**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Chanuka I: Candle-Lighting

Does a woman light her own chanuka candles? When does she light for others?

# Candle-lighting

In 164 BCE, the *Chashmona’im* succeeded in purifying *Beit Ha-mikdash*. We light Chanuka candles in order to publicize and give thanks for the miraculous cruse of oil and the rededication of the Temple that it symbolized. We also commemorate the miraculous military victory over the Seleucid Greeks.

Unusually, the Talmud presents three different levels on which a household can fulfill the obligation of lighting candles:

*Shabbat* 21b

Our Rabbis taught [in a *baraita*]: The mitzva of Chanuka is a candle for each man and his household. *Mehadrin* [those who zealously chase after or glorify *mitzvot*] – a candle for each and every person. *Mehadrin* *min ha-mehadrin* [the most zealous among the *mehadrin*]: Beit Shammai say: The first day he lights eight, from here on he progressively decreases. Beit Hillel say: The first day he lights one, from here on he progressively increases…for we ascend in holiness and do not descend.

The essential obligation is for one candle to be lit in every household each night of Chanuka. All family members share in a single act of lighting, and publicizing the miracle. *Mehadrin*, those who are zealous to chase after or glorify *mitzvot*, light one candle each night for each household member. *Mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*, taking the mitzva to another level of zealousness, change the number of candles each night to mark the progress of the miracle. Halacha follows Beit Hillel, so we add a candle each night.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Early halachic authorities dispute how to fulfill the mitzva *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*, at the most zealous level. Rambam takes the view that this second level of *mehadrin* builds on the first, so that each household member has a unique set of increasing candles.

Rambam, Laws of Megilla and Chanuka 4:1

How many candles does he light on Chanuka? The mitzva is for each household to light one candle, whether the household has many members or only one person. One who chases after the mitzva lights candles according to the number of the household members, a candle for each person, both men and women. One who chases after the mitzva more than this and does the ideal mitzva lights a candle for each person on the first night and progressively adds a candle [for each person] each night.

Tosafot maintain that *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin* does not relate to the *mehadrin* level at all, but is independent of it. On this view, only one set of candles is lit per household, in a growing progression.

Tosafot *Shabbat* 21b s.v. *Ve-hamehadrin*

And the *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*: It seems to Ri that [the views of] Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel only apply to "a candle for each man and his household" for thus there is more glorification [*hiddur*]. For it is clearly recognizable that he increases or decreases, which corresponds to the days that are entering or elapsing. But if he makes a candle for each person, even if he adds from here on, it is not recognizable, for [those who see it] will think that this is the amount of people in the household.

According to Tosafot, multiple candles can correspond **either** to the number of household members (as in *mehadrin*) **or** to the night of Chanuka (as in their view of *mehadrin min ha-mehadrin*). To represent both simultaneously would be confusing, and lose the significance of a recognizable nightly progression.

In a departure from the typical pattern of halachic rulings, Shulchan Aruch and most Sefardi communities follow Tosafot, with each household lighting a single *chanukiya* (Chanuka lamp) each night, and Rema and most Ashkenazi communities follow Rambam.

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 670:2

On the first night he lights one, from here on he progressively adds one each night until on the last night there are eight, even if there are many household members, they should not light more. Rema: There are those who say that every member of the household should light (Rambam) and this is the simple custom. They should take care that each person puts his candles in a unique place, in order that it be recognizable how many candles they light.

In response to the concern that multiple *chanukiyot* would make it harder to track the progression from day to day, Rema recommends lighting each *chanukiya* in a distinct location.

There is an interesting divergence between Rema and Rambam. Whereas Rambam writes that one person lights the candles for the entire household, "he lights a candle for everyone…," Rema rules that each household member lights candles individually, "every member of the household should light."

For Rambam, the *mehadrin* levels reflect each household member, but remain part of a single mitzva incumbent upon the household as a whole. Rema's view suggests that while the basic mitzva is upon the household, the *mehadrin* levels add a personal level of observance for each household member.

# Women Lighting Chanuka Candles

We might be inclined to think that a woman is exempt from having Chanuka candles lit in her household, because lighting is a positive time-bound mitzva. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches otherwise:

*Shabbat* 23a

A woman certainly lights, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Women are obligated in the Chanuka candle, for they were also/indeed part of that miracle.

Women are fully obligated to light Chanuka candles, because women were included in that miracle, *af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes* (*"af hen*" for short). *Af hen* can mean that "indeed" women were essential to bringing the miracle about, or that women, "too," were included in the threat posed by Antiochus and the ensuing redemption. Tosafot record both perspectives, the former in the name of Rashbam.

Tosafot *Megilla* 4a

For they also/indeed were part of that miracle: Rashbam explained that the essence of the miracle came about through them [women]…on Chanuka through Yehudit…. This is difficult, because “they too” (“*af hen*”) indicates they are ancillary; according to his explanation it should [just] say “they [were part of that miracle].” Therefore, it seems to me that “they too were” subject to the [perilous] uncertainty (*safek*) …and on Chanuka, the decree was mightily against them…

We discuss the principle of “*af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes*” in greater depth [here](file:///d:\Users\user\Downloads\deracheha.org\af-hen).

In what way were women essential to the miracle?

Rashbam writes that the Chanuka miracle came about through Yehudit. But who was she?

Yehudit daughter of Merari is the heroine of the apocryphal Book of Judith, perhaps inspired by the Biblical Yael (Shofetim 5:25), for lulling the enemy general Holofernes to sleep with milk and then beheading him. However, the Book of Judith appears to be set in a much earlier era, which makes it difficult to attribute the Chanuka miracle to that recounting of the Yehudit story.

At the same time, traditional Jewish sources seem to tell a parallel story integrated into the Chanuka narrative. Kolbo, for example, calls the woman who took action "Yehudit the daughter of Yochanan," a direct descendant of Matityahu, and provides context for what occurred:

*Kolbo* 44

Women are obligated in the Chanuka candle for they, too, were part of that miracle. That means that the enemies came to destroy everyone, men, women and children. There are those who explain that the great miracle occurred by means of a woman, and her name was Yehudit, as is explained in the *aggada*. Yochanan, the High Priest, had a daughter who was very beautiful. The Seleucid Greek king ordered that she lie with him. She fed him a cheese dish so that he would grow thirsty and drink a lot and become drunk and lie down and fall asleep. So it was, and he lay down and slept, and she took his sword and cut off his head and brought it to Yerushalayim, when the army saw that their hero had died, they ran away. For this reason, it is customary to make cheese dishes on Chanuka.

According to Kolbo, Yehudit's act of resistance was instrumental in defeating the enemy. Where Kolbo spells out the details of his story, Rashi's comment on this matter is more cryptic:

Rashi *Shabbat* 23a s.v. *Hayu be-oto ha-nes*

The Seleucid Greeks decreed that all virgin brides be bedded first by the commander, and the miracle was performed through a woman.

Rashi gives us to understand that the Seleucid Greeks exercised droit du seigneur, sleeping with each bride on her wedding night, in a type of sexual warfare that undermined the very fabric of Jewish society, the sanctity of the family. Rashi notes that a woman changed the course of that practice, without spelling out how. One possibility, as Ran suggests, is that Rashi's account can mesh with Kolbo's:

Ran on the Rif *Shabbat* 10a

For they too were in that miracle. For the Seleucid Greeks decreed that all virgin brides be bedded first by the general. Through a woman a miracle was performed, for we say in the midrash that the daughter of Yochanan fed the enemy chief cheese to get him drunk, and she cut off his head, and they all fled.

According to Ran, the daughter of Yochanan beheads the enemy the night he seeks to exercise his droit du seigneur.

There is also an early tradition from Megillat Ta'anit, recorded less than two hundred years after the Chashmonean revolt, in which Matityahu's sons begin the revolt in order to protect their sister.

*Megillat Ta'anit*

…Matityahu ben Yochanan the High Priest had one daughter. When her time came to marry, the [Seleucid Greek] officer came to defile here. But Matityahu and his sons did not allow it [*droit du seigneur*] and they were zealous and they defeated the Seleucid Greek empire…

Otzar ha-midrashim relates that the young bride shocked her brothers into revolt:

*Otzar Ha-midrashim Chanuka*, p. 190

The Seleucid Greeks would abuse the virgins of Israel, and they did this for three years and eight months until the deed of the daughter of Matityahu the High Priest, who was marrying a son of Chashmonai named Elazar. When her wedding day arrived, they seated her in her litter. When the time of the meal arrived, all the great ones of Israel gathered in honor of Matityahu and the son of Chashmonai, for there were none greater than they in that generation. When they sat down to feast, Chana daughter of Matityahu stood up atop her litter and clapped her hands together and ripped her royal cloak and stood before all of Israel exposed, and also before her father and her mother and her father-in-law. When her brothers saw this they were ashamed and their faces fell to the ground and they rent their garments and they stood over her to kill her. She said to them "Listen to me my brothers and my kinsmen: If when I stood before the righteous naked without any sin you would be zealous for me, why are you not zealous when it comes to handing me over to the uncircumcised to abuse me! Shouldn't you learn from Shimon and Levi, the brothers of Dina, who were only two and were zealous for their sister and killed a large city like Shechem and gave themselves up for the Oneness of God, and God helped them and did not shame them. You are five brothers Yehuda, Yochanan, Yonatan, Shimon, and Elazar, and young Kohanim, more than two hundred young men. Put your trust in God and He will help you, as it is said "For nothing gets in the way of God's salvation" (Shemuel I 14). She opened her mouth and wept and said "Master of the world, if You will not have mercy on us, have mercy on the sanctity of Your great Name which is called upon us and avenge us today. At that time, her brothers became zealous…

Here a daughter of Matityahu forfeits her own dignity to demonstrate to her brothers that they bear responsibility for allowing the sexual subjugation of Judean women to persist. She gives voice to the victims of sexual violence and places the imperative of justice for them and fighting the Seleucid practice in a Biblical framework that speaks to her brothers and her people. Her voice is heard.

On all of these readings, Jewish women suffered along with the men under Antiochus. On some of them, men found the courage to revolt and help bring about wondrous Divine intervention thanks to a woman who led the way.

# Lighting for the Household

The Talmud teaches that "a woman certainly lights." This clearly establishes that if a woman lives alone, or only with other women or minors, the household must have a Chanuka candle, which a woman (or every household member, depending on practice) lights:

*Ha-agguda Shabbat* II

Women are obligated and for this reason if a widow is the head of the household and she knows how to recite the *beracha*, she should light [the Chanuka candle] and discharge the obligation of the members of her household, as we say, "a woman certainly lights."

Furthermore, the Talmud teaches that if a married man isn't home on a given night, his wife lights and he can rely on her lighting:

*Shabbat* 23a

Rabbi Zeira said: Initially, when I was at yeshiva, I would participate [in my host's lighting by contributing] coins [to pay for the lighting materials] together with the host. Once I married a woman I said, "Now I certainly don't need to [pay my host], since they light for me in my home.

Mishna Berura makes clear that this is the practical halacha:

*Mishna Berura* 675:9

When the man is not at home, the wife should light [the Chanuka candle] –for she is subject to the obligation—and with a blessing.

The same goes for a woman away from home; she can rely on the lighting of her husband, or another adult household member. Whether husband or wife can choose to light candles with *berachot* away from home when the spouse is known to be lighting at home is a matter of debate.[[2]](#footnote-2)

When Her Husband is Present

In communities in which each household lights a single *chanukiya*, or has one designated lighter, it has been customary for a man to do the lighting. Ra'avan writes that, though women take priority in Shabbat candle-lighting, that is only because of a special mishnaic tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Ra'avan *Shabbat* 340

Just as a woman lights the candle on Shabbat night as we learn in the mishna, “On [account of] three transgressions women die in childbirth: because they are not careful with *nidda*, with *challa*, or with candle-lighting” (*Shabbat* 31b). So too a woman lights the Chanuka candle if her husband is not home… but in any case, when her husband is there, he takes priority for he too is obligated.

Mishna Berura recognizes that a wife **can** discharge her husband's obligation in his presence, but in his *Beiur Halacha* suggests an alternative reason why she **should** not. The Talmud teaches that a man who has his wife recite *birkat ha-mazon* for him is cursed, as commentators explain, because he did not learn to recite it himself. We could view the two cases as analogous:

*Mishna Berura* 675:9

A woman lights: This means for all the members of her household. Even a man can make her an agent to discharge his obligation.

*Beiur Halacha* 675 s.v. *Isha madleket*

She is able to discharge even her husband's obligation, but it is known what our sages said…A woman recites *birkat ha-mazon* for her husband, but the sages said a curse comes upon a man whose wife and children recite *birkat ha-mazon* for him.

Rav David Auerbach notes, however, that other halachic authorities express no reservations about a wife lighting for her husband. He explains, contra Mishna Berura, that the two cases are not really analogous. The fundamental halacha is that, since men and women are fully obligated in the mitzva of lighting Chanuka candles, either one can light candles in the home, and recite the blessings, in the other's presence:

Rav David Auerbach' *Halichot Beitah* 23:6 note 16

…It seems that one can distinguish, and this is in accordance with what Rashi wrote in *Sukka* 38a "A curse should come upon him: because he did not learn [to recite *hallel*]."…Presumably he [the husband] certainly knows how to recite this short *beracha* [over Chanuka candles] himself, but for whatever reason tells his wife to light the candles and recite the *beracha*…Regarding lighting the Chanuka candles, where man and wife are fully equal in this obligation, one can say that there is no problem at all in designating his wife as an agent, and for this reason Bach and Taz and other halachic authorities omitted [mention of curse] and did not write that ideally it is improper to designate his wife as an agent [for lighting in his presence].

In a home where the practice is to light only one *chanukiya* each night, there is a widespread custom, supported by the reasoning of *Beiur Halacha*, for the husband to light. However, following the reasoning of *Halichot Beitah*, there are also strong grounds for husband and wife to adopt whatever practice suits them (e.g., to alternate lighting it from night to night as they see fit).

# Lighting as one of the Mehadrin

A simple reading of early halachic authorities, such as Rambam, leaves every impression that women were counted individually as part of the *mehadrin* levels, where there is a set of candles for each family member.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rambam, Laws of Megilla and Chanuka 4:1

One who chases after the mitzva lights candles in accordance with the number of household members for each and every one, both men and women.

This makes it difficult to understand common Ashkenazi practice, that in households with adult male members, it is customary for women and girls not to light Chanuka candles, even when every male member of the household does so.

It is not at all clear how this came to be the case. One possible explanation, advanced by Rav Shemuel Leib Kauder and cited by Mishna Berura,[[5]](#footnote-5) draws on Tosafot's position that "*af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes*" means that women were *tefeilot*, or secondary figures in the miracle.

An alternate explanation applies the Talmudic concept *ishto ke-gufo*, “his wife is like himself,” to the Chanuka candle. Thus, a married couple are considered a single entity, and one candle suffices for the two of them even when they light as *mehadrin*:

*Eliya Rabba* 671

For 'his wife is like himself' and she is not counted among the *mehadrin*…For [a woman] lights specifically when she doesn't have a husband or when her husband is out of town.

The symbolism of *ishto ke-gufo* is potentially powerful. Even if every other member of the household may be considered independent, husband and wife form a single unit and publicize the miracle together. Yoetzet Halacha Lisa Septimus considers the significance of this partnership, weighed against lighting separately:[[6]](#footnote-6)

Lisa Septimus, “Women Lighting Chanukah Candles: Is it playing with fire?”

…For any partnership to flourish, alongside the development of a united voice, the individual voices must be preserved and appreciated.  Even women who choose to follow the simple reading of the Mishnah Berurah and to fulfill their mitzvah through the principle of ishto k’gufo must not forget that they too are obligated in the mitzvah. That for some the mitzvah is fulfilled most ideally when husband and wife fulfill the mitzvah as a unit cannot negate each individual’s obligation. And regardless of whether in a given scenario husband and wife function separately or as a unit, both are important.

Single Women Lighting Mehadrin

If a reason some women do not light *mehadrin* is because of *ishto ke-gufo*, why don’t more single women and girls light when they are members of a male-headed household?

In answer to this difficulty, Chatam Sofer suggests that perhaps the original practice of lighting candles outdoors would have compromised female *tzeniut*, and the custom, once established, was maintained even for indoor lighting:

*Chatam Sofer Shabbat* 21b

…What is the reason that our women are not accustomed to be among the *mehadrin*?...In my humble opinion, when they originally enacted “a candle for a man and his household” outside the entrance to his home…then no woman would be found among the *mehadrin* because it is not respectable for her to go outside to the public domain at evening time and to light among the men…and nowadays, even though everyone lights indoors, the original custom still has not moved from its place…

Alternatively, one might suggest that it would appear disrespectful for daughters to light when their mother did not. However, Chida also expresses surprise that a male child would light when his mother would not:

*Birkei Yosef* OC 671

Nevertheless the practice does not make much sense, because for [a woman] to be ”*ishto ke-gufo*” (one entity with her husband) means something is missing and her glory is removed. For are [women] of lesser status [than the offspring]…?

Having young boys light but not their mothers might send a complicated educational message, especially for a home-based mitzva.

In Practice

Even those who apply *ishto ke-gufo* here, Mishna Berura among them, allow a woman to light voluntarily among the *mehadrin*.

*Sha'ar Ha-tziyyun* 675:10

…So wrote Maharshal and Eliya Rabba, that "his wife is like himself" and does not need [to light *mehadrin*]; however, she is able to light on behalf of his entire household.

Early halachic authorities do not mention *ishto ke-gufo*, however. Closer to our day, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik reportedly rejected its application here altogether:

Rav Herschel Schachter, Nefesh Ha-Rav, p. 226

See Magen Avraham, that each household member should light, and see there in Mishna Berura that this is aside from his wife, for she is like himself…And our Rabbi [Rav Soloveitchik] said that this makes no sense, and it is correct that married women should also light for themselves.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein laid out the practical implications of this view:[[7]](#footnote-7)

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, Women's Obligation to Light Chanuka Candles

In the home of Rav Soloveitchik zt"l, it was customary for women to light, and so is the custom in my home. As we have seen, the simple understanding of the law is that women are obligated just like men (on the level of the "extremely zealous"), and the burden of proof falls upon those who think otherwise.

In a family that lights multiple *chanukiyot*, there is good reason for a woman to light one.

# Lighting in the Synagogue

While the mitzva is to light at home, it is also customary to light Chanuka candles in synagogue, in order to publicize the miracle further, ideally with a *minyan* present.[[8]](#footnote-8) Since women are obligated in lighting Chanuka candles, Ben Ish Chai rules that women can count toward a quorum of ten for lighting candles in synagogue.

*Rav Pa'alim* II OC 62

Regarding the law of the Chanuka candle, which we light and recite a *beracha* over in synagogue in order to publicize the miracle …For one can say that it works for women to combine [with men to a quorum of ten] in order to publicize the miracle.

Technically, it would seem that a woman could light the candle for the synagogue as well. Whether a woman *should* light the candles at synagogue (which raises more sensitivities than other settings) or in other communal contexts is a distinct discussion. Actual practice depends on the factors we explored [here](file:///d:\Users\user\Downloads\deracheha.org\discharging-obligations-2-in-practice), and is similar to the case of *kiddush*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We continue our discussion of Chanuka observances for women in our next shiur.

1. See *Shulchan Aruch* 470:2 infra, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mishna Berura 677:3:15-16 Although the basic halacha is that he is exempt from lighting if they light for him in his home, in any case, if he wants to be stringent upon himself and to light for himself [when away], he is permitted to, so long as he has in mind before candle lighting time that he does not wish to discharge his obligation through his wife…. Thus said many later halachic authorities. There are some halachic authorities who think that once our sages exempted him through his wife's lighting, he does not have the power to say 'I don't want to discharge my obligation through my wife'. He should [in that case] only light [when away] without a *beracha*… [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See our discussion in Three Mitzvot. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In his discussion of husband and wife lighting in different locales, Terumat Ha-deshen strongly implies that each would light separately at home:

   Terumat Ha-deshen 101

   Just as there is glorification of the mitzva in having a candle for each and every person in one household, so, too, there is glorification in having a candle for a man and a candle for his wife in two places. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mishna Berura 675:9

   See the responsum of *Olat Shemuel* 105 that according to our practice, where each person lights individually, a woman still does not need to light, for they are only secondary to men. If they want to light, they recite a *beracha* like other positive time-bound commandments over which they can recite a *beracha*. When the man is not at home, the woman should light, since she is obligated, with a *beracha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Available here: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/women-lighting-chanukah-candles-is-it-playing-with-fire/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Available here:

   <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/womens-obligation-light-chanuka-candles> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Shulchan Aruch OC 671:7

   We light [Chanuka candles] and recite *berachot* in *beit ha-kenesset*, in order to publicize the miracle. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Women are obligated and, though it publicizes the miracle, its typical performance is home-based. I.e., it is not inherently public in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)