

A Short Guide to the Laws of Chanuka

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In conjunction with the MYC

The word Chanuka means “dedication.” During the Second Century BCE the Jews were subjugated by the Syrian-Greek army of Antiochus Epiphanes. The Jews were not permitted to practice their religion (observing Shabbat, Holidays, Brit Mila, etc were all punishable by death). Moreover, the Bet HaMikdash (the Temple), was captured and defiled by the Greeks with the help of some collaborationist Jews. They introduced a sculpture of Zeus inside the Bet Hamikdash, dedicating the Bet HaMikdash to him and instituting new sacrifices of impure animals like pigs to Zeus. Around the year 165 BCE, the Jews, lead by the famous Yehuda HaMaccabi, rebelled against the powerful armies of Antiochus and miraculously defeated them. Their first mission was to recover the Bet HaMikdash. They purified the Temple, but in order to dedicate it back to God Almighty they needed to light the Menorah, which indicated that the Bet HaMikdash was functioning. They found one small jar of pure, untainted oil, with an amount of oil which normally would last only for one night. They lit the Menorah and happily rededicated the Bet HaMikdash back to God. Miraculously, the small jar of oil lasted for eight days, giving them exactly the time needed to produce new pure olive oil. **Chanuka means the “dedication of the Bet haMikdash to God” – after years of being defiled to serve idols.** The festival is observed by the kindling of candles on a *Chanukkia* (eight branch Menorah) – one candle on each night of the holiday, progressing to eight candles on the final night, in remembrance of the miracle of the oil. Chanuka is celebrated every year on the 25th of the month of Kislev for 8 days.



****This year, 5774/2013, Chanuka starts Wednesday night, November 27th.****

- Chanuka candles can be made of wax, paraffin, regular oil, or anything that lights, but ideally, one should use olive oil, because the miracle we are celebrating occurred with olive oil. Another advantage of olive oil is that normally the oil candles will last for more time, while some small wax candles will last less than the required time (half hour). This Mitzva cannot be performed with electric candles, even if real candles are not available. An electric *Chanukkia*, however, can be used in addition to the regular *Chanukkia*.
- In the past, people used to place the *Chanukkia* outside the front door, on opposite side to the Mezuzah. This is technically the best place for it (some families still do this). But nowadays, the *Chanukkia* is normally lit inside the house, close to a window, in a way that is visible from outside.
- Unlike most Mitzvot, lighting the Chanuka candles is not an individual Mitzva like praying or giving Tzedaka, but a family Mitzva. Therefore, according to Sephardic and Mashadi tradition, we light only one *Chanukkia* per family, not per individual.
- If someone lives in Manhattan, or overseas, but still depends financially on his or her family, he/she does not need to light his/her own candles, as they can rely on their parents' lighting. If those who are away from home still want to light the candles away from home, they may do it but without saying a Berakha. To this effect, a son or daughter is considered part of the immediate family while they are financially dependent on their parents. However, if they live on their own home and file their own tax returns, they should light their own candles. If the husband is in a business trip, technically, he is included in the candle lighting done at home by his wife and children. It is a good idea for the family member who is away to call in/Facetime/video chat with the family while they are lighting the Chanuka candles at home.
- One may not benefit from or use the Chanuka candles for any other purpose than for the mitzva ("En Lanu Reshut Lehistamesh Bahem"). Therefore, we light an auxiliary candle (the Shamash) every night, so that in case someone accidentally benefits from the candles, he will be benefitting from the Shamash and not from the

actual Chanuka candles. The Ashkenazi custom is to first light the Shamash and with the Shamash one lights the rest of the candles. The Sephardic custom is that all the candles are lit first, with a regular match or with a longer candle, and the Shamash is lit at the end. The Shamash should be distinct from the other candles (usually placed higher, either on one side or in the middle of the *Chanukkia*) so that it is not confused with the candles of Mitzva.

- According to Jewish tradition, a "day" begins in the evening. Therefore, we begin lighting on the evening before the first day of Chanuka, and subsequently add one candle each night, until there are 8 candles on the night before the 8th day of Chanuka.
- The candles should ideally be lit shortly after sunset, which is approximately 4:30 PM in NYC. The candles must contain enough fuel at the time of lighting to burn for 30 minutes after nightfall. If one did not light the candles early in the evening, they can be kindled later, when the family is home.

- Before lighting the Chanuka candles we recite the following blessings:

Blessing #1: Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-henu melech ha-olam, Asher kide-shanu bi-mitzvo-tav, Vi-tzee-vanu le-had-leek Ner Shel Chanuka.

ברוך אתה ה' א-להינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה

Blessing #2: Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-henu melech ha-olam, She-asa nee-seem la-avo-tenu, Baya-meem ha-haem baz-e-man ha-zeh.

ברוך אתה ה' א-להינו מלך העולם, שעשה נסים לאבותינו, בימים ההם בזמן הזה

The third blessing is said on the first night only:

Blessing #3: Baruch ata Ado-nai Elo-henu melech ha-olam, Sheh-he-che-yanu ve-kee-yihemanu Ve-hee-gee-yanu laze-man ha-zeh.

ברוך אתה ה' א-להינו מלך העולם, שהחיינו וקיימנו והגענו לזמן הזה

We then recite the passages of Hanerot Halalu and Mizmor Shir Chanukat Habayit

- **Friday:** Every night we light Chanuka candles after sunset, but on Friday (this year November 29th), we light the Chanuka candles 20-25 minutes BEFORE sunset: approximately at 4:05 PM (NY time). Why? Because candle-lighting time for Shabbat candles is 4:11 PM (NY time), and Chanuka candles must be lit before that. Another specific rule for Friday's Chanuka candles: while every night the candles should last at least for half an hour, on Friday, the candles should last for more time. So, make sure your candles are long enough, or have enough oil to burn for approximately one extra hour.
If you are spending Shabbat in your parents or in-laws' home, your immediate family (husband, wife, children) is considered part of the extended family of your parents, since you also partake the same food, house, etc. So, when you go to your parent's house for Shabbat they should light the candles and your family is included in their Mitzvah without further requirements. However, if you and your family are going to arrive at your parent's house after Shabbat has begun, then you should light Chanuka candles at your own house. In this case, when the *Chanukkia* is being left lit at your home, take extreme precautions to avoid any fire hazard!
- **Saturday night:** When Shabbat is over (after 5:19 PM, NY time), at home you should first recite the Havdala and then light the Chanuka candles. In the Synagogue, for practical reasons, we first light the Chanuka candles and then do the Havdala.
- During the eight days of Chanuka we recite the Hallel every morning in Shacharit. We also add the prayer of Al Hanissim in the Amidah and Birkat Hamazon. Every morning we also read a portion of the Torah related to the dedication of the Holy Temple in the desert (Mishkan). If one forgets to say Al Hanissim in the Amidah or Birkat Hamazon, he does not need to go back and repeat the prayer.

*Much of the content presented here has been adapted from Rabbi Bitton's website,
www.rabbibitton.blogspot.com