bottom line: if you're going to keep saying the Bracha of Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish despite the issue raised above (who isn't?!), then you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by having these appreciations in mind/heart/soul. To reiterate though: it's a matter of thinking about/appreciating them *before* igniting the flame, and that they should actually be your motive for lighting it—and *then* recite 'Borei Me'orei Ha'Aish' and take delight in these wonderful gifts of candlelight (and sure, be grateful to Hashem as well for the fact that it has the ability to help us see things :-)

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limitation on the type of illuminative benefit, that it could only be on the practical plane and not psychological; they merely provided an example which is most universally relevant/relatable, but it's very possible that they validate the psychological benefits of illumination as well.

Now, add to this another significant safek/uncertainty (mentioned above in the end of footnote 8): it is not clear if the requirement regarding the *motive when lighting the candle* is exactly parallel to this requirement regarding the *benefit received from it once it's lit*. Thus, even if we were to say that according to the opinion of Rava and co., the Halachic requirement of 'yay-osu'-benefit allows for only the *practical* illuminative type, they might still agree that the requirement regarding the motive when lighting is more lenient (as it's more removed from the actual fulfillment of the purpose/benefit of the candlelight), and that it is open to any type of illuminative purposes, even if only on the psychological plane.

Bringing it down to the practical, Halachic level then, it follows from the above that there are arguably *three Halachic doubts which all work together in favor of the main idea suggested in this essay*, that a psychological benefit of the candle's illumination may serve as the candle-lighter's motive in order for people to recite the Bracha on it: 1 & 2) the sfekos/doubts within the opinion of Rava, as explained just above that even he may agree to the validity of this type of motive, 3) the doubt as to which opinion in the Gemara we should follow altogether: Rav—who would seem to certainly validate this type of motive, as explained above—or Rava—who may also agree, based on the 'sfek sfeka'. And although the Shulchan Aruch sides with Rava on the general issue of requiring that the person must stand close to the candle, a significant number of Rishonim actually pasken like Rav—which would come with the side-implication of validating the 'psychological-benefit-motive', as stated above—and thus it's fitting for this opinion of Rav/the-Rishonim-who-pasken-like-him to be brought into the equation, making this point re the 'psychological-benefit-motive' a sfek-sfek-sfeika in favor of validating it.