WOMEN & SHABBAT CANDLES

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

Our sages set forth three reasons why we light Shabbat candles. First, for peace and harmony in the home; second, to honor Shabbat and third, to create pleasure. This class will focus on the first reason and the related questions of how the Shabbat candles are related to peace and harmony, as well as why the mitzvah (obligation) of lighting is the Jewish woman's.

One need only consider how much we depend on light - whether physical or spiritual - to understand the importance of a Jewish woman's role in this regard. Light fosters communication and interaction between people. It gives us the ability to relate properly to one another. In a sense, darkness erases distinctions between people, whereas light creates a separation between entities, clarifying their boundaries and bringing out their individuality. At the same time, light brings things together by conferring a sense of unity and shared space. Darkness on the other hand is often associated with chaos.

Light creates physical clarity and spiritual harmony. In a room without light we trip over the same things that, with light we realize are far from obstacles, but are there to make life easier and more comfortable. This is true with people as well. When there is light between people, we enhance each other's experience. When two people see things the same way, empathize with each other or share similar values, they are said to see things in the same light. This convergence becomes a basis for peace and harmony in their relationship. It is these very qualities that a woman invokes on Friday evening when she lights candles and ushers into her home a feeling of almost palpable peace and tranquility.

Our sages tell us that the moments of Shabbat candle lighting are a time of teshuva, of returning to our spiritual source. With the flames in front of us, our hands covering our eyes and our focus turned inward, we reflect upon what went right or wrong in the past week and evaluate whether life is leading us in the proper direction. We ask ourselves whether we are on a path lit by truth, or whether we are still in the dark. Torah itself is compared to light, because it is the ultimate source of direction and clarity. Thus the Shabbat candles connect us intimately to Torah. When a Jewish woman lights candles on Friday evening she aligns herself with Torah's eternal order and harmony. From this place of profound connection, she gains the ability to bring the same clarity to her surroundings.

In the atmosphere created by our candles, we are free to meditate on our common goals as Jews and to experience the repose of peace and harmony that is uniquely Shabbat. By refraining from activities of the week and by bringing God into the picture, we acknowledge that we Jews share a

belief and a way of life according to Torah, which is the basis of our identity as a people. We see others united by virtue of their business or hobbies, but this bond is based only on common interest, rather than timeless values. The Jewish woman promotes the essential cohesiveness of the Jewish Nation each time she lights.

As bearers of light, women draw down from above the spiritual clarity of Shabbat, and then disseminate it throughout the week to come. The candle light of Shabbat expresses the inherent peace of the individual and collective Jewish soul. It is no wonder then that candle lighting is a woman's obligation, since it is she who unifies and creates peace in her household. If we consider Adam before Eve, he had no sense of common goal or collective purposefulness, since he was just one individual. With the creation of Eve and her marriage to Adam, God introduced the challenge of human relationships. The idea that Adam and Eve should be united by virtue of their connection to God remains the basis for peace not only in a Jewish marriage, but as a member of a larger, eternal entity - the Jewish Nation. When a woman lights Shabbat candles she acknowledges that women since Eve have been agents of unity and visionaries of peace, connected to God via the weekly flames they ignite.

What does lighting Shabbat candles mean for you as a Jewish woman? We would like to ask your participation in creating a cyberspace anthology of women's insights and experiences in front of the candles. The anthology will be published as part of our Women in Judaism class. Changed Please email "lkohn@torah.org" with your response to the above material or your own observations on the subject. In addition, if you do not yet light Shabbat candles and would like to, please let us know. We'll get you started.

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