

Laws of Chanukah

It is a rabbinic commandment to kindle lights for Chanukah each evening of the eight days of Chanukah which begin on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev.

Reason for the Mitzvah

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 21b) relates that during the time of the Second Temple, when the Syrian-Greeks ruled Israel they persecuted the Jews greatly. They issued terrible decrees to destroy their religion and defile the sanctity of the Holy Temple. The Hasmoneans rose up and with the help of G-d miraculously defeated the mighty armies of the Syrian-Greeks. The day on which the Jews reclaimed the Temple was the 25th of Kislev 3597/165 B.C.E. The Jews searched the Temple and found only one flask of pure olive oil with which to light the menorah. Although the oil was sufficient to burn for only one day, a miracle occurred and the oil lasted and lasted, burning for eight days until they were able to procure new, pure olive oil. For this reason the sages of that generation decreed that these eight days beginning with the 25th of Kislev be days of rejoicing and thanksgiving. On each evening of Chanukah, lights should be kindled in each house to publicize the miracle.

The Number of Lights

The Talmud mentions three levels of observance of this mitzvah. The “basic obligation” is to kindle one light per household each evening. However, the Talmud notes that it is admirable to “enhance” the mitzvah by kindling more than the minimum. There are two possible “enhancements” to this mitzvah. Those who “enhance their performance of mitzvos” (HaMehadrin), kindle one light for each member of the household (e.g. if the household consists of five members, five lights are kindled every evening). Those who “enhance their mitzvos even more” (Mehadrin min HaMehadrin), begin with one light per household on the first evening and add one additional light each succeeding evening until a total of eight lights are kindled on the eighth evening.

- The custom in Sephardic communities is to “enhance their mitzvos even more” and kindle one light per household on the first evening and add one additional light each succeeding evening until a total of eight lights are kindled on the eighth evening.
- The custom in Ashkenazi communities is to “incorporate both enhancements”, that is, each member of the household kindles their own set of lights; one light on the first evening and an additional light each succeeding evening until each member kindles a total of eight lights on the eighth evening.

Who is Required to Light

- The obligation to kindle Chanukah lights applies to all adult members of a household and to children once they reach the age of “training” (the age when they begin to understand what mitzvos are about). However, since the “basic obligation” is to kindle one light per household each evening, when one member of a household kindles the lights the entire household fulfills its obligation collectively. As head-of-household, the husband would generally be the one to kindle the lights.
- In a Sephardic home where one set of lights are kindled for the entire household, one member kindles the lights on behalf of the entire household.
- In an Ashkenazic home, each member kindles their own set of lights. The exception is the wife who is exempt if her husband lights, because we consider husband and wife as one individual (ishto kigufo). However, should she desire to light, she may do so. Where the husband will not light at home (e.g. he is away from home), she is required to light herself.

The Proper Time for Lighting

- The Talmud says: “The proper performance of this mitzvah is from the time the sun sets until the time that people cease to walk about in the street.” In Talmudic times, the lights were kindled to publicize the miracle to passersby; therefore they had to be kindled while people were still out in the streets. The commentators explain that in those days (prior to the advent of streetlamps), a half hour after sunset the streets would be empty, they would therefore kindle at sunset, publicizing the miracle for a half hour to those in the street.
- Nowadays, in exile, we kindle the lights primarily to proclaim the miracle to our households; therefore one may kindle the lights even after this time publicizing the miracle for a half-hour to the household.
- In practice: ideally one should strive to perform the mitzvah as stated in the Talmud - kindling at sunset for a half-hour. If one is unable to do so (e.g. one is at work or on the road), one may kindle even after this time.
- Concerning sunset, whether it refers to the beginning or the end of the sun’s setting, there are various schools of thought amongst the sages, hence, one should consult their Rabbi or follow the local custom.
- On Friday evening, one kindles the Chanukah lights prior to the Sabbath candles. Extreme care must be taken to kindle both the Chanukah and Sabbath lights before sunset!
- On Saturday night, one must wait at least until 50 minutes after sunset (when Sabbath is over) to kindle the Chanukah lights.

Where to Place the Chanukah Lights

- In Talmudic times the lights were placed at or near (the outer part of) the entrance of the house - if the house was open to the street. If there was a courtyard in front of the house and the courtyard was open to the street, the lights were placed at the entrance to the courtyard. The reason for this was to publicize the miracle to the passersby.
- In Israel, even in our times, it is the custom for those who are meticulous in their observance of mitzvos to kindle outdoors in a glass enclosed menorah box.
- In the Diaspora, it has become the accepted custom to kindle the lights indoors. If one has a window facing the street, it is preferable to place the lights in the window, thus publicizing the miracle to the passersby as well. However, many people kindle in the house near a doorway similar to the way it was done in Talmudic times.
- Those who kindle at the doorway, place the lights at the left side of the doorway. The reason is that since the mezuzah is on the right doorpost, by placing the lights at the left side, one will be surrounded by mitzvos.
- Ideally, the lights should be placed so that the flame will be no lower than three handbreadth (approximately 27 centimeters) and no higher than ten handbreadths (approximately 90 centimeters) from the ground (of the street or apartment).

The Lights

- All oils and candles may be used; however, the preferred practice is to use olive oil since the Chanukah miracle revolved around olive oil.
- All wicks may be used; however the preferred practice is to use cotton or linen wicks.
- Electric or gas lights may not be used to perform this mitzvah.

The Procedure

- One should gather all the members of the household when lighting, in order to publicize the miracle.
- Before kindling the lights the following blessings are recited:

1) "Boruch atta Ado-ny Elo-heinu melech haolam asher kidishanu bimitzvosav vitzivanu lehadlik ner shel Chanukah."

Blesses are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light.

2) "Boruch atta Ado-ny Elo-heinu melech haolam she'asa neesim la'avosainu bayamim hahaim bazman hazeh."

Blesses are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has performed miracles for our forefathers in those days, at this season.

3) “Boruch atta Ado-noy Eloheinu melech haolam shehechiyau vikiyemanu vihigyanu lazman hazeh.”

Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us and brought us to this season.

On the first night of Chanukah all three blessings are recited. On all subsequent nights, only the first two blessings are recited.

After reciting the blessings, the lights are kindled. According to the custom most widely followed, on the first night one kindles the light on the extreme right of the menorah. On the second night, one adds a light to the left of the first one, kindling the added light first, and then moving to his right, lights the one at the extreme right. This procedure is repeated every night; first one kindles the added light, and then kindles the rest, moving from left to right.

After kindling the first light there is a widely held custom to begin reciting the Haneiros Hallalu song and to continue reciting it while kindling the remaining lights. Following the kindling of the lights, and recital of Haneiros Hallalu, it is customary for Ashkenazim to recite the Maoz Tzur and for Sephardim to recite Psalm 30.

The sages teach that one should kindle the Chanukah lights with great joy. Those who are zealous in this mitzvah will merit seeing the Divine Light and will bear children who will grow up to be Torah scholars.