

# Menorah 101

Laws of the Jewish Holiday  
in a Simple and Concise Language

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אשירה לדי' כי גמל עלי

I am indebted to my wife for all the patience and support she continues to have for me.

Thank you my dear reader, for without your interest this pamphlet would not exist.

Much thanks as well to the Minneapolis Community Kollel for their resources.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to be a quick review of some pertinent laws relevant to this time of year.  
It was formulated for those who do not have the opportunity or resources to study the laws in detail.

Some of these laws and sources have been adapted from the seforim:

Halachos of Chanukah by Rabbi Shimon D. Eider זצ"ל and הלכות חג ברחג by R' Moshe Mordechai Karp שליט"א

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Feel welcome to make copies of this pamphlet for free distribution

Kisleiv 5773

Note: There is much dispute regarding the ideal time to light the menorah. This pamphlet follows the opinion of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein זצ"ל (Iggros Moshe Orach Chayim vol. 4 101:6)

## ❖ Finding the Right Menorah

It is a mitzvah to use as beautiful a menorah as one can afford<sup>1</sup>. However, a menorah is only beautiful as it is functional and in this regard, a menorah must meet the following guidelines:

- All eight lights must be positioned at the same height and in a straight row.<sup>2</sup>
- The shamash (candle used for lighting) must be distinct from the eight lights<sup>3</sup>. Ashkenazic custom places the shamash higher than the other lights<sup>4</sup>.
- Technically speaking, it is not necessary to use a menorah-candelabra to fulfill the mitzvah. Independent candles or glasses of oil can also be used if they are lined up in a manner that complies with these conditions<sup>5</sup>.

### Fuel

- It is best to use a fuel that produces a consistent, clear flame. Today, the custom is to use olive oil or wax candles.<sup>6</sup>
  - Olive oil is the ideal fuel to use<sup>7</sup>.
- Using a gas or electric powered menorah does not fulfill the mitzvah<sup>8</sup>.
- The candles must be long enough and the oil reservoirs must contain enough fuel for the lights to burn through the required time<sup>9</sup>. (See ❖ **Lighting Times** below.)

### Wicks

- Each light may contain no more than one wick.<sup>10</sup>
- Braided wicks cannot be used.<sup>11</sup>

## ❖ Setting It Up

The menorah should be set up ahead of time whenever possible. This way, it can be lit as soon as the proper lighting time arrives.<sup>12</sup>

### Proper Menorah Location

Outside of Eretz Yisroel (Israel) the predominant custom is to light the menorah inside the home<sup>13</sup>.

- The ideal place inside the home is in front of a public-facing window<sup>14</sup>. Otherwise, it should be placed near the doorway of the home on the side that is opposite the mezuzah<sup>15</sup>. For more specifications see note 16.
  - If neither of these areas is practical, situate it in a prominent area of the home.<sup>17</sup>  
Note that the menorah may not be placed where candles are lit throughout the year.<sup>18</sup> For example, placing it on the dining room table is usually inappropriate.
- The menorah may not be placed in a drafty area that could cause the flames to be extinguished.<sup>19</sup>
- When two or more menorahs are lit, they must be distanced from each other enough that an observer would not mistake their flames as belonging to the same menorah<sup>20</sup>.
- Once the menorah is lit, we customarily do not move it until after it has burned through the required timeframe.<sup>21</sup> (See ❖ **Lighting Times** ) Be sure to find a place where it can remain through this time.

### Preparing the Individual Lights

- On the first night of Chanukah only one light is lit (besides the shamash)<sup>22</sup>. It is placed in the far right position of the menorah- the right side of a person who is facing the menorah from the general home area<sup>23</sup>.
- On each successive night, an additional light is added to the immediate left of what was lit the previous night<sup>24</sup>. For example, on the third night the three lights are in the three places furthest to the right of the menorah.

## ❖ Lighting Procedure

- \* Before lighting, it might be wise to find the blessings in your siddur and prop the siddur open. This will facilitate reading from it while holding the lit shamash.
- 1. Have all the members of the home present.<sup>25</sup>
- 2. Stand in front of the menorah with your back to the general home area and your audience.
- 3. Light the shamash.
- 4. Recite the two blessings that conclude with: *"I'hadlik ner shel Chanukah"* and *"she'asah nissim la'avoseinu..."*<sup>26</sup>.
- 5. If it is the first night of Chanukah, recite the blessing of *"Shehechyanu"* as well<sup>27</sup>.
- 6. After reciting the blessings no unnecessary speech or activity is allowed until the lights are lit.<sup>28</sup>
- 7. When there is more than one light, light the newest one first (the one furthest to the left). Continue lighting towards the right<sup>29</sup>.
- 8. Sing the two traditional songs of thanksgiving: *"Haneiros Halalu"* and *"Maoz Tzur"*<sup>30</sup>. (Find these in the siddur after the blessings for the menorah lighting.)

## ❖ Lighting Times

- Irrespective of when the menorah is lit, the flames are supposed to burn a minimum of half an hour during "nighttime"<sup>31</sup>.
  - In this context of Halacha, nighttime begins forty minutes after sunset<sup>32</sup>.  
For example, if sunset is at 4:00, nighttime begins at 4:40. The lights would be required to burn for half an hour anytime after 4:40.

### Basic Lighting Times

The menorah may be lit during the late afternoon or night as long it will remain lit through half an hour of nighttime.

#### – Late Afternoon

The earliest time that one may light is after *"plag hamincha"*. When lighting then, there must be enough fuel for the lights to remain lit until nighttime plus the additional half hour.

Plag hamincha varies by geographical region and time of year. Consult a rabbi for more details, or figure it out yourself based on its description in endnote 33.

#### – Night

If lighting late at night, see below ❖ **When Away From Home** for important details.

### Ideal Lighting Time

- For Sunday through Thursday, the most appropriate time to light is ten minutes after sunset<sup>34</sup>. In this instance the candles must remain burning for a minimum of sixty minutes- thirty minutes until nighttime begins and then for the half hour minimum.
- One who cannot leave work early enough to light at the ideal time (which unfortunately is often the case), should be sure to light as soon as he or she arrives home<sup>35</sup>.
- See ❖ **Shabbos** below for the ideal lighting time for Friday and Saturday evenings.

- Once the lights have burned the minimum half hour of nighttime, they can be put out (unless it is Friday evening).
  - If this intent is anticipated, it is preferable to verbalize it before lighting<sup>36</sup>.

### Lights that have Extinguished Prematurely

- Depending on the circumstance, it is sometimes obligatory to relight flames that have extinguished prematurely.
  - If when the flames were lit it was unlikely that they would remain through the required time (such as because of a drafty location or insufficient fuel), they must be relit in a proper location with sufficient fuel to last through half an hour of nighttime. No blessing is recited at this relighting.<sup>37</sup>
  - If they had the ability to remain lit through the appropriate time, then it is proper – but not obligatory- to relight them (unless Shabbos has begun when it is forbidden to relight them)<sup>38</sup>.

### ❖ Who is Obligated?

- All Jewish adults over bar/bas mitzvah are included in the obligation to light the menorah<sup>39</sup>.
- Children who can understand the mitzvah's concept are obligated to perform it. (This is often at age five or six.<sup>40</sup>) They too must use a menorah and sufficient fuel to fulfill the mitzvah properly<sup>41</sup>.

### Lighting as a Group

- A representative of a group can light on behalf of the entire group. To be considered a group the members must either:
  - Share the home, such as a family living together or students sharing the same house<sup>42</sup>.
  - Jointly own a share in the oil or candles<sup>43</sup>. In this case, each member of the group should lift up the candles or oil with the intent of acquiring them before the menorah is lit.
- In most families of Sefardic ancestry and their communities, only one menorah is lit per home<sup>44</sup>.
- In families with Ashkenazic ancestry and those living in their communities, each member of the home lights independently<sup>45</sup>.
  - Wives may light independently if they wish, but the general custom is that they include themselves with their husbands' lighting<sup>46</sup>.

### ❖ Importance of the Mitzvah

- Once the ideal lighting time (ten minutes after sunset) has arrived, the menorah should be lit as soon as practically possible<sup>47</sup>.
- To ensure that the mitzvah is not forgotten or delayed, it is prohibited to begin a significant or involving activity once the ideal lighting time has arrived until after the menorah is lit<sup>48</sup>. Some examples are studying, eating a meal or beginning a project. (Snacking remains permitted.)<sup>49</sup>
- It is more important to maintain harmony in the home than to light at the proper time. Therefore, if a wife is not yet home, it is appropriate to wait for her even though the ideal lighting time will pass.<sup>50</sup>
- We do not ignite a flame from any of the eight Chanukah lights even if it is for the other lights in the menorah<sup>51</sup>.
- Women customarily do not do domestic activities such as sewing or laundry<sup>52</sup> during the main half hour that the lights burn (see ❖ **Lighting Times**). This is in commemoration of the heroine Yehudis who played a significant part in the miraculous defeat of the Greeks<sup>53</sup>.

- Since the Chanukah lights are designated for a mitzvah, no benefit may be derived from their light.<sup>54</sup>
- Leftover wicks or fuel from the eight lights may be reused another night for the eight lights. However, using them for the shamash or any other purpose- mitzvah or mundane -is forbidden<sup>55</sup>.
  - After Chanukah, all leftover fuel and wicks must be destroyed or thrown away in a respectable fashion so that they are not mistakenly used.<sup>56</sup>
- Leftover fuel or wicks that were not actually used in the menorah are always permitted for benefit<sup>57</sup>.

## ❖ Shabbos

### Friday

- On Friday afternoon, the menorah is lit before the Shabbos candles<sup>58</sup>.
  - Let's do some math:
    - 18 The menorah is lit before the Shabbos candles which are lit eighteen minutes before sunset.
    - 40 Regarding Chanukah, nighttime begins forty minutes after sunset.
    - + 30 The menorah must contain enough fuel to remain lit through half an hour of nighttime
    - 88 The menorah must contain enough fuel to remain lit for at least 88 minutes!<sup>59</sup>
  - \* Regular Chanukah candles do not last long enough and using them would not fulfill the mitzvah. Practical alternatives are using extra-long candles, an oil menorah with sufficient reservoirs or not to use a menorah altogether. Line up tea lights or Shabbos candles in accordance to the rules described above in ❖ **Setting Up-Menorah Styles**.
- It is always appropriate to pray mincha before lighting the menorah<sup>60</sup>. Since mincha is prayed before sunset and the menorah is ordinarily lit after sunset, this issue is not so relevant. On Friday afternoon however, the menorah must be lit before sunset and this preference is applicable<sup>61</sup>.
  - For this reason, many communities have an earlier time for praying mincha during this time of year. If your community does not offer an earlier mincha, you should light the menorah before praying mincha since this preference does not override praying with a minyan<sup>62</sup>.
- Be aware that the menorah is muktzah and cannot be moved the entire Shabbos<sup>63</sup>. The stand or table that it is placed on often becomes muktzah as well<sup>64</sup>.

### Saturday Night

- There are varying opinions whether the lighting of the menorah is before or after havdalah. One should follow his or her family custom<sup>65</sup>.
  - Families without a specific custom should recite havdalah first<sup>66</sup>.

## ❖ When Away From Home

Of course, one who can return home to light the menorah when most people are awake and about should do so. The following laws are for when returning home at that time is not practically possible<sup>67</sup>.

- It is virtuous to push off travelling until after sunset in order to light at home at the appropriate time.<sup>68</sup>
- Sometimes, when leaving on a trip one will still be home in the afternoon when the earliest permissible time to light has arrived (see ❖ **Lighting Times**). In this case, one should light at that time.

- A married woman fulfills her obligation with her husband's lighting and the following laws do not need to concern her.<sup>69</sup>

### Away the Entire Night

The obligation to light when away for the entire night depends on if other members of the household remain at home.

- **Other Household Members Remain at Home**

If other household members remain at home, one of them should be appointed to light for the entire home. The representative must be above bar/ bas mitzvah.<sup>70</sup>

- If possible, the traveler(s) should light locally as well. They should not recite their own blessings but if a local is reciting them, the traveler should listen to them before he or she lights<sup>71</sup>.

- **No-One is Left at Home**

If the entire household has left, all the traveler(s) should light normally where they are staying.<sup>72</sup>

### Away For Part of the Night

The obligation to light when away for part of the night depends on if other people will be awake when the traveler returns.

- **Other People will be Awake**

One who is returning home late at night should light when arriving home if other members of the household are still awake, or if it is practical to wake them for the lighting<sup>73</sup>.

- Similarly, if all the members of the house are away for part of the night, they should light upon their return<sup>74</sup>.

- **No-One will be Awake**

If everyone else at home will be sleeping, and it will be impractical to wake them, a member of the household who is above bar/ bas mitzvah should be appointed as the home representative and light at the proper time.<sup>75</sup>

- **Living Alone**

One who lives alone should light when returning home. The blessings should only be recited if there are still Jewish people inside or outside who are awake and about that would see the lit menorah<sup>76</sup>. If necessary, it is proper to invite a friend or neighbor to come and see it.

## ❖ This Year's Unique Halacha

This year, the first night of Chanukah is on Motz'ei Shabbos (Saturday night). On Friday afternoon, before Shabbos begins, it is appropriate to set up the menorah for when it will be lit. This way, it will be immediately available when Shabbos is over and it is time to light<sup>77</sup>.

A word to the wise: If you use "floating wicks", put them together in advance but do not place them in the oil until just before they are used; otherwise the cork floaters become "soggy" and will not work properly.

- <sup>1</sup> Mishna Berura 673:28  
<sup>2</sup> Shulchan Aruch 671:4  
<sup>3</sup> Shulchan Aruch 673:1  
<sup>4</sup> Shulchan Aruch 673:1  
<sup>5</sup> Kaf Hachayim 673:3, 671:32  
<sup>6</sup> Rema 673:1  
<sup>7</sup> Rema 673:1  
<sup>8</sup> Halachos of Chanukah chapter II note 62  
<sup>9</sup> Shulchan Aruch 675:2  
<sup>10</sup> Rema 671:4  
<sup>11</sup> Rema 671:4  
<sup>12</sup> Mishna Berura 672:1  
<sup>13</sup> Rema 671:7  
<sup>14</sup> Mishna Berura 671:38  
<sup>15</sup> Rema 671:7. See Igros Moshe Orach Chayim IV #125. Many Chassidic communities light the menorah there rather than in a public-facing window  
<sup>16</sup> According to many opinions, it is also proper that the menorah lights should be positioned at a height of between 11" and 35" off the ground. See Mishna Berura 671:27; Halachos of Chanukah III B 10, 11; Shiurei Halacha of Rabbi Shmuel Felder  
<sup>17</sup> This can be understood from the language of "mitzvah" that is used in Shulchan Aruch 671:7  
<sup>18</sup> Rema 671:7  
<sup>19</sup> Shulchan Aruch 680:1  
<sup>20</sup> Rema 671:2  
<sup>21</sup> Mishna Berura 675:6  
<sup>22</sup> Shulchan Aruch 673:2  
<sup>23</sup> Shulchan Aruch 676:5  
<sup>24</sup> Shulchan Aruch 676:5  
<sup>25</sup> Mishna Berura 672:10  
<sup>26</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Rema 676:2  
<sup>27</sup> Shulchan Aruch 676:2  
<sup>28</sup> Shulchan Aruch 432:1  
<sup>29</sup> Shulchan Aruch 676:5  
<sup>30</sup> Shulchan Aruch 676:4 (only "Haneiros Halalu" is mentioned there)  
<sup>31</sup> Shulchan Aruch 672:2, Mishna Berura 672:5  
<sup>32</sup> Igros Moshe Orach Chayim IV 101:6  
<sup>33</sup> According to most opinions the calculation for Plag Hamincha is as follows: Take the full amount of minutes from sunrise to sunset and divide them in twelve equal segments. Plag hamincha is one segment and a quarter before sunset.  
 (For example, if sunrise is 7:00 and sunset is 4:00 there are a total of 540 minutes in the day. This divided by 12 equals 45 minutes per segment. Plag Hamincha is one segment (45) plus a quarter of a segment (11.25) before sunset, which equals approximately 56 minutes before sunset - in our example Plag Hamincha is at 3:04)  
 See also Shulchan Aruch 672:1, Mishna Berura 672:3 and Halachos of Chanukah page 21 note 13  
<sup>34</sup> Igros Moshe Orach Chayim IV 101:6  
<sup>35</sup> Mishna Berura 672:10

- <sup>36</sup> Shulchan Aruch 672:2, Mishna Berura 672:7  
<sup>37</sup> Mishna Berura 673:25  
<sup>38</sup> Mishna Berura 673:27  
<sup>39</sup> Shulchan Aruch 675:3  
<sup>40</sup> Mishna Berura 609:1  
<sup>41</sup> Shulchan Aruch 677:2, Rema 675:3  
<sup>42</sup> Mishna Berura 677:1  
<sup>43</sup> Shulchan Aruch 677:1, Mishna Berura 677:1  
<sup>44</sup> Shulchan Aruch 601:2  
<sup>45</sup> Rema 601:2  
<sup>46</sup> Mishna Berura 671:9  
<sup>47</sup> Mishna Berura 672:10  
<sup>48</sup> Mishna Berura 672:10  
<sup>49</sup> Halachos of Chanukah III A 10  
<sup>50</sup> See Shiurei Halacha by Rabbi Shmuel Felder  
<sup>51</sup> Rema 674:1  
<sup>52</sup> See Halachos of Chanukah I B 9 for a definition of what is forbidden  
<sup>53</sup> Shulchan Aruch 670:1, Mishna Berura 670:3  
<sup>54</sup> Shulchan Aruch 673:1 see Mishna Berura 672:8  
<sup>55</sup> Shulchan Aruch 677:4  
<sup>56</sup> Mishna Berura 677:19  
<sup>57</sup> Biur Halacha 677 "Hatzarich"  
<sup>58</sup> Shulchan Aruch 679:1  
<sup>59</sup> Mishna Berura 679:2, see Igros Moshe Orach Chayim IV 101:6  
<sup>60</sup> Sha'arei Teshuva 679:1  
<sup>61</sup> Mishna Berura 679:2  
<sup>62</sup> Halachos of Chanukah V A 3  
<sup>63</sup> Shulchan Aruch 679:1  
<sup>64</sup> Shulchan Aruch 309:4  
<sup>65</sup> Mishna Berura 681:3  
<sup>66</sup> See Aruch Hashulchan 681:2  
<sup>67</sup> Mishna Berura 672:12  
<sup>68</sup> Halachos of Chanukah IV A 5  
<sup>69</sup> Mishna Berura 671:9  
<sup>70</sup> Halachos of Chanukah IV A 2  
<sup>71</sup> Mishna Berura 677:16  
<sup>72</sup> Halachos of Chanukah IV A 8  
<sup>73</sup> Mishna Berura 672:11  
<sup>74</sup> Halachos of Chanukah IV A 8  
<sup>75</sup> Halachos of Chanukah IV A 2  
<sup>76</sup> Mishna Berura 672:11, see Sha'ar Hatziyun 17  
<sup>77</sup> Mishna Berura 672:1; Shiurei Halacha by Rabbi Shmuel Felder