

CHANUKAH : FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

QUESTION: Is there a source for the custom of women refraining from doing housework while the Chanukah candles are burning? What type of housework is included in this custom?

DISCUSSION: This custom is cited in Shulchan Aruch and dates back at least to the days of the Rishonim. Women have always felt a special affinity for the Yom Tov of Chanukah since a woman - Yehudis, the daughter of Yochanan Kohen Gadol - played a prominent role in the defeat of the Greeks. In addition, Jewish women suffered from the Greeks more than the Jewish men did.(1) There are two basic reasons why women chose to refrain from work as an expression of their special observance of Chanukah(2):

1. To serve as a reminder that it is forbidden to "benefit" from the Chanukah candles. Refraining from work when the candles are burning reinforces the idea that the Chanukah candles are not to be used for any other purpose but as a reminder of the great miracle that took place.(3)
2. In order to highlight the fact that Chanukah is indeed a Yom Tov, women refrained from doing "work" - as they refrain on Yom Tov - so long as the candles are burning.(4)

There are two opinions as to the amount of time that women customarily refrain from doing housework. Most poskim hold that the custom applies only to the minimum length of time that the candles must burn,(5) which is approximately one-half hour after the stars appear. Others, however, maintain that the custom to refrain from work lasts as long as candles are burning anywhere in the community, which may be as late as midnight.(6) The custom in most communities follows the first view.(7)

There are various opinions as to what "work" means vis-a-vis this custom. Most communities prohibit "work" that would be forbidden on Chol ha-Moed, such as doing laundry, sewing, ironing, etc., while cooking, baking and light household tasks would be permitted.(8) But in some communities, "work" includes all work, including cooking and baking.(9)

QUESTION: Is it permitted to recite the blessings over Chanukah candles that are kindled outside one's home, e.g., at a Chanukah party in school, in a public hall or as a public display?

DISCUSSION: Several contemporary poskim address this issue and the consensus is that it is not permitted. They explain that the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles was instituted specifically to be performed in one's home or in a place where one is residing temporarily. Reciting the blessings

over candles lit outside of one's home may be a brachah l'vatalah.(10)

The only exception to this rule is when candles are lit in shul between Minchah and Ma'ariv on Chanukah. Thus it may be argued that any public lighting is similar to the lighting in shul. But for several reasons the poskim strongly reject this argument and recommend that one avoid reciting the blessings in any setting other than in one's home or in shul.(11)

QUESTION: When is the appropriate time to light Chanukah candles and how long should the candles burn?

DISCUSSION: Concerning the proper times for lighting, there are several views in the poskim which are reflected in various customs. Those who have a family tradition should uphold it, but those who do not have a specific custom should light at the time that recognized Gedolei Yisrael lit, which is about 20 minutes after sunset.(12) Although in Eretz Yisrael many people light immediately after sunset, outside Eretz Yisrael that may be too early, since it is yet daylight for a while and too early to kindle the lights.

There should be enough oil, however, for the candles to burn until one half-hour after three stars appear, tzeis ha-kochavim.(13) There are various ways of calculating Tzeis ha-kochavim, ranging from 42 to 72 minutes past sunset. In order to fulfill the mitzvah according to all views, there should be enough oil to burn for about 80-85 minutes.

On erev Shabbos, Chanukah candles are lit right before lighting Shabbos candles, which is about 20 minutes before sunset. In order to fulfill the mitzvah according to all views, there should be enough oil to burn for at least two hours.(14)

QUESTION: How important is it to daven Minchah before lighting Chanukah candles on Erev Shabbos Chanukah?

DISCUSSION: If possible, one should daven Minchah on Friday before lighting Chanukah candles.(15) There are two reasons for davening Minchah first: 1) The afternoon Tamid sacrifice, which corresponds to our Minchah service, was always brought before the lighting of the Menorah in the Beis ha-Mikdash(16); 2) Davening Minchah after lighting Chanukah candles appears contradictory, since Minchah "belongs" to Friday, while the Chanukah candles "belong" to Shabbos.(17) But if no early minyan is available, then it is better to light first and daven with a minyan afterwards.(18) Working people who are unable to daven Minchah before lighting the menorah because that would cut their short Friday even shorter, should light candles first and then daven Minchah in shul with a minyan.

Rabbi Neustadt is Rav of Young Israel in Cleveland Heights. He may be reached at 216-321-4635 or at jsgross@core.com

FOOTNOTES:

1 *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 139:3.

2 Some men also have the custom to refrain from doing work during this time; Mishnah Berurah 670:3.

3 Be'ur ha-Gra O.C. 670:1.

4 Levush O.C. 670, quoted by Kaf ha-Chayim 670:6.

5 Mishnah Berurah 670:4.

6 Magen Avraham 670:2, quoted by Be'er Heitev 2 and Siddur Ya'avetz.

7 Mishnah Berurah 670:4 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 7; Kaf ha-Chayim 670:8. See Aruch ha-Shulchan 670:8 who writes that in his community, women refrained from work only at the time that the candles were being lit.

8 Harav M. Feinstein (Mo'adei Yeshurun, pg. 8; Halachos of Chanukah, pg. 4); Harav Y. Kamenetsky (Emes L'Yaakov O.C. 670, note 584); Shraga ha-Meir 6:87

9 This is the custom in Yerushalyim; Harav Y.Y. Fischer, quoted in Rivevos Efrayim 1:436.

10 Minchas Yitzchak 6:65; Harav S.Z. Auerbach (quoted in Az Nidberu 6:75); Shevet ha-Levi 4:65; Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 1:398.

11 There are a number of distinctions between lighting in shul and any other public lighting: 1) The purpose of lighting in shul was to remind us of the lighting of the Menorah in the Beis ha-Mikdash, and only lighting in shul, a mikdash me'at, is similar; 2) Lighting in shul was instituted for the sake of guests who had no where to sleep, whereas lighting Chanukah candles in any other public venue would not address this concern.

12 Harav Y. Kamenetsky (Emes L'Yaakov O.C. 672, note 586). See also Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 2:334 and Az Nidberu 7:70. See Igros Moshe O.C. 4:101-6 who writes that the appropriate time is 10 minutes after sunset, but Harav Feinstein himself used to light 13-18 minutes after sunset (Halachos of Chanukah, pg. 20). Harav A. Kotler lit 25-30 minutes after sunset (ibid.)

13 See Igros Moshe O.C. 4:101-6.

14 See Be'ur Halachah 672:1. The breakdown is as follows: 20 minutes before sunset, 72 minutes till the stars appear, and an additional half hour for the candles to burn at night.

15 Mishnah Berurah 679:2.

16 Sha'arei Teshuvah 679:1, quoting Birkei Yosef.

17 Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 679:7, quoting Pri Megadim.

18 Birkei Yosef 679:2; Yechaveh Da'as 1:74.

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Rabbi Neustadt is Rav of Young Israel in Cleveland Heights. He may be reached at 216-321-4635 or
at jsgross@core.com.