

The Laws and Customs of Chanukah

הלכות ומנהגי חנוכה.

Background.

The Rambam writes¹, 'During the period of the Second Beis HaMikdash, during the rule of the wicked Syrian - Greeks, evil decrees were enacted against the Jews. They sought to wipe out their religion and did not permit them to learn Torah or to perform Mitzvos. They stretched out their hands and stole the Jews' money and daughters. They entered into the Beis HaMikdash, broke down the barriers and rendered impure all the ritually pure things there. The Jews were greatly oppressed by them and they were put under great pressure until the G-d of their fathers had mercy upon them and saved them. The house of Chashmonai, the high priests over powered them and killed them and saved Israel from their hands. They crowned a king from among the Kohanim and the monarchy returned to Israel for more than two hundred years, until the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash.

As a result of this, the Chachamim who were in that generation established that these eight days, starting on the 25th of Kislev should be days of simcha and hallel. And on these days we light candles at the entrance of the houses, each of the eight nights. These days are called Chanukah.'

Jewish History Timeline:

2928 – [-832bce] **Start of building of First Temple.**
 2938 – [-822bce] **First Temple completed.**
 3338 – [-422bce] **First Temple destroyed.**
 3406 – [-354bce] **Megillas Esther written.**
 3408 – [-352bce] **Start of building of Second Temple.**
 3412 – [-348bce] **Second Temple completed.**
 3426 – [-334bce] **Wall built around Yerushalayim.**
 3590 – [-170bce] **Start of Greek decrees.**
 3622 – [-138bce] **Chanukah miracle.**
 3828 (3830) [68ce (70ce)] – **Second Temple destroyed.**

- There are three basic reasons why the oil had to last for 8 days.
 1. The fresh, pure oil was a 4 day journey away from Yerushalayim.
 2. All the people who could produce oil were tamei, and so they would have to wait 7 days to become tahor and to be able to produce the oil.
 3. For the first seven days they were busy with rebuilding the mizbeach and the vessels for the avoda.

¹ הלכות חנוכה ג'א-ג'.

General.

- The days of Chanukah are not considered to be a yom tov, as such melacha is permitted and one does not wear yom tov clothes.
- Women however, have a minhag of not doing melacha during the first 30 minutes that the candles are burning. However, this only applies to the kind of melacha that may not do on Chol HaMoed such as laundry and sewing.
- There is however a mitzvah of hallel and hodaah, to praise Hashem and to thank Him for the miracles. As such, one should recall the miracles that took place at that time, and this should be an inspiration to increase ones avodas Hashem².
- Full Hallel is recited each day of Chanukah³.
- Unlike Purim, there is no mitzvah to have a special seuda on Chanukah, however if one sings לשירות ותשבחות to Hashem, then the meal becomes a seudas mitzvah⁴.
- There are those who have the custom of eating milchig foods, or foods cooked with oil in commemoration of the miracles that occurred through these things⁵.
- One should give extra tzedaka on Chanukah, especially to needy Torah scholars.
- Al Hanissim is recited at every tefilla and every birkas hamazon. If one realises that they missed it out and has finished the amida or benching, they do not have to bench or daven again.

The Chanukah Candles.

- The mitzvah of Chanukah candles is a very precious one and one should be particular to fulfil it so as to publicise the miracle and to thank Hashem for all that He has done for us⁶. The gemara says⁷ that one who is particular to light (Shabbos and Chanukah-Rashi) candles properly will merit sons who are talmidei chachamim as the pasuk says⁸ כי נר מצוה ותורה אור.

Who is obligated to light Chanukah candles.

- All adult Jews, both men and women⁹, are obligated to light Chanukah candles every night of Chanukah.
There are two basic reasons why women are obligated in Chanukah candles, even though it is a positive, time bound commandment.
 1. They were also beneficiaries of the military miracle¹⁰.
 2. The miracle took place through a woman (i.e. Yehudis)¹¹.
- The primary obligation of Chanukah candles is נר איש וביתו i.e. one candle per household per night. The minhag Ashkenaz is that mehadrin min hamehadrin is for each member of the household to light one candle on the first night, two on the second etc¹².

² פמ"ג א"א רס"י או"ח תר"ע. ומובא בשם כמה אחרונים כגון השל"ה הק', החת"ס ועוד.

³ או"ח תרפ"ג:א'.

⁴ או"ח תר"ע:ב'.

⁵ רמ"א או"ח תר"ע:ב' ומ"ב ס"ק י'.

⁶ רמב"ם הל' חנוכה ד':י"ב.

⁷ גמ' שבת כג:

⁸ משלי ו':כ"ג.

⁹ או"ח תרע"א, תרע"ה:ג' ומ"ב שם.

¹⁰ גמ' שבת כג. בשם ריב"ל, טוש"ע או"ח תרע"ה:ג'.

¹¹ או"ח תרע"ה מ"ב ס"ק י'.

¹² רמ"א או"ח תרע"ה:ב'.

- Sefardim light one menorah for the whole family¹³.
- A wife fulfils her obligation through her husband's lighting as אשתו כגופו.
- There are various minhagim as to whether an unmarried woman living in her parents home lights Chanukah candles.
- An unmarried woman living on her own must light Chanukah candles.

When to light Chanukah candles.

- The minhag Yerushalayim is to light candles at sunset (shkiya)¹⁴.
- The minhag in Chutz la Aretz is to light candles at Tzeis HaKochavim¹⁵. This is at 4:46 pm this year (in London). One who regularly davens Maariv Bizmano should ideally do so before lighting Chanukah candles¹⁶.
- Whatever time one lights, the candles must be long enough, or there must be sufficient oil to burn for half an hour after Tzeis HaKochavim. If one lights after Tzeis (see next point) there still has to be enough wax or oil to burn for at least half an hour.
- If one is unable to light at this time, he should light when he gets home. If there are people still out and about on the street he still say the brachos. This time will vary from place to place. If it is very late and there are no longer people walking around outside, he may still say the brachos as long as other members of the household are still awake. The latest time to light candles in such a case is Alos Hashachar, which is at about 6:00 am this year.
- The earliest time to light Chanukah candles is plag hamincha, which is at about 3:07pm this year. On Friday afternoon one must light between plag hamincha and zman hadlakas nerot which is at about 3:35pm. One must light Chanukah candles BEFORE lighting shabbos candles¹⁷.
- If a woman lit Chanukah candles (and was planning on lighting her own Chanukah candles) and was thereby mekabel shabbos, she can get someone else (who has not yet been mekabel shabbos) to light on her behalf.
- Bedieved a man can light Chanukah candles after his wife has lit shabbos candles (as long as he was not mekabel shabbos and it is still before shkiya).
- On Friday night the candles must be long enough to burn for half an hour after Tzeis Hakochavim i.e. until 5:20pm¹⁸. One simple solution is to line up tea lights. If one is not able to do this (and only has normal weekday candles) he should light without a bracha¹⁹.
- On Motzei Shabbos the Chanukah candles are lit after havdala (some have the custom, especially in Yerushalayim of lighting the Chanukah candles before havdala)²⁰.

The Menorah (Chanukiya).

¹³ או"ח תרע"ה:ב'.

¹⁴ ע"פ הגר"א בביאורו לאו"ח תרע"ב אות ב'. ועי' מעשה רב סי' רל"ה.

¹⁵ או"ח תרע"ב:א'.

¹⁶ או"ח תרע"ב מ"ב ס"ק א'.

¹⁷ או"ח תרע"ט:א'.

¹⁸ או"ח תרע"א מ"ב ס"ק ב'.

¹⁹ שו"ת להורות נתן ח"ו סי' מ"ג.

²⁰ עי' ספר, חנוכה' פרק כ' הלכות ג'-ה' והערות שם.

- The menorah may be made out of any material. However it is considered to be hiddur mitzvah to have a beautiful one. The definition of beauty and חשיבות varies from time to time and place to place²¹.
- One may not take a single glass of oil and put a number of wicks in it, unless there are dividers between the wicks²².
- The candles should be in a straight line and of equal height. The shammas should be either higher or lower, or otherwise distinct from the other candles²³.
- If one does not have a suitable menorah then the simplest solution is to line up tea lights, or other similar candles in a straight line²⁴.
- There is a preference to use olive oil that is fit for eating, but one can use other oil or wax candles²⁵.

Where to light Chanukah candles.

- In the times of the Mishna the original mitzvah was to light outside the house, at the entrance to the courtyard²⁶. This is the custom in many places in Eretz Yisrael today.
- During the last 2000 years this has not been a realistic option for various reasons. As such, the prevalent minhag in Chutz La Aretz is to light next to any window facing a courtyard or street²⁷.
- One who lives in a flat that is more than 20 amos high may still light next to a window if there are other flats opposite²⁸.
- One must light Chanukah candles in the place where he is sleeping. So if one is invited out to a Chanukah party, one may not light there, rather one should light beforehand (or afterwards) at home²⁹.
- If one goes away to a different for Shabbos Chanukah and plans to return home late on Motzoei Shabbos, a Rav should be consulted as whether to light in the place where he was over shabbos, or when he gets home³⁰.
- In a hotel the candles should be lit in the dining room³¹.
- If candles are going to be lit at a public event such as at a wedding, Chanukah party (not in a private home) or the like, no bracha is recited.

How to light Chanukah candles.

- The electric lights should be on in the room where the candles are to be lit as it is forbidden to derive any benefit from the Chanukah candles.
- On the first night one candle should be lit at the rightmost end of the menorah.
- On all subsequent nights the candles should be put in from right to left and lit from left to right, i.e. the newest candle is lit first. However those who have a different family minhag should follow their minhag.

²¹ סוד הדלקת נר חנוכה לרבי יצחק בן הראב"ד.

²² או"ח תרע"א:ד'.

²³ או"ח תרע"א:ד'.

²⁴ או"ח תרע"א מ"ב ס"ק י"ח.

²⁵ או"ח תרע"ג:א'.

²⁶ גמ' שבת כא:

²⁷ או"ח תרע"א:ה' מ"ב ס"ק כ"ז, ל"ח.

²⁸ עי' שו"ת שבט הלוי ח"ד סי' ס"ה.

²⁹ או"ח תרע"ז:א'.

³⁰ עי' ספר, חנוכה' להגר"צ כהן שליט"א עמ' ע"ט סוף הערה לב.

³¹ עי' רמ"א או"ח תרע"ז:א'.

- All brachos should be made standing, before lighting the first candle. After the first candle has been lit, הללו should be recited. After lighting all the candles מעוז צור is sung.
- If one spoke between making the brachos and lighting the first candle, if it was to do with the candles then no new bracha is made, if it was about something else, the brachos must be repeated.
- The person who lights the candles should light all the candles and not share it out among other people who are present.
- Women have the minhag not to do melacha for the first 30 minutes after the candles have been lit. However this does not apply to all melacha, rather to the types of melacha that are forbidden חול המועד.
- Although many have the minhag to sit by the candles for the first 30 minutes, there is no requirement to do so.