Whose Candle Must Go?

When Rabbi Tanchum of Noi received the following question he decided to use it as a topic for his public lecture: “If there is a candle whose light is preventing a mortally ill person from sleeping and thus endangering his life — may one extinguish this candle on Shabbos?”

He began his lecture with a reference to the words of King David in Tehillim that “the dead cannot praise Hashem,” and stressed the urgency of studying Torah and performing mitzvos during one's lifetime because there is no opportunity to do so after death. After a lengthy discourse on the circumstances of David's own death on Shabbos, the sage concluded his lecture with this ruling on the halachic question put to him: “The light created by man is called a candle and man’s soul is called a candle (Mishlei 20:27). It is preferable for man’s candle to be extinguished in favor of Hashem’s candle.”

Maharsha points to the similarity between this gemara and one further on in Mesechta Shabbos (151b) in which Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel states: “The Shabbos may be violated to save the life of a one-day old baby but not to bury King David. In regard to the child we say that it is preferable to violate one Shabbos to enable this child to observe many future Shabboses, but in regard to King David there is no longer any possibility for him to perform any mitzvos.”

The interesting thing about both of these two aforementioned rationales for violating the Shabbos to save a life is that neither of them is the conclusive source for the ruling. In the Talmudic discussion of this source (Mesechta Yoma 85b) the explanation about the candle is not even mentioned and the one about observing future Shabboses is rejected as inadequate. The only fully adequate source, concludes the gemara, is the passage (Vayikra 18:5) “You shall live in them,” which teaches us that wherever there is even a reasonable possibility that Shabbos observance may endanger life it must be abandoned.

Rashi explains that since uneducated people came to public lectures it was the policy of sages like Rabbi Tanchum to embellish their halachic rulings with such homiletic explanations which would be more effective in getting their point across.

Two of Each

After spending twelve years of intense Torah study in the cave where they hid from their Roman pursuers, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar found difficulty in reconciling themselves with an imperfect world in which people neglected Torah study. Even after being sent back to the cave for another year by Hashem for being too destructive in their criticism, Rabbi Elazar still could not make peace with the world despite his father's efforts to change his perspective. He finally succeeded in doing so on one occasion so dramatically described in the gemara.

Shabbos was approaching and an elderly Jew was rushing home clutching two bundles of hadassim (myrtle branches) in his hands. “What are these for?” the sages asked him. “To honor the Shabbos,” he replied. “But isn’t one bundle enough?” they wondered. “One is for Zachor,” he explained, “and the other for Shamor.”

“See how Jews love their mitzvos,” said Rabbi Shimon to his son, who finally made peace with an imperfect world.

In the two Torah accounts of the Ten Commandments, the commandment regarding Shabbos is once introduced (Shmos 20:8) with the words “Zachor (remember) the Shabbos” and another time (Devarim 5:12) “Shamor (observe) the Shabbos.” Although both Zachor and Shamor were said in one Divine word, as we say in our Lecha Dodi prayer on Shabbos Eve, they refer to two different dimensions of this holy day. Zachor relates to the positive actions we do on Shabbos to sanctify it — Kiddush, prayers, meals and zemiros songs — while Shamor is the title for the vast category of creative labors prohibited on the Day of Rest.

The custom of lighting at least two candles in honor of the Shabbos is also based on the need to focus on both of these dimensions. The hadassim in their role of fragrant beauty serve as a source for the flowers which decorate the Shabbos table. But Maharsha sees another dimension in the choice of hadassim which appear in Tanach (Zecharia 1:8) as a symbol of the righteous. Just as we learned (Shabbos 23a) that one who is diligent in lighting Shabbos candles will merit having sons who are Torah scholars, so will Shabbos-honoring hadassim, representing righteousness, achieve the same goal.