

Shabbos Candles - Part I

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Shabbos candles are the hallmark of a Jewish home. For many people, their earliest childhood memories are of their mother lighting candles and blessing them as the twilight approached on Friday afternoon. Marranos told stories about their parents being Moser Nefesh (risking their lives) so that the holiest day of the week would have its source of illumination. What follows is a discussion of the Halachos and minhagim that relate to this central element of the Jewish religion.

Source of the Obligation

The gemara (Shabbos 25b) tells us that lighting Shabbos candles is a chovah (an obligation). The chiyuv (obligation) to light candles is Rabbinic according to most Rishonim (see Rambam Hilchos Shabbos [5:1] and Responsa of the Rashba [Chelek 4:295]). The Rishonim offer two reasons for this takanah: Kavod Shabbos and Oneg Shabbos. The gemara (Shabbos 23b) writes that if one has the opportunity to purchase Chanukah candles or Shabbos candles, he should buy the Shabbos candles because Shalom Bayit takes precedence. Thus we see that the reason for lighting Shabbos candles is so that there should be peace in the home. Rashi (s.v. Shalom) cites a later gemara (25b) which explains that people don't enjoy sitting in the dark and therefore, there won't be peace in the home. This is clearly a mitzvah that adds to one's enjoyment of the Shabbos and therefore falls under the category of Oneg (see L'vush 263,1). Rashi (25a s.v. chovah) also writes that it is based on Kavod Shabbos, because one only has an important meal when his area is properly illuminated. Tosfos (s.v. Hadlakas) writes almost the exact same thing as Rashi, but explains that it is a subcategory of Oneg Shabbos, as the candlelight adds enjoyment to the meal. The Rambam (Hilchos Shabbos 5:1) seems to agree with Tosfos and writes that it is included in the mitzvah of Oneg Shabbos. These opinions seem more consistent with the aforementioned gemara, since Shalom Bayit seems to be synonymous with Oneg Shabbos. However, the Rambam himself, elsewhere (Hilchos Shabbos 30:5) counts Hadlakas Neiros as Kavod Shabbos. The Aruch Ha'Shulchan (263:2) explains that really Shabbos candles fulfill both Oneg and Kavod Shabbos. When lit by the meal, they lend a sense of importance to the proceedings and are therefore a kiyum (fulfillment) of Kavod, but in the rest of the house, the light provided by additional Shabbos candles prevents members of the family from tripping or bumping into things, and therefore constitutes Oneg (it's possible that Tosfos would agree to such a categorization, but apply it differently. The sefer Tosefes Shabbos (263:1) writes that in the room in which one is dining, the candles are for Oneg, and in the rest of the house they constitute Kavod. Perhaps Tosfos would agree to such a statement.)

The proper categorization of the mitzvah isn't just a question of understanding, it also carries with it at least two major nafka minas (See sefer Kavod V'Oneg Shabbos by Rav Simcha Bunim Cohen).

1. The Rema (263:4) writes that if one's house was already illuminated before the onset of Shabbos, he should extinguish the existing lights and relight them in honor of Shabbos. This suggests that the reason for lighting candles is not merely Oneg Shabbos, for if it was, pre-existing lights would suffice. One can enjoy the Shabbos regardless of when the candles were lit. But if we assume that there's also an aspect of Kavod, then the lights would need to be lit specifically for Shabbos.
2. The aforementioned Rashi (also see Biur Halachah s.v. Bachurim) implies that if the only reason for lighting candles was Kavod, simply lighting in the room that one eats his meal would suffice. However, once we include the reason of Oneg, one is obligated to make sure that his house is well lit, to avoid any possible accidents, and the resulting internal strife.

The procedure for lighting candles

The mishnah in Shabbos (31b) implies that Hadlakas Neiros is one of the Mitzvos of which women generally tend to be in charge. There are two major reasons given for this:

(1) The Rambam (5:4) and Rashi (32a s.v. hareini) write that since women are generally in charge of domestic affairs, they have precedence when it comes to mitzvot involving the home.

(2) Rashi also quotes the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah perek 17, also see Yerushalmi Shabbos 2:6) which explains that since Chavah was partially responsible for the death of Adam Ha'Rishon¹, who is called 'oro shel olam', women took upon themselves to help rekindle the world's holy lights. The Mishnah Brurah quotes the Magen Avraham who says that even though women generally light the candles, the man of the house should set them up.

The Mishnah Brurah (262:11) writes that women who light candles have a minhag to be fully dressed in their Shabbos clothes (though the Mishnah Brurah adds that lighting on time obviously takes precedence over being dressed for Shabbos). Another popular minhag is cited by the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (75:2) that one should give some money to tzedakah before lighting candles. The K'tzos Ha'Shulchan (74:19) explains that this minhag originated from the times of the Geonim to give money to the Rebbi Meir Ba'al Ha'Neis fund to support those living in Eretz Yisrael. Once the woman is ready to light, she should first light the candles and then say the bracha. The Rema (sif 5) cites the Mordechai who explains that we assume that the bracha on the candles is a woman's way of bringing in the Shabbos. Therefore, once she accepts Shabbos upon herself, she can no longer light the candles. Since she must make the bracha after she lights the candles (because lighting the candles signifies the acceptance of Shabbos) she should be careful to avoid getting benefit before the bracha thereby being Mikayeim the Din of Over L'asyaso (avoiding benefit from something without a bracha). The Rema actually writes that she should cover the candles with her hands. Sefer Minhag Yisrael Torah conjectures that perhaps this is the source for the common custom that women wave their hands around before covering their eyes. Since they have to cover

¹ Since Chavah caused Adam to sin, she caused him to lose immortality and in essence caused his death.

the candles, and there too many candles to conceal if one simply leaves her hands in the same place, she should move them around, symbolizing that she wishes to separate between her eyes and all of the candles before covering her eyes [as the Kaf Hachaim (34) mandates in such a case]. However, if the husband is lighting the candles, the Aruch Ha'Shulchan (74:13) recommends that he should say the bracha before lighting and have in mind not to accept Shabbos until later. Furthermore, on Yom Tov, since there is no Issur (prohibition) of lighting candles, both the Mishnah Brurah (168:27) and Aruch Ha'Shulchan (ibid) pasken that a woman should say the bracha before she lights. This is contrary to the opinion of the Magen Avraham (ibid:12) who assumes that we say Lo Plug Rabanan [we say the rule remains in place even though the reason might not apply] in this case. In certain cases, the Rema (ibid:9) permits a woman who's lighting to delay her acceptance of the Shabbos even after she has lit candles. However, the Mishnah Brurah (s.k. 44) limits this only to cases of need, since some Poskim are of the opinion that one can not light candles without accepting Shabbos.

Upon concluding the mitzvah, many women have the minhag to Daven for their sons to grow up to be Talmidei Chachamim. The Mishnah Brurah (ibid:2) explains that this is based on the gemarah (Shabbos 23b) that says that one who performs this mitzvah with great care will merit having sons who are Talmidei Chachamim, as the passuk in Mishlei states (see Rashi s.v. Banim) "Ki Ner Mitzvah V'Torah Or", that a candle is a mitzvah and the Torah is its light.