

Do you prefer wine or candles?

In the Torah portion, Vayaeshev, which we will read in Shul this Shabbos, we learn about the story of Joseph and his brothers. We learn how Joseph was filled with his own dreams and how his brothers hated him because of his dreams. Even his father, Jacob, rebuked him for them but then the Torah says a strange thing. It says, "His Father watched the thing". What does this mean? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the answer that the Talmud gives to questions regarding Chanukah. The Talmud in Gemora Shabbos asks, "What happens if a person only has enough money to buy either Chanukah Candles or wine for Kiddush? Which one should he buy?" The Gemora answers that he should buy the Chanukah candles. At first glance this answer seems very strange. Shabbos is a Biblical holiday while Chanukah is only a Rabbinical holiday. Kiddush is a symbol of personal holiness and personal dedication while the Chanukah candles are a symbol of a communal struggle for religious liberty. Shouldn't a personal vision of holiness take precedence? Then the Gemora goes on to make a peculiar statement. It says that one who observes the commandment of the Chanukah candles will be worthy to possess scholarly children, while one who observes the Kiddush faithfully will only be worthy to acquire personal wealth. Why? The answers to these questions, I believe, lie in a deep insight of Judaism which unfortunately today is being overlooked. Judaism has always believed that individual achievement is good and important, but it has never believed that in all circumstances and times individual achievement will always lead to the greatest common good. Often individual achievement will hinder the common good. If the Maccabees would have only thought of their careers there wouldn't be any Jews today. The Kiddush is a symbol of individual achievement both spiritual and physical. If there is a conflict between Chanukah and Kiddush, Chanukah takes precedence. This is what the Torah means when it says Jacob watched the thing. The word in Hebrew for watch also means to filter or strain. If Joseph would in the future filter his ambition by considerations of the common good, he'd be all right. If not, it would be bad. How do you manage your ambition? Do you prefer wine or candles?