A Guide to the Laws of Chanukah

Kislev 5787/December 2026

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Timing note: Sunset, nightfall, plag hamincha, and Shabbos candle-lighting times vary by location. Consult your local z'manim (times) calendar.

I. History & Chanukah Customs

History

During the Second Temple era (352 B.C.E. until 70 C.E.), the Greek Empire passed decrees against the Jewish People, attempted to obliterate their religion, and prevented them from being involved with Torah learning and the performance of *mitzvos* (commandments). The Greeks also plundered the property of the Jewish People and abducted their daughters. The Greeks entered the Temple, wrought havoc there, and defiled that which was pure.

The Jews were in great distress because of the Greeks and were subjected to great oppression. The Hasmoneans, sons of the *Kohain Gadol* (High Priest), overcame the Greeks, slew them, and delivered the Jews from their hands. They appointed a king from among the priests (Kohanim), thereby returning Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

The date when the Jews overcame their enemies and destroyed them was the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev (139 B.C.E.). On that day, the Jews entered the Sanctuary of the Temple, but could not find any pure olive oil sealed with the High Priest's seal, except for one jar which contained enough oil to burn for only a single day. Nevertheless, a miracle occurred and they were able to kindle the lamps of the Menorah with that one jar of oil for eight days, until they were able to crush olives and produce pure oil.

For these reasons, the Sages of that generation ordained that these eight days beginning on the twenty-fifth of Kislev should be celebrated as days of happiness and praise. Lights should be kindled each evening in our homes on each of these eight nights to make known and publicize the miracle.

Chanukah Customs

Melacha (constructive acts prohibited on Shabbos and Yom Tov) is permitted on Chanukah. Women, however, follow the custom of refraining from doing strenuous work during the time the Chanukah candles are burning at home. This would only apply to sewing, laundry or other types of activities prohibited on Chol Hamoed. Cooking and turning lights on or off are permissible. The custom is to refrain from work only for the minimum amount of time that the candles must burn, which is approximately 30 minutes. The reason why women observe greater stringency than men is that the Greek decrees were harsher for women. Furthermore, a miracle during that period was brought about through a righteous woman named Yehudis.

Yehudis was the daughter of Yochanan, the High Priest. The enemy ruler proposed that she live with him. Under the guise of acquiesce, she came to him and fed him dishes of cheese so that he would become very thirsty and would drink large amounts of wine to quench his thirst. He fell asleep in an intoxicated slumber, and she managed to kill him. When the leader of the Greek army saw that their ruler had been slain, he and his army fled. To commemorate this miracle, there are some who follow the custom of eating dairy dishes on Chanukah. It is also common to eat foods fried in oil (donuts, latkes etc.) to commemorate the miracle of the olive oil.

Additions in Davening and Bentching

Throughout the eight days of Chanukah*, Al HaNissim* should be added to the *Shemoneh Esreh* in *Modim*, the blessing of thanksgiving.

The following rules apply if one forgot to recite *Al HaNissim*: If one remembers before mentioning G-d's name in the blessing *HaTov Shimchoh*, one should go back and say *Al HaNissim* and then complete the blessing. However, if one remembered only after one had already said G-d's Name, one should conclude the blessing without going back to say *Al HaNissim.*

Al Hanisim is also added to bentching after *Nodeh Lecha.* If one forgot to recite it and realized his error before reaching G-d’s name, he should go back and say *Al HaNissim* and then complete the blessing. However, if one remembered only after one had already said G-d's Name, one should conclude the blessing without going back to say *Al HaNissim.* Instead, he should continue until he reaches the designated *Harachaman* found in Siddurim (Artscroll p. 194). If one misses that insertion, nothing need be done.

On each of the eight days of Chanukah, we recite the complete *Hallel*. The *Tachanun* prayers and the prayers *E-l erech apayim* recited upon taking the Torah out of the Ark, *Lam'natzeach* recited after *Ashrei* of *Shacharis* and *Tzidkos'choh Tzedek* at Mincha on Shabbos should be omitted.

II. Menorahs, Oils and Wicks

1. Is the shape of the menorah important?
Ideally, the lights should stand in a straight line and all at the same height. Therefore, one should preferably not use a menorah whose branches are in a staggered position or of differing heights.

2. How far apart should the branches be?
The branches of the menorah should not be very close to one another since each light should be separated from the next by approximately 2 cm. If the lights are too close to each other they will appear like a torch, which is not valid according to many opinions.

3. What if one has no menorah at all?
A menorah enhances the mitzvah, but is not essential. A person wishing to light with oil could use several glasses or cups placed in a straight line. If candles are being used, they may be fixed in a row onto a tray or similar surface.

4. Is it preferable to use oil or candles?
Oil is preferable since the miracle in the Holy Temple happened with oil. The most preferred type of oil is olive oil since the miracle happened with olive oil. Solidified oil is considered equally as good as liquid oil since it melts as it burns. If one cannot afford or obtain olive oil, one may use any other oil (or paraffin) that burns with a clear flame. When using candles, it is important that they be long enough to burn for the appropriate amount of time (*see below, Section III*).

6. Which type of wicks should be used?
All wicks may be used, but the most ideal is cotton or linen.

7. Should one use fresh wicks every night?
It is not necessary to replace the wicks every night. Some opinions prefer the reusing of wicks since they light better. Some have the custom to change the wicks every night in the same way that they were changed daily in the Holy Temple.

8. May one throw away used wicks?
Since the wicks were used for a mitzvah one may not disgrace them by throwing them away in the garbage. One should burn them or wrap them in a bag before discarding them.

9. May one use electric lights for the menorah?
Electric lights are not valid for the mitzvah of the menorah.

III. When, How and Who Should Light?

1. When is the ideal time to light?

Ideally, the candles should be lit immediately at nightfall. There are varying opinions as to what constitutes nightfall. According to Rav Moshe Feinstein, the ideal time to light is about 10 minutes after sunset. Those attending Mincha/Maariv services should light soon after they return home. The candles must burn for at least a half hour from the beginning of halachic nightfall, according to local zmanim. (Please note that some smaller candles do not burn for this requisite amount of time).

In extenuating circumstances, one is permitted to light earlier than nightfall, provided it is after a halachic time known as *plag hamincha*. Nonetheless, even if one lights early, the candles must still burn until at least 30 minutes after local halachic nightfall. This is especially relevant on Friday, when one must light the menorah before lighting Shabbos candles.

2. What if one wasn't able to light at the ideal time?
One is permitted to light and make the blessings anytime during the night until *alos hashachar* (daybreak).The candles must burn for a half hour from whatever time they were lit. If, however, it is so late that there is no one awake either at home or walking on the streets, one should still light but not make the blessings.

3. Who should light?
It is universally accepted to light the Chanukah candles according to the custom of those who the Talmud refers to as *"mehadrin min hamehadrin*"; that is, each person in the household lights one candle on the first night, two on the second, adding one daily, until the eighth night when he will light eight. Children who have reached the age when they are being trained in the performance of mitzvos should also light, though some apply this only to boys (since wives do not light, see the following paragraph).

4. Are women obligated in this mitvza?
Women are obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of kindling Chanukah lights, for they had a key role in the miracle. However, a wife should not light herself if her husband is lighting. This is an affirmation of the unity that exists between a husband and wife, who are considered to be one individual *("ishto k'gufoh").*

5. Which candle do I light first?
On the first night, one should light the candle on the far right. On the second night, one should add another candle to the left of the previous night's candle. Similarly, each night, one should add a candle on the left side. Each night, one should begin by lighting the candle one has added, and then continue lighting towards the right.

6. What is the shamash and why do we use one?
The *shamash* is an extra candle that is lit on the menorah. One reason for the presence of a *shamash* is because it is forbidden to benefit from the light of the Chanukah candles. In order to avoid any possible benefit, we light an extra candle that we are permitted to benefit from so that any possible or inadvertent benefit could be attributed to it.

IV. Where to Light

1. **Where should the menorah be placed?**

The most ideal place is outside the door of the yard or house that faces the street, to publicize the miracle of Chanukah as much as possible. This is the prevalent custom in Israel today.

2. Why is this not done in Diaspora (out of Israel) countries?
In the Diaspora, the prevalent custom is to light the menorah indoors. Several reasons have been suggested for this:

- There may be a situation in which this would agitate non-Jewish neighbors.
- Others may extinguish or steal the menorah.
- The winter weather conditions of rain and strong winds do not make it practical to light outside.

3. Which window should be chosen for lighting?
One should choose the window that enables the maximum number of people to see the menorah, since publicizing the miracle is an important part of the mitzvah. For example, it is better to light by a bedroom or kitchen window that can be seen by many people, than by a dining room window that can be seen by fewer people.

4. Does the height of the window matter?
If possible, the flames should be above 3 *tefachim* (9 inches) and below 10 handbreadths (about 3 feet) from the floor of the house. If the menorah cannot be seen from the street at this height, it should be placed higher.

5. What about an upper floor window above street level?
One may certainly place the menorah by a window that is less than 20 cubits (about 30 feet) above the street, since at this height it is easily visible. One may light at a window on higher floors, provided there are other buildings nearby that can clearly see your lights. If this is not possible, it is preferable to light next to one's doorway (see #8 below).

6. May one light by a frosted window?
It is preferable to light by a plain glass window so that the number of lights can be seen clearly. If this is not possible, one may light by a frosted window, even though the flames appear somewhat fuzzy from the street.

7. May several people light by the same window?
Yes, but effort should be made to space the menorahs apart, so that one can easily see the number of lights in each menorah. If several suitable windows are available, it is preferable for each person to light by a different window.

8. What if a person has neither a door nor a window that can be seen from the street?
The menorah should be placed on the left side of the doorway leading into the room that is most used during the evening.

9. If a person lives in an apartment building, where should he light?
It should be lit inside the house near a window that faces the street. If there is no window that faces the street but neighbors pass by his front door, the menorah should be lit there. Otherwise, see previous question.

10. May one light the menorah on the stairway outside the door of the apartment?

This should be done only when there is no other alternative. Although the people living in the building will walk through the stairway and see the menorah, this is not a public street and the publicity is minimal. It is considerably better to light the menorah by a window facing a street, or near an outside entrance.

11. Where should a dormitory student light?
If he/she sleeps in the dormitory, he/she should light there. If he sleeps at home or with a family, it is preferable to light where he sleeps. However, if this will cause considerable disturbance to his Torah learning schedule, he should light at the school.

12. Where in the school should he light?
While it would be ideal to light in a dorm room since this is designated for personal use, this is usually impractical for various reasons. It is preferable to light in the dining room since this is an important and heavily populated area. In any event, students must obtain permission from the staff before lighting anywhere, in order to avoid any inconvenience or risk of fire.

V. Lighting Away From Home

1. Must one light the menorah at home?
The mitzvah of lighting the menorah is described by the Sages of the Talmud with the words "a light for a man and his home. "From this we learn that the *mitzvah* is not only a personal one but also one that pertains to the home. Therefore, a person cannot fulfill his obligation by lighting anywhere other than at home. For example, a man may not light at work but must return home to fulfill the mitzvah.

2. When may a person light or become a partner at the home of a friend or relative?

Lighting or becoming a partner at another person's home is permitted only when sleeping at that place.

3. What if a person is away from home for part or all of Chanukah (e.g.: on business) but his family remains at home?

The wife or son over bar mitzvah must light the menorah at home. Strictly speaking, the husband also fulfills his obligation by this and is not required to light separately. However, according to the widespread custom, the husband lights his own menorah at the place where he is sleeping. He should make the blessings only if he lights earlier than the menorah is lit in his home. If he lights later than the menorah is lit in his home, he should not recite the blessings himself, but rather listen to someone else who is making the blessings wherever he is.

4. What if a woman is away from home during Chanukah but her husband is lighting at home?

The wife fulfills her obligation through her husband's lighting and is not required to light her own menorah. If possible, she should try to hear the blessings being recited by someone else lighting.

5. What if the wife is at home but the husband will arrive only later in the evening?

There are two options:

- The wife can wait for her husband to light the menorah when he arrives.
- The wife can light the menorah at the correct time and exempt the husband from lighting when he arrives. If possible, he should try to hear the blessings being recited by someone else lighting.

To avoid any misunderstanding, the couple should discuss the situation beforehand and come to a mutually acceptable arrangement.

6. What if the husband is at home but the wife will arrive only later in the evening?

If the wife agrees, the husband should light on time, thus fulfilling the obligation for himself and his wife. If the husband senses that his wife may be upset to miss the lighting of the menorah, he should wait until she arrives.

7. What if both the husband and wife go away together for a few days?
During the days that they are away from home, they should light the menorah in their new location. If any other members of the family remain at home they must light a menorah for themselves at home.

8. What should an unmarried person do when sleeping away from home?

A guest should light his own menorah in the place he is lodging. Alternatively, he may become a partner with the family where he is lodging, but if he is lodging alone he must light his own menorah.

9. Where should a person light on the day he leaves his home?

If he leaves before lighting time, he should light at his destination. But if he leaves after lighting time, he should light at home before he leaves.

10. Where should a person light on the day he returns home?

If he leaves from his current location before lighting time, he should light at home. But if he leaves after lighting time, he should light at the place he has been temporarily.

11. Does the same apply to a person who returns home on Saturday night after being away for Shabbos?

A person who intends to return home immediately after Shabbos should light when he arrives home. In this case, every effort should be made to return home quickly. A person who intends to remain at his temporary location for a while after Shabbos should light at the place he has been during Shabbos.

13. Where in a hotel should a guest light?

If permission is given, he should light in his room since this is considered his home. It is praiseworthy to eat at least one meal a day in the room. If the hotel insists that he light in the communal dining room, he may fulfill his obligation there (provided he eats his meals in the dining room).

14. What if a person is traveling through the night?

- If he begins his journey after *plag haMincha*, he should light before he leaves.
- If he must leave before this time but will arrive at his destination before dawn, he should light when he arrives.
- If he must leave before this time and will arrive after dawn, he should light while traveling (see next question).

15. Under what conditions may one light when traveling?

One must fulfill several conditions:

- He is paying for the journey (e.g.: train, boat).
- He does not hold the menorah in his hand but puts it down somewhere.
- There is no fire hazard. If all these conditions are met, he should light with blessings, even if he is able to light only one candle. If these conditions are not met, some maintain that he is exempt from lighting. Others hold that a flashlight may be used in this case.

16. What if he fears that he will have to extinguish the candle(s) within half an hour?

He should light without saying the blessings.

VI. Shabbos Chanukah

1. When should one daven Mincha on Erev Shabbos?

Preferably, one should daven Mincha before lighting the menorah. This is the same sequence of events as in the Holy Temple, where the menorah was lit after the afternoon offering. If this is not possible, one may daven Mincha after lighting the menorah.

2. Is it preferable to daven Mincha with a minyan after lighting the menorah, or to daven alone before lighting?

It is better to daven with a minyan after lighting.

3. When should the menorah be lit on erev Shabbos?

It should be lit before kindling the Shabbos lights.

4. What if one mistakenly kindled the Shabbos lights first?

A woman certainly may not kindle the menorah after the Shabbos lights, since she has accepted Shabbos. A man who kindles Shabbos lights (e.g.: lives alone, wife is away) does not accept Shabbos at that time. Therefore, if he mistakenly kindled the Shabbos lights first, he should light the menorah afterwards (provided it is still before sunset).

5. Is there any way to light the menorah after accepting Shabbos?

One may ask another person to light the menorah on his behalf, provided that the other person has not accepted Shabbos and it is still before sunset.

6. Who should recite the blessings in this situation?

The one who lights should recite the first blessing *(l'hadlik ner shel Chanukah)* and the owner of the menorah may recite the second blessing.

7. Should the husband light the menorah before the wife kindles the Shabbos lights?

Yes. Since the menorah is lit also on behalf of the wife, it should be kindled before she accepts Shabbos.

8. Should the wife kindle the Shabbos lights only after all the Chanukah lights have been lit?

Ideally yes, but if time is short she may kindle the Shabbos lights as soon as her husband has kindled one Chanukah light.

9. If other menorahs are also to be lit (e.g.: by children, visitors) should the wife wait until all have been lit?

No. She may kindle the Shabbos lights as soon as her husband has lit his menorah.

10. If the husband is not ready to light the menorah and time is short, should the wife kindle the Shabbos lights first?

Yes. The husband may still light the menorah afterwards, provided it is still before sunset. The same applies if the wife mistakenly kindled the Shabbos lights first.

11. What is the optimal time for lighting the menorah on erev Shabbos?
The Shabbos lights should be lit at the usual time (18 minutes before sunset), preceded by the Chanukah lights.

12. What is the earliest time for lighting the menorah?

The earliest time is *plag haMincha*. Consult local zmanim for each Friday of Chanukah.

13. What if a person lit a menorah before this time?

He has not fulfilled his obligation. The menorah should be extinguished and relit at the correct time. The blessings must be repeated.

14. Until when must the lights burn?

The lights must be capable of burning until 30 minutes after local halachic nightfall. Therefore, one must be especially careful on *erev* Shabbos to use sufficient oil or long candles that can burn until this time. If the menorah can only contain a small amount of oil or small candles, an alternative should be used on *erev* Shabbos.

15. Must all the lights burn this long?

Ideally, all the lights should be capable of burning for this length of time. In extenuating circumstances, it is sufficient to use one long candle or one larger cup of oil.

16. What if one or more of the lights go out?

- If it is still before sunset and he has not yet accepted Shabbos, he should relight it without a blessing.
- If he has accepted Shabbos, he should ask another person who has not accepted Shabbos to light it for him.
- If it is already sunset, nothing can be done. The obligation has been fulfilled even if all the lights go out.

17. Where should the menorah be placed?

The menorah should be put in the usual position. However, extra care must be taken to avoid winds and drafts from doors and windows. It is forbidden on Shabbos to open a door or window that will cause a flame to go out or flicker significantly.

18. If the menorah is placed on an object (e.g.: chair, table, tray), may the object be moved with the menorah on it after the lights have been extinguished?

No. Both the menorah and the object it rests on are *muktzeh.*

19. May the menorah be moved in an unusual way?

Yes. One may hold it in an unusual way, e.g.: between one's arms.

20. What is the procedure on motzei Shabbos (Saturday night)?
In a shul, the custom is to light the menorah before saying *havdalah*. At home, there are two equally accepted customs: Some recite *havdalah* first, and others light the menorah first. If you do not have an established custom, you should first recite *havdalah*, and then light the menorah.