



Why is Candle Lighting so Central to Judaism?

Returning the Lost Light

Candles and light have illuminated my life since I initially embraced Judaism when lighting my first Shabbat Candles in Jerusalem. I recall the light I discovered then in the rocks and crevices of Jerusalem's enchanted Old City, where the voice of Torah and Tefilah permeated the winding cobbled-stoned steps. Oh, how I yearn for those first years in the Torah world when my fellow returnees to Judaism and I were glowing with the light of Torah. It's comforting to note that for almost 40 years, my life has been involved with sharing that Torah light. Since Torah is light and a mitzvah is compared to a candle, it is not hard to understand why lighting candles is central to Judaism. We light candles every Friday night and for every festival. Moreover, Chanukah – The Festival of Light – is all about candles. In Kabbalah, we relate to Hashem as The Ultimate Light – *Ohr Ein Sof* (the Infinite Light). "Know that before the emanations emanated, and the creation was created, a supreme simple light filled all existence. There was no vacant place, rather all existence was filled with simple Infinite Light, which had neither beginning nor end..." (*Arizal, Etz Chaim* 1:2). When Hashem created the world, He contracted, so to speak, some of His Infinite Light in order to make room for the world. Yet, He gave us an opportunity to return this lost light by means of keeping the Torah and the Mitzvot. When we light candles – especially the mitzvah candles for Shabbat and holidays – we return sparks of the original Divine light back into the world.

Candles and Spirituality

I had the merit to study under Nechama Leibowitz, z"l during the last years of her life. She was a very personable and informal teacher, insisting on the simple title, Nechama! Those years of crowding together onto the simple wooden benches of her cramped Jerusalem apartment, lined with books and folders (*gilyonot*) were simply enlightening. For *Parashat Tetzaveh*, Nechama asked, "Why is the commandment to light the menorah (candelabra) mentioned before all the vessels of the Mishkan were placed and before the Kehuna (Priesthood) was given to Aharon? To highlight her question, Nechama enthusiastically added that igniting the candelabra is the only service in the Mishkan (tabernacle) mentioned in the Book of *Shemot*, where the dimensions of the vessels are described but not their function. The order and details of other service in the Mishkan is only mentioned in the *Book of Vayikra*. She answered her own question with a gleam in her eyes, "Obviously, lighting the candles as a technical requirement to bring light into the Mishkan will not justify why this mitzvah is placed out of order. Yet, if you regard kindling the lights according to their spiritual perspective, then the lighting of the menorah represents the purpose of the entire service in the Mishkan – which is the elevation of the soul towards the Divine light by keeping the mitzvot of the Torah. Since igniting the candelabra infuses the Mishkan with its divine purpose it must be mentioned before the service of any other vessel. The candle symbolizes words of Torah illuminating our path in life while keeping us from stumbling. It furthermore represents the mitzvot, for whoever performs a mitzvah, sustains his soul and is considered as if he lit a candle before G-d as it states,

ספר משלי פרק כ פסוק כז כִּי נֵר הַשֵּׁם נִשְׁמַת אָדָם חֹפֵשׂ כֹּל חֲדָרָי בְּטוֹן:

"For Hashem's candle is the soul of man, searching all the inward parts" (*Mishlei* 20:27).

Besides guarding us from stumbling, the main benefit of the candle is for the purification of the soul (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 36:3). Hashem, the Torah, mitzvot, the soul and the Jewish people are all compared to light and are therefore all one. Just as a person's soul is compared to light, also the Torah is compared to light, "For the mitzvah is a candle and the Torah light..." (*Mishlei* 6:23).

Everyone's light comes from G-d, "Hashem is my light and my salvation" (*Tehillim* 27:1). He is specifically the light of Israel, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Eternal has shone upon you" (*Yesha'yahu* 60:1). It is Israel's role to shine this divine light into the world, "Then nations shall go by your light and kings by the brilliance of your shine" (*Yesha'yahu* 60:3).

The Menorah Correspond to Women's Wisdom

ספר שמות פרק כז (כ) ואתה תצוה את בני ישראל ויקחו אליה שמן זית זך כתיב למאור להעלות נר תמיד:
 "And you shall command the children of Israel, and they shall take to you pure olive oil, beaten for lighting, to kindle the lamps continually" (*Shemot* 27:20).

The word **תצוה/tetzave** – 'command' has the numerical value of **צוה/נשים/nashim tzivah** – He commanded women. This alludes to a women's obligation to light the Shabbat candles (*Ba'al HaTurim, Shemot* 27:20). The verse ends with the words, **נר תמיד/ner tamid** – 'eternal candle' which shares the gematria with **בשבת/b'Shabbat** – 'on Shabbat.' The first word of the verse, **ואתה/v'ata** – 'and you' has the same numerical value as **בית/bayit** – 'home.' Together with **נשים/נשים/nashim tzivah**, we get the sentence: 'women are commanded to light candles in the home for shabbat' (Rabbi Mordechai Rosen z"tl). Each of the three main vessels of the Mishkan, correspond to a particular patriarch and one of the pillars upon which the world is sustained. The table with its showbread corresponds to Avraham and the bestowal of kindness. The altar corresponds to worship and Yitzchak. Ya'acov, who represents Torah, corresponds to the ark with the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The menorah corresponds both to wisdom and to the holy matriarchs, as it states, "The wisdom of women built her home..." (*Mishlei* 14:1). While Sarah was living, a light burned in the tent from one Shabbat eve to the next. When Yitzchak brought Rivkah into his mother Sarah's tent (*Bereishit* 24:67), this divine light returned (Rashi). The connection between women and candlelight is further highlighted by the fact that the word **המנורה/HaMenorah** has the same gematria (306) as **אשה/Isha** – 'woman.' The Jewish home is considered a small Mishkan. Just as the Mishkan requires the four items – ark, altar, table and menorah to make it complete, so too, does a Jewish home require four corresponding things: Torah, worship, kindness and wisdom. The first three are brought to the home by the man but the fourth comes from the woman. Only when all four are present is the Mishkan – built by the Israelites in the desert – complete. The same goes for the small Mishkan that the husband and wife build together (Imrei Shaul, *Inyanei Shabbat* 149:19).

Candles for the Soul of the Departed

During the year of mourning for my dear father, Shlomo ben Yisrael Leib הכ"מ, I've taken on the custom of having a *yartzeit* candle perpetually lit for the elevation of his soul. I find great comfort in keeping this minhag. However, what is the reason for lighting candles on the *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of passing), at a *shivah* house, and even for the entire first year of mourning? Not only does the candle serve as a remembrance of the departed soul, but it also fills the dark void after a soul departs from this world. The memorial candle serves to replenish the light in the world (*Responsa BeTzel haChochmah* 4:29). In addition, lighting a candle brings joy to the departed. The soul is made up of divine light, and it naturally delights in something that is of a similar makeup. This is the case, even though the candle generates mere physical light, and the soul's light is spiritual (Rabbi Bachaya, *Shemot* 25:31). Lastly, we light a candle to atone for the soul of the departed. The verse states, "For the lights honor Hashem" (*Yeshaya'hu* 24:15). When we light candles to honor G d, in the merit of the departed, G-d promises to forgive and watch over their souls (Rosh, *Orchot Chaim*, *Hilchot Erev Yom Kippur*). The prevalent custom is to light the candle during the first week of *shivah*, when the soul is most present (*Responsa BeTzel haChochmah* 4:29). Since the soul's ascent is not completed until the end of the first year, Chabad and others keep the candle lit until the year has passed. The soul is judged and cleansed during the first year after its passing. As such, the

pleasure derived from the candles is particularly appreciated ([Maavar Yabbok, Sefat Emet 15](#)). During those times when we are to remember the deceased, we light a candle in memory of the soul. On the *yahrtzeit* and when *Yizkor* is recited, the soul has permission to travel back to this world, that it left behind. Therefore, we light a candle for its delight and memory (*Mateh Efraim*, sec. 3). Since the candle represents Hashem, Torah, mitzvot and the soul, lighting a perpetual candle for my father is comforting, because it reminds me of the eternity of his divine soul.

Candles, Light and Eternity

The eternity of candles is reflected by the fact that from one candle you can kindle 1000 candles without depleting the light of the original candle. This contrasts with any material good that becomes diminished when shared with others. Yet, the eternal candles teach us that when we fulfill a mitzvah even when it involves expense, we never lose out. When Hashem commanded the Israelites to donate to the Tabernacle, it used the words *וַיִּקְחוּ לִי* /*vayikchu li* – ‘take for me.’ Rashbam explains that this expression only applied to the Tabernacle. Yet, the command to ignite the candelabra is for all generations. Therefore, it changed the language to use the unusual expression *וְאַתָּה תִּצְוֶה* /*V’Ata tetzaveh* – ‘And you are commanded,’ since the language of *וְצִוָּה* /*tzava’ah* – ‘command’ applies to all future generations. The word *כָּתִית* /*katit* – ‘beaten’ has the gematria 830. This comprises the accumulated years of the first temple, which stood for 410 years and the second temple, which lasted 420 years. Scripture thus alludes to the fact that the menorah will be lit in the temples which will stand for 830 years. Yet, how can we fulfill the mitzvah of lighting the menorah after the Temple has been destroyed? Even then, we continue to light in the synagogues which are called a small sanctuary (*Midrash Hagadol Vayikra 6:3*). Moreover, the Shabbat candles that women continually light, extend the light of the Mishkan into the home, which is also called a small Temple. Toldot Yitzchak adds that the two first temples will light for a limited period as it states, *כָּתִית לְמָאוֹר* /*katit lama’or* – ‘beaten for light’ but the third temple, which will be built in the near future, ב”ח, will remain forever, as the verse continues: *וְהָאֵלֹהִים יִלְהַעֲלֶתְךָ נֵר תָּמִיד* /*ha’alot ner tamid* – ‘to bring up eternal light’ – its light will never be extinguished!