

Halachos of Chanukah

1. It is important to properly perform the mitzvah of Chanukah lights for the Gemara says (Shabbos 23b) that one who faithfully observes the mitzvah of kindling Shabbos and Chanukah lights will be rewarded with sons who are Talmidei Chachamim (Torah scholars).

2. According to the letter of the law it is sufficient for the head of each household to kindle only one light on each night of Chanukah for the entire household (נר איש וביתו). However, the accepted practice is to enhance the mitzvah (mehadrin) and have each member of the household kindle his own Menorah. Moreover, we enhance the mitzvah even more (mehadrin min hamehadrin) by kindling an additional light on each night of Chanukah, corresponding to the number of days in Chanukah. For example, on the second night, two lights are kindled, and on the third night, three, and so on, until eight lights are kindled on the eighth night (besides an additional light for the shamash, see below #18). [This is the custom among Jews of Ashkenazic descent. Among Sefardic Jews only one Menorah is kindled in each household (by the head of the household), and enhancement of the mitzvah is accomplished by adding an additional light on each night of Chanukah.]

Who is obligated to kindle Chanukah lights?

3. Men and woman alike are obligated to kindle Chanukah lights. (The reason women are obligated in this mitzvah is that they too, were involved in the miracle of Chanukah, הנס באותו היום). Technically, a woman could kindle Chanukah lights and recite the bracha on behalf of her entire household. However, the custom is for a man to perform the mitzvah on behalf of his wife and unmarried girls (who are home). If the husband is out of town, then the wife should kindle the Chanukah lights at home and recite the bracha.

4. A man who has already kindled his Menorah is permitted to repeat the bracha and kindle another Menorah on behalf of a woman that can't say the bracha herself provided she stands near the Menorah and listens to his bracha.

5. A child who is old enough to be educated and trained to perform mitzvos (chinuch) is also obligated to light a Menorah. Although it is sufficient for a child to kindle a single light on all eight nights of Chanukah, the custom is for him to kindle the same number of lights as an adult.

6. It is halachically questionable whether a blind person is obligated to kindle Chanukah lights. Some authorities are of the opinion that he should not recite a bracha upon kindling his Menorah. Therefore, if he is married it is preferable for his wife to light the Menorah on his behalf. If he is not married and he is residing at someone's house, he should discharge his obligation by purchasing a share in his host's oil or candles (משתתף בפריטי, see below #75) and by paying attention to the host's bracha.

7. An onein (a mourner prior to the burial of his relative) is exempt from the mitzvah, and his wife should kindle the Chanukah lights instead of him. If he is alone, he should kindle lights (for purposes of פרסומי ניסא - publicizing the miracle) but he should not recite a bracha.

8. An avel (mourner, during the first year after the death of his relative) may recite the berachos over the Chanukah lights at home (including the bracha sh'hecheyanu), but he should not be honored with kindling the Menorah in shul on the first night of chanukah because he should not recite sh'hecheyanu in public. On the remaining nights of Chanukah he is permitted to kindle the Menorah in shul and recite the berachos (see below # 38 for a listing of the proper berachos on each night of Chanukah).

The Menorah and the wicks:

9. It is proper for one to have a beautiful Menorah, preferably one made of metal. If one can afford it, he should buy a silver Menorah to beautify the mitzvah (hiddur mitzvah).

10. Some authorities are of the opinion that one who kindles Chanukah lights independently without a Menorah (that joins all his lights in one vessel) has not properly fulfilled the mitzvah.

11. The lights must be aligned in a straight and level row. They may not be organized in a crooked, curved or uneven arrangement (eg., as a semi-circle). There should be a gap between the lights so that they should appear as separate lights rather than as one large torch. Also, care must be taken not to place wax candles too close to one another because the heated wax could melt and the candles could merge or collapse.

12. There should be a separation between one Menorah and the next so that they do not appear as one. Likewise, two people should not use two ends of the same Menorah because it will appear as though all the lights were lit by only one person.

13. All types of fuel (oils) are valid for Chanukah lights. However, olive oil is preferred (mitzvah min hamuvchar) and should be sought even if it is expensive.

14. If one does not have enough oil for the entire Chanukah, he may use oil on one night and candles on the next night. However, he should not light some oil lights and some candles on the same night.

15. All types of wicks are valid, but cotton or linen wicks are preferred.

16. Some people have a custom to make new wicks each night and discard the old wicks. However, some authorities maintain that this is not necessary. On the contrary, they assert that it is preferable to reuse the old wicks because they ignite easier.

17. Those who reuse the old wicks, should use them for the added light which is kindled first (since the old wicks ignite easier and the primary mitzvah is fulfilled with the added light).

18. It is forbidden to use or benefit from the Chanukah lights (see below #50). Therefore, the custom is to add one extra light each night, called the shamash, so that one who needs to use some light could benefit from the shamash, rather than from the Chanukah lights. The shamash should be a little removed from the other lights (e.g., on a higher level) to indicate that it is not one of the Chanukah lights. [One should kindle a shamash even if there is an electric light burning in the room.]

Where to place the Menorah:

19. It is a mitzvah to place the Chanukah Menorah near the entrance to one's house, on the outside facing the street. Today, since we dwell among gentiles, the custom is to kindle the Menorah indoors. Some place the Menorah, within a tefach (handbreadth, approx. 3-4 inches) of the left side of the entrance to the house (on the inside of the house). Others, place the Menorah in a window facing the street.

20. Preferably, the Menorah should be placed between three and ten tefachim above the ground. (According to R' Chaim Nah's calculations, this converts into - above 9.5 inches and below 31.5 inches. According to the Chazon Ish, the proper position is above 11.25 inches and below 37.75 inches.) If one placed his Menorah lower than three tefachim or higher than ten tefachim he is still יוצא (fulfilled the mitzvah).

21. The maximum height for the [flame of the] Menorah is twenty amos (30-40 feet) off the ground. If one places his Menorah above twenty amos he has not fulfilled the mitzvah (because its light is not readily visible from that height). He must extinguish the lights and rekindle it at a lower height.

22. If one has the custom to place the Menorah in his window, he can place it there even if the window-sill is higher than ten tefachim from the floor of his house.

23. If one lives in the upper story of a house, more than twenty amos above the street, some say that he should place his Menorah inside his apartment next to the entrance, since it is not readily visible to pedestrians passing in the street. If he placed it in his window some say that he is nevertheless יוצא.

24. For those who have the custom to light the Menorah near the door, it should be placed within a tefach of the left side of the doorway, opposite the mezuzah, so that one who enters the house should be surrounded by mitzvos (the mezuzah on the right and the Menorah on the left). If one placed the Menorah on the right side of the doorway he is nevertheless יוצא. In the event that the door has no mezuzah (e.g., he has lived in the apartment for less than thirty days or the mezuzah was removed for inspection), the Menorah should be placed on the right of the doorway.

25. The Menorah should not be lit in a place where one kindles lights year round so that it should not appear as though it was kindled merely to provide light for the house.

The proper time to kindle the Menorah:

26. Some say that the Menorah should ideally be kindled immediately after sunset, and this is Minhag Chabad. While others maintain that the best time to kindle it is at nightfall (upon the appearance of three stars).

27. There must be sufficient fuel for the Chanukah lights to burn until a half hour after nightfall, [according to Minhag Chabad it should burn 50 minutes from when lighting the candles.] If one lit his Menorah without this amount of fuel, he may not simply add some fuel while the Menorah is burning. Rather, he must extinguish the lights, add fuel, and then rekindle it (without a new bracha).

28. If one will not be able to kindle his Menorah after sunset, he may kindle it up to 1 1/4 hour before sunset (Plag HaMinchah). Under no circumstances, however, may one kindle his Menorah earlier than that time. If one did kindle his Menorah earlier than 1 1/4 hour before sunset he must extinguish it and rekindle it at the proper time.

29. Some say that today since the Menorah is kindled inside, it may be kindled even late at night when there are no longer any people in the street (since the lights will be visible to the people in the house, see #30). However, it is still preferable to kindle the Menorah in the proper time (at the beginning of the night).

30. If one did not kindle his Menorah at the proper time, he may kindle it later in the night (up until daybreak), as long as some members of his household are awake. Therefore, if one comes home very late and wishes to kindle Chanukah lights with a bracha he should awaken [at least] one member of his family. If this is not possible, he should kindle his Menorah without a bracha. (There are some authorities who permit one to recite a bracha even if there are no family members awake. If one insists, we allow him to rely on these authorities and we do not prevent him from reciting a bracha.)

31. If one failed to kindle the Menorah one night, on the following night he should still kindle the same number of lights as everyone else. He cannot compensate for the lost mitzvah by kindling more lights on the next night.

32. After the Menorah has burned for a half hour (after nightfall), one is permitted to benefit from its light. Also, one may extinguish the lights after a half hour and use the remaining oil for personal use. Some authorities forbid benefiting from the lights of the Menorah, even after they burned for a half hour, but they permit extinguishing the lights. Some have a custom, however, not to extinguish the Chanukah lights at all. (See below #54 regarding use of the remaining oil for the following night's lights.)

33. Once the Menorah is lit it should not be moved from place to place. Some refrain from moving a lit Menorah even after it has burned a half hour. Others, however, permit moving a lit Menorah once a half hour has passed.

34. If the Chanukah lights go out during the half hour one is not obligated to relight them (because he has already fulfilled the mitzvah at the time of the kindling), except if one kindled his Menorah early (such as on Erev Shabbos) and it went out before sunset. If one's Menorah goes out on Erev Shabbos before sunset, but after one has already accepted Shabbos upon himself, he should ask his friend (who has not yet accepted Shabbos) to relight the lights for him. If it is apparent at the time of the kindling that the wick has not ignited properly (and is bound to go out), one is obligated to extinguish the light and relight it properly.

The manner of kindling:

35. One may not eat a meal after sunset before he kindles his Chanukah lights. Even if he is in middle of a meal he should interrupt his meal to perform the mitzvah. In fact, he should refrain from eating a meal even a half hour before the time of the Menorah lighting. It is permitted, however, to eat a snack or a small amount of cake (i.e., less than a k'beitzah - egg's volume).

36. One should gather all the members of household when lighting his Menorah (for פרסומי ניסא - to publicize the miracle).

37. One must ignite the Menorah while standing.

38. On the first night of Chanukah the following three berachos are recited prior to the kindling of the Menorah: (a) להדליק נר חנוכה, (b) שעשה נסים לאבותינו, and (c) שהחיינו. On the subsequent nights, one recites only the first two berachos (and omits sh'hecheyanu).

39. Even a גר (convert) recites the bracha שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתַיִנוּ (Who performed miracles for my forefathers), even though his forefathers were not Jewish and were not included in the miracle of Chanukah.

40. The proper text of the sh'hecheyanu bracha is שְׁהַחַיֵּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעַנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה (lizman hazeh, not lazman or bizman).

41. If one forgot to recite sh'hecheyanu the first night, he should wait and recite on the following night when he kindles the Menorah.

42. If one was an onein on the first night of Chanukah and thus did not recite any berachos (as above #7), then when he kindles his Menorah on the second night he should recite sh'hecheyanu along with the other two berachos.

43. If one forgot to recite the berachos prior to kindling he can still recite it as long as he is in midst of the kindling. Once he has finished the kindling he can no longer recite the berachos. However, according to some authorities one may recite the second and third bracha (שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים and שְׁהַחַיֵּינוּ) even afterwards (during the first half hour).

44. On the first night, one kindles the light that is furthestmost to the right. On the second night one adds a light to the left of the first light, and kindles the added light first and the same is done on the subsequent nights as well. One always lights the added light (which is towards the left of the old lights) first, and then the remaining lights are kindled as one moves towards the right. (Although some have a different opinion on the matter, this is the accepted custom.)

45. One may not speak (of matters unrelated to the Menorah) from the time he recites the berachos until he finishes kindling all of the lights. However, if one did speak he need not repeat the berachos, unless he did so before he began kindling the first light.

46. Some recite the prayer הנֶרֶת הַלָּלוּ immediately after kindling the first light while they are in the midst of kindling the remaining lights. Others do not recite הנֶרֶת הַלָּלוּ until they finish kindling all the lights, and this is Minhag Chabad.

47. When kindling the Menorah one should hold the match (or kindling candle) to the wick until the flame takes hold of most of the wick (i.e., the greater portion of the part of the wick that extends above the oil).

48. The custom is to linger near the Menorah for a half hour and gaze at the lights (except on Erev Shabbos when one must go to shul immediately after the kindling).

49. Women have a custom to refrain from performing the types of labor that they refrain from on Rosh Chodesh and Chol HaMoed, while the Chanukah lights are burning (during the first half hour).

Deriving benefit from Chanukah lights:

50. It is forbidden to benefit or use the light of the Menorah, such as to eat or examine something by its light. Some permit using it for a holy purpose, such as for the study of Torah, but others forbid even such uses. Accordingly, it is even forbidden to eat a Shabbos meal by the light of the Menorah.

51. However, it is not forbidden for one to pass through, or even sit, in a room where Chanukah lights are burning, because this is only incidental use.

52. The custom is to refrain from using one Chanukah light to kindle another. Rather one should use a match or a separate candle (that was not ignited from a Menorah during its first half hour of burning).

53. In shul it is permitted to use one Chanukah light to kindle another. Moreover, it is even permitted to kindle the shamash with one of the Chanukah lights (since the kindling in shul is just a custom and is not the primary mitzvah).

54. One may use the oil remaining in the Menorah (after the lights go out) for the following night, even if the lights went out before they burned for a half hour. Oil remaining after the eighth night may not be used for personal use and must be burned because it was designated for Chanukah use only. (It cannot be stored for the following Chanukah next year because of a concern that one may inadvertently use the oil during the year.) If one stipulates when filling his Menorah that he wishes to designate only as much oil as required for the mitzvah, then he may use any oil that remains after the Menorah has burned a half hour.

55. Oil remaining in the bottle may be used for personal use (even if the bottle was originally purchased especially for Chanukah and no special stipulation was made).

The shul Menorah:

56. A Menorah is kindled in shul (between Minchah and Maariv) in order to publicize the miracle of Chanukah in a public place (פרסומי ניסא). [Even though the Menorah at home should ideally be placed below ten tefachim, the shul Menorah is placed above ten tefachim, in a high position.]

57. The Menorah is placed near the southern wall of the shul (in commemoration of the Bais Hamikdash Menorah which was positioned on the southern side of the sanctuary).

58. There are various customs as to the proper position of the shul Menorah and the manner of kindling it: Some place it parallel to the southern wall while other place it perpendicular to it. Some stand facing the southern wall when kindling the shul Menorah, and they begin with the lamp on their left (the east furthest light), and then proceed towards the right (on the following nights). Others, however, leave some space between the Menorah and the southern wall and stand with their backs towards the wall when lighting the Menorah. These people kindle the light on the far right on the first night. On the second night they add a light towards the left which is kindled first, and then they proceed towards the right.

59. Upon kindling the shul Menorah, the chazan recites the same berachos that are recited at home (see above #38).

60. One does not fulfill his obligation with the kindling of the shul Menorah, rather everyone must kindle a Menorah in their own house. Even the chazan who recites the berachos in shul must repeat the kindling and the berachos at home. On the first night, however, he does not repeat שהחיינו at home - unless he kindles on behalf of his wife (and children).

61. The plaza in front of the Kosel Hamaravi in Jerusalem is akin to a shul and therefore a Menorah should be lit there.

62. The Menorah in shul is kindled between Minchah and Maariv, except on Motzo'ei Shabbos when it is kindled after Maariv before Havdalah. (On Erev Shabbos care must be taken to kindle it after Plag HaMinchah and before sunset.)

63. According to many opinions there must be at least ten men present when the Menorah is kindled in shul. There are some lenient opinions that permit kindling in shul without the presence of a minyan (ten people). On Erev Shabbos, if sunset is approaching and there is no minyan present in shul, it is possible for one to rely on the lenient opinions and kindle the Menorah without a minyan present.

64. In some places they have a custom for the shul Menorah to burn until midnight. In other places they have it burn for the entire night.

65. The custom is to kindle a Menorah in shul before Shacharis as well, but without a bracha. [Some say that it is proper to have a Menorah burn in shul for the entire night and day (24 hours).]

Kindling the Menorah on Erev Shabbos and Motzo'ei Shabbos:

66. On Erev Shabbos one must kindle his Menorah before sunset (but not before Plag HaMinchah - 1 1/4 hour before sunset).

67. On Erev Shabbos, the Chanukah Menorah is kindled prior to the kindling of the Shabbos candles.

68. On Erev Shabbos one must put enough fuel in his Menorah to burn until a half hour after nightfall. If this is not possible for all the lights, then at least on one of the lights should burn for that period of time. (See above #34 regarding one whose Chanukah lights go out before sunset.)

69. Some are of the opinion that on Erev Shabbos the proper time to kindle the Menorah is after Minchah (and thus one must daven Minchah early) and this is Minhag Chabad. Others, however, permit kindling the Menorah on Erev Shabbos even before Minchah.

70. After kindling the Menorah on Erev Shabbos one should immediately recite 'הנרות הללו וכו' and go to shul. Other hymns (e.g., ma'oz tzur) can be recited later in the evening (upon one's return from shul).

71. On Motzo'ei Shabbos the Menorah should be kindled immediately after the conclusion of Shabbos (after Maariv). Some kindle their Menorah before Havdalah, while others kindle it immediately after Havdalah, and this is Minhag Chabad.

72. One who generally conducts himself in accordance with Rabbeinu Tam's view and does not perform melacha (forbidden Shabbos labor) after Shabbos until 72 minutes after sunset, should conduct himself accordingly even on Chanukah; he should wait 72 minutes after sunset before kindling his Menorah.

One who is away from home on Chanukah:

73. A traveller who is away from home on Chanukah can discharge his obligation by having his wife at home kindle a Menorah on his behalf. If the traveller has his own private eating or sleeping quarters he must kindle a Menorah there so that people (who do not know that his wife is kindling for him) should not suspect him of neglecting the Mitzvah of Chanukah lights (חשד). However, some maintain that he should not recite his own bracha (but rather try to listen to his host's berachos) since

the kindling is only in order to avoid suspicion, and he fulfills his primary mitzvah obligation through his wife's kindling.

74. One discharges his obligation through his wife's kindling only if he is aware at the time that his wife, indeed, is kindling on his behalf. If one, for example, arrives home late one night and discovers that his wife kindled a Menorah on his behalf without his knowledge, he has not fulfilled the mitzvah and he is obligated to kindle his own Menorah at that time.

75. If the traveller is single (or one's wife is not lighting a Menorah for him at home) he should try to kindle his own Menorah at the place where he is staying. If this is not possible he can discharge his obligation by acquiring a small share in his host's oil and wicks (or candles). This is accomplished by paying the host a few cents for a share in the oil and wicks that will be used in the Menorah (משתתף בפריטי). Or, alternatively, the host can grant his guest a share in his oil wick as a gift (in which case the guest must lift the bottle of oil and wicks with the intent to formally acquire ownership in a portion of it). The guest should be present when the host kindles his Menorah and he should pay attention to the berachos. [As above, if the traveler has his own private eating or sleeping quarters he is obligated to kindle his own Menorah there (and recite the berachos), and he cannot fulfill his obligation by purchasing a share in the host's oil.]

76. Purchasing a share in another's oil is a viable option only for a guest who purchases a share in his host's oil. However, one traveler cannot fulfill his obligation by purchasing a share in a fellow traveler's oil, but rather they must each light a Menorah. Also, if two partners share an apartment they are each required to kindle their own Menorah, they cannot join as partners in one Menorah.

77. If one has sleeping quarters in one house and eats his meals in another house (such as a Yeshiva student who eats his meals in the dining room and sleeps in the dormitory), he should kindle his Menorah in the place where he eats his meals. (However, in places where the custom is to kindle the Menorah outdoors such a person must kindle a Menorah at both houses in order to avoid suspicion.)

78. One who eats regularly at another's table, such as a domestic servant or a Yeshiva student who is regularly served meals at someone's house, is considered as a member of the host's household and he is not required to kindle his own Menorah or purchase a share in the oil (unless he wishes to fulfill the mitzvah l'medhadrin min hamehadrin).

79. Even a poor person who subsists on charity is obligated to borrow or collect money, or sell his clothing to obtain funds for oil or candles for Chanukah - at least to obtain the minimum requirement of one light per night for his household. [This halacha does not apply to a minor below the age of thirteen.]