Why Did They Even Bother to Light the Menorah?

**Question:** What is the Mitzvah of the lights of Chanukah – lighting them or placing them in the correct place?

**Answer:** It is well-known that this is a dispute in the Gemara (Shabbat 22-23) as to whether the Mitzvah is the lighting of the Chanukah lights, or whether the Mitzvah is that the lights be placed in the proper spot, i.e. lit for a certain period of time. What is the difference? One example is in a case where someone who is not obligated in the Mitzvah, like a non-Jew, kindles the lights and then a Jew, who is obligated, picks them up and puts them down. If the
Mitzvah is the actual lighting, since the lights were kindled by someone who is not obligated, the Jew cannot fulfill his obligation with them. If, however, the Mitzvah is placing the lights, even though the lights were kindled by someone who is not obligated, since they were put down by the Jew, he does fulfill his obligation. The Halachah is that the actual lighting is the Mitzvah (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 675:1). This is also verified by the blessing itself: "Who has made us holy with His Mitzvot and commands us to light...".

Based on this discussion, we can ask: What exactly was the miracle of Chanukah? Was the miracle the actual lighting of the Menorah in the Temple or was the miracle that they were lit for a certain period of time? The miracle seems to be that they were lit for a certain period of time, since there was no problem lighting the Menorah – there was enough oil for one day! If we say that the miracle was the actual lighting of the Menorah, what was the miracle?

Answer: The miracle was that it took great strength to be bold enough to even light the Menorah in the first place. They could have said: "Why should we light it? It needs to be lit for eight days before new oil will be ready. It isn't worth it to light it for one day." But they did not say this. They said: "Hashem
commanded us to light. We will light. What will be tomorrow? We don't know.

Hashem will decide." The same is true of the revolt. "You are going to rebel against the Greeks?! You think you can win?! Sure you can begin a battle, but how are you going to win? Why even start then?" "We were commanded by Hashem, so we will begin. After that Hashem will decide." There was a great miracle, but they didn't know that this was going to occur when they began.

This is "Mesirat Nefesh" – true self-sacrifice. There are many example of great self-sacrifice in our tradition, but the miracle of Chanukah is unique. Up to this point, there were always prophets. Here, however, there were no prophets to give direction. They acted because they understood what Hashem commanded them to do.

This is similar to the question of why Yom Ha-Atzmaut was established on the 5th of Iyar in particular, since on that day no miracle occurred. The Jewish State was declared, and with it a life-threatening situation began (Chanukah and Purim were established on the day after the "war" ended). Our Rabbi, Rav Tzvi Yehudah Ha-Cohain Kook, explained that the courage to declare the State is the miracle of miracles, the soul and root of all of the miracles and
wonders (Le-Netivot Yisrael vol. 1, p. 179). The Talmud discusses a shepherd
who abandoned his flock, leaving it prey to either a wolf or a lion who came
and tore it to pieces. The Rabbis established that his responsibility for the
slaughter depends on whether or not he would have been able to save the
animals. If he would not have been able to overcome the attacking animal, he
is exempt from all payment. The Talmud asks: Why is this so? Perhaps it
would have happened as for David: "Your servant slew both the lion and the
bear" (Shmuel 1 17:36)? Perhaps a minor miracle would have occurred (Baba
Metzia 106a)? The Tosafot described the miracle: "A spirit of courage and the
knowledge to wage war" (Tosafot ibid.). So too in the matter of the declaration
of the State: "The awakening, the exerting of effort, the philosophizing and the
strengthening for the drive to rescue and revive," is a miracle from the
Heavens, "with a supreme and inner stimulus of power." The fact that the
Nation of Israel was filled with the spirit to fight and the knowledge to wage
war is the foundation of all miracles (Le-Netivot Yisrael ibid.). From this act
flowed all of the miracles which led to establishment and strengthening of the
State of Israel.