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

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Candle-Lighting I: What, Who and Where

What is the mitzva of Lighting Shabbat and yom Tov candles? Who lights? where?

# Obligation & Purpose

The Torah prohibits performing labor on Shabbat, and singles out kindling a fire as an archetypal act of labor:[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Shemot* 35:2-3

Six days shall you perform labor and on the seventh day it will be sacred for you, a *Shabbat Shabbaton* for God; whoever performs labor on it will be put to death. You shall not kindle fire in all of your dwellings on the Shabbat day.

Lest we think that this prohibition obliges us to spend Shabbat in the dark, a midrash halacha explains that we kindle a flame **prior** to Shabbat, in order to illuminate our dwellings over the course of Shabbat:

Mechilta Va-yakhel, Masechta De-Shabbeta 1

"You shall not kindle fire in all of your dwellings on the Shabbat day." On the Shabbat day you do not kindle, but you do kindle from erev Shabbat for Shabbat.

The Mishna takes candle-lighting prior to Shabbat as a matter of course, and discusses at length which oils and wicks are acceptable for a Shabbat candle. For example, Rabbi Yishmael precludes using tar—which produces an unpleasant odor when burning—as fuel for the Shabbat light, out of concern for *kevod ha-Shabbat* (the honor due to Shabbat).

Mishna *Shabbat* 2:2

Rabbi Yishmael says: We do not light with tar because of the honor of Shabbat

What is *kevod ha-Shabbat*? Rambam explains that we honor Shabbat by having our home ready for it, specifying a lit candle as one of the necessary preparations.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 30:5

One needs to prepare his house while it is still day because of *kevod ha-Shabbat*, and there should be a lit candle and a table set for eating and a bed made, for all these are for *kevod Shabbat*.

More directly, in discussion of the above mishna, Rava states explicitly that there is an obligation to kindle a Shabbat candle:

*Shabbat* 25b

"Rabbi Yishmael says" etc. What is the reason? Rava said: Because its odor is bad, it is a decree lest he leave it and go out [from where it was lit]. Abbaye said to him: So let him go out. He [Rava] said to him [Abbaye]: For I say, lighting the candle of Shabbat is an obligation.

Here, Rava associates the obligation of candle-lighting with being in the **presence** of the candle and enjoying its light.

*Kevod ha-Shabbat* and *oneg Shabbat* (taking pleasure in Shabbat) are considered rabbinic-level *mitzvot*. Both are derived from *Yeshaya* 58:13, and they often appear side by side.[[3]](#footnote-3) Tosafot learn from Rava's statement that the obligation of candle-lighting entails eating the nighttime Shabbat meal by the candlelight, in fulfillment of *oneg Shabbat*.

Tosafot *Shabbat* 25b s.v. *hadlakat*

…For it is an obligation to dine in proximity to the candle, because of *oneg* [*Shabbbat*].

Indeed, another midrash teaches that the Shabbat candle fulfills *oneg Shabbat*:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Midrash Tanchuma *No'ach* 1

Whence do we derive [the requirement of] the Shabbat candle? As it is said, "And you will call Shabbat a pleasure." (*Yeshaya* 58:13).

This midrash does not make specific mention of the Shabbat meal. Its broad purview jibes well with a different Talmudic passage:

*Shabbat* 23b

[If one lacks sufficient funds for both, which takes precedence,] the [Shabbat] candle of his home or [wine for] Kiddush? The candle of his home takes precedence because of *shalom bayit*.

This passage grants the Shabbat candle primacy over kiddush wine because illumination throughout the home fosters peace within it, *shalom bayit*. Rashi points out the more practical aspect of light promoting peace:

Rashi *Shabbat* 25b

Kindling a candle of Shabbat…And in a place where there is no candle, there is no peace, and one walks and stumbles, and walks in the dark.

The Shabbat candle that emerges from these descriptions is not merely ritual or symbolic. It provides illumination that naturally helps us to achieve *oneg Shabbat* and *shalom bayit*. On the other hand, the wrong oil could detract from *kevod ha-Shabbat* because of its smell.

At the same time, *oneg Shabbat*, *kevod Shabbat*, and *shalom bayit* have a spiritual aspect (which we discuss more [here](https://www.deracheha.org/three-mitzvot-2/)), and the Shabbat candle comes to symbolize the Divine presence in the home. Inspired by a Talmudic passage, Maharal compares the Shabbat candle to the pillar of fire that guided *benei Yisrael* in the wilderness:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Maharal *Chiddushei Aggadot Shabbat* 23b

…For the Shabbat candle is a matter of mitzva, and it is as though it is the candle of God, and therefore it is similar in its quality to the pillar of fire, which was from God. And it is not like other candles of the weekday, rather this is a sacred thing…

# Yom Kippur & Yom Tov

What of candle-lighting for other sacred days? Let's look first at Yom Kippur, and then at Yom Tov.

Yom Kippur

The Mishna describes candle-lighting on Yom Kippur as subject to custom:

Mishna *Pesachim* 4:4

[In] a place in which they are accustomed to light the candle on the eve of Yom Kippur, they light it. [In] a place in which they are accustomed not to light, they don’t light [it].

At first glance, this is surprising, since Yom Kippur is a sort of Shabbat. Still, Yom Kippur differs from Shabbat in that there are no *mitzvot* of *kavod* or *oneg*, there is no meal to be eaten by the candle's light, and even the applicability of *shalom bayit* to Yom Kippur has been called into question.[[6]](#footnote-6) Commentators explain that the varying customs reflect differing views on whether candlelight will foster or deter marital relations, which are prohibited on Yom Kippur.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The custom to light with a *beracha* has become dominant, even though the Talmud recognizes the custom of not lighting. Lighting for Yom Kippur retains the status of a custom (except for when Yom Kippur coincides with Shabbat):

Shulchan Aruch OC 610:2

There is one who says that one recites a *beracha* over lighting the Yom Kippur candle. Rema: And thus is the custom in these provinces.

Yom Tov

On Yom Kippur and on Shabbat, kindling a flame is prohibited, so lighting a candle seems intuitive. However, we can kindle lights on Yom Tov from a pre-existing flame, so there is no obvious need to light a Yom Tov candle. Indeed, we find almost no mention of candle-lighting for Yom Tov in the Mishna or Talmud.[[8]](#footnote-8) Some early halachic authorities write that it appears in their text of the Yerushalmi, although it does not appear in our text:[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hagahot Maimoniyot Shabbat 5:1

Similarly, on Yom Tov they had the custom to light a candle, and thus it is in the Yerushalmi in the fourth chapter of *Beitza*: One who lights a candle on Yom Tov needs to recite the *beracha*: "Who sanctified us with His *mitzvot* and commanded us to light the candle of Yom Tov."

There is no compelling reason **not** to light for Yom Tov, and lighting with a *beracha* on Yom Tov has become widespread practice, with the exception of some Yemenite communities.

Shulchan Aruch OC 263:5

On Yom Tov also, one must recite the *beracha* "to light the candle of Yom Tov."

Aruch Ha-shulchan explains that lighting on Yom Tov is based on the mitzva of [*simchat Yom Tov*](https://www.deracheha.org/simchat-yom-tov/), rejoicing on Yom Tov. He also notes the custom of many women to recite *she-hechiyyanu* along with candle-lighting on the first night of Yom Tov. (We discuss this further [here](https://www.deracheha.org/kiddush-2-practical-issues/).)

Aruch Ha-shulchan OC 263:12

Just as on Shabbat we are commanded in lighting candles, so too on Yom Tov, for it is clear that Yom Tov is a time of rejoicing and there is no rejoicing without light. Therefore she [a woman] needs to recite the *beracha* "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the world, Who sanctified us with His *mitzvot* and commanded us to light the candle of Yom Tov." Mordechai and Or Zarua and Hagahot Maymoniyot brought this from the Yerushalmi, but I did not find this in the Yerushalmi that is before us. And our women also recite the *beracha* of *she-hechiyyanu* at the time of candle-lighting on Yom Tov.

# Number and Meaning

We've been using the term "the Shabbat candle" deliberately, since almost every source that we've seen up till now has referred to it in the singular, as "*ner Shabbat*." In his explanation for the tradition to light two candles, Ra'aviyah highlights the symbolic aspect of candle-lighting, invoking the concept of *kevod ha-Shabbat*.

Ra'aviyah I Shabbat 199

It seems to me that they adopted the custom of two candles, for one is to eat by its light, and it is recognizable [that the lighting is for Shabbat] only with two...Furthermore, one can say that one corresponds to "*zachor*" (remember) and one corresponds to "*shamor*" (keep), as we say "They saw that old man who took two bunches of myrtle…'Wouldn't one suffice for you?' 'One corresponding to *zachor* and one corresponding to *shamor*. '" (*Shabbat* 33b)… According to this, one should not add a third candle, and if one needs it, he should place it at a distance so that it is recognizable…

For Ra'aviyah, one candle would not recognizably serve a ritual or symbolic purpose. Adding a second candle makes it clear that our interest in the Shabbat candle goes beyond the functional value of its light. Once there are two candles, we can connect them conceptually to the over-arching duality of the mitzva of Shabbat in the ten commandments: remembering and keeping Shabbat.

To preserve the two candles' symbolism, Ra'aviyah prefers that other candles not be lit alongside them. Aware of the importance of candles' functionality, though, he allows for lighting additional candles as long as we maintain distance between them and the other two. For this reason, many women with the practice of lighting additional candles are careful to distinguish visually between the first two candles and the extras.

In practice, many women have a custom of lighting more than two candles when lighting at home,[[10]](#footnote-10) with the number of extra candles often corresponding to the number of children a woman has or to the seven days of the week or the Ten Commandments.[[11]](#footnote-11) Women commonly light the same amount of candles on Yom Tov as on Shabbat.

Forgetting to light

Maharil once instructed a woman who did not light candles one Shabbat to add extra oil to each candle that she would light from then on:

Maharil Minhagim Shabbat 1 (Lebensohn), Addition

Maharil was asked: A woman who was ill and did not light a candle for Shabbat, and he instructed her to be careful all her days to add to each mitzva candle more than what she had been accustomed until now.

Women embraced this ruling, and developed a stringent custom for a woman who forgets to light to add an additional candle on subsequent Shabbatot:

Darkei Moshe Ha-katzar OC 263:1

Maharil wrote (Laws of Shabbat 1) A woman who forgot and did not light a candle on Shabbat, that she needs all her days to add to the mitzva candle more than what she was accustomed to light until now. And she needs a fast and confession etc. All these are only remote stringencies, and on the contrary it seems that whoever adds to the [number of] candles detracts, and loses the intention of *zachor* and *shamor*. But women's practice is in accordance with the words of Maharil, that whoever forgot one time lights three candles for all her days.

While Rema expresses strong reservations about adding candles in Darkei Moshe, his gloss to Shulchan Aruch is more conciliatory and accepting of women's practice:

Shulchan Aruch OC 263:1

One should be careful to make a hardy candle, and there are those who deliberately make two wicks, one corresponding to "remember [the Shabbat]" and one corresponding to "keep [the Shabbat]." Rema: and they can add and light three or four candles, and thus is the practice. The woman who forgot to light one time, lights three candles for all her days (Maharil), for one can add to something intended [to symbolize] another matter, as long as one does not decrease [the number].

In practice, this custom applies specifically when a woman was negligent, not when she faced circumstances beyond her control:

Magen Avraham 263:3

One time - And if she forgot a few times, she needs to add each time, for the matter is in order to make a reminder so that she be careful from now on with the honor of Shabbat. For this reason it seems to me that if she was subject to circumstances beyond her control and thus didn’t light, as if she was in prison or the like, she need not add.

What if the house was lit by electric lights? In this case, Rav Wosner is stringent:

שו”ת שבט הלוי ה:לג

אשר שאל לענין אשה ששכחה להדליק נרותיה בליל שבת אבל היה דולק נר האלקטרי אם נדון זה בכלל מש”כ הפוסקים באו”ח ריש סי’ רס”ג דשכחה להדליק שתוסיף נר, ומקום הספק דהא איכא עכ”פ אור בבית שזה עיקר שלום בית הנה קשה להשיב במה שאין מקור בראשונים, אבל כך נראה דנקרא שכחה לענין זה, דעכ”פ עברה על מצות הדלקת הנר שהיא מצות האשה במיוחד

Shevet Ha-Levi 5:33

He asked regarding a woman who forgot to light her candles on leil Shabbat but there was an electric [light] lit, if this is included in what the authorities wrote in Orach Chayyim, at the beginning of 263, that if she forgot to light she add a candle. The place of doubt is that there is in any case light in the home, for this is the essence of Shalom Bayit. It is difficult to respond to something without a source in the early authorities, but it seems that for this matter, it is called forgetting, for in any case she transgressed the mitzva of candle-lighting…

Rav Ovadya Yosef, however, ruled that this penalty does not apply if the house was otherwise illuminated for Shabbat, even with electric lights, since the necessity of adding a full candle is debated and since the essential function of candle-lighting was met:

*Yalkut Yosef* Shabbat I 263:2-5, note 42

Since the halachic authorities debated this, and nowadays there is electric light without this, and the place is lit well, and there is no concern that one will stumble over wood or a stone, one can be lenient not to penalize her here…And with respect to the halacha, I asked our master my father and teacher [Rav Ovadya Yosef] and he agreed with our words above, that there is no need to penalize her if the electric light was on.

In this ruling, Rav Ovadya Yosef distinguishes between the functional purpose of the Shabbat candles, to ensure that our homes are properly illuminated, and the ritual candle-lighting to honor Shabbat. If electric lights have been left on so that we are not groping around in the dark, it is not necessary to impose a lifelong penalty on a woman who omitted the intentional, ritual act of candle-lighting.

We've seen that the complementary functional and spiritual purposes of Shabbat candles have relevance for a number of the *halachot* of candle-lighting. This is especially the case now, when our main source of artificial light is electric, so that the candles are more clearly symbolic.

# Who Lights

The fundamental obligation is for each household to be illuminated on Shabbat. Rambam notes that this applies irrespective of gender:

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 5:1

Lighting a candle on Shabbat isn’t optional, [meaning] if he wants he lights, and if he wants he doesn’t light. And it's not a mitzva, [meaning] that he is not obligated to chase after it until he does it, like making an *eiruv* or washing hands to eat. Rather it is an obligation, and both men and women are obligated that there be in their homes a lit candle on Shabbat.

In line with what we've learned about the candles' functional role, Rambam writes that the obligation is not for each individual to light, but rather that there be a lit candle in the home over Shabbat. That means that there is no obligation for more than one person in a household to light Shabbat candles. Women are given precedence in being the ones to light the candles in the home.

Avot De-Rabbi Natan (Version 2) 9

….They [our sages] entrusted to her [the woman] the mitzva of the candle and she became obligated in the candle…

We discuss a woman's precedence in this mitzva and different explanations for it—for example, that women were more often found at home—[here](https://www.deracheha.org/three-mitzvot/). Precedence, however, does not mean that men are exempt, as Deracheha Editor-at-Large Sarah Davis Rudolph points out:[[12]](#footnote-12)

Sarah Davis Rudolph, "Words Matter." [OU.org](http://ou.org/), May 14, 2019

Shabbos candles, contrary to widespread opinion, are not just for women. I was once handed a kiruv-oriented pamphlet that explicitly stated women have a mitzvah to light Shabbos candles. What the writer probably meant was that there’s a traditional connection between women and Shabbos candles – but the clear implication (I wish I could remember the precise imprecise wording!) was that men have no obligation. That’s an understandable mistake, given the habits of our communities that have women playing a primary role in this mitzvah, but it’s simply not true. (See, for instance, Rambam in Hilchos [Shabbos 5:1-3](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shabbat.5.1-3?lang=he-en&utm_source=ou.org&utm_medium=sefaria_linker), regarding both the habits and the halachic reality.) How many men might neglect their Rabbinic responsibility – because their rabbeim didn’t think to teach them about Shabbos candles (since it’s a “women’s mitzvah”), or because they picked up that pamphlet searching for inspiration and truth and found a falsehood buried inside?

Indeed, a man typically lights Shabbat candles if there is no female of bat mitzva age in the household for Shabbat who can light them, or sometimes if there are a multitude of candles to light. So, for example, immediately after a woman gives birth, her husband is permitted to light the candles:

Magen Avraham 263:3

Women are cautioned - Even if the husband wants to light [the Shabbat candle] himself, the wife takes precedence (Bach) and when she has given birth, on the first Shabbat the husband lights and recites the *beracha*.

The concern might have been hygiene post-partum,[[13]](#footnote-13) which would leave room for a woman who can get cleaned up to light candles if she wishes to.

Similarly, a woman can delegate the lighting to a man if she is away or indisposed, as when she needs to immerse in the mikveh on *erev Shabbat*:

Responsa *Ha-Elef Lecha Shlomo* OC 110

His question: How women should conduct themselves with Shabbat candle-lighting if they immerse on Friday night. Behold, the fundamental resolution is that they [the women] light first and stipulate that they are not accepting Shabbat, and so I always instruct…It is also correct for the husband to light and recite the *beracha* …for with any mitzva performed through an agent, it is fitting that the agent recite the *beracha*.

(We'll discuss the first resolution that he mentions, lighting conditionally, in our next installment.)

It is customary, however, for a man to help prepare the Shabbat candles for lighting, as by singing the wicks, so that kindling is easier and longer lasting. The Talmud lists examples of sages who involved themselves in candle-lighting.[[14]](#footnote-14) Rabbi Akiva Eiger notes that women are told to be careful about **lighting** candles, which hints at men **preparing** them.[[15]](#footnote-15) Finally, Mishna Berura writes that it is good for a man to prepare the candles:[[16]](#footnote-16)

Mishna Berura 263:12

It is good that the man set up the candles.

Our discussion so far has envisioned a household whose members will eat Shabbat dinner at home by the light of the Shabbat candles. What happens when a few families or households, or a group of people, eat together?

On the one hand, we've seen that the obligation for Shabbat candles to be lit applies to the home. There is no independent mitzva of candle-lighting incumbent on the individual. Thus, it would seem that one person should light Shabbat candles on behalf of the entire group, providing *oneg Shabbat* for all who are present at the meal, since all depend on the hosts for their food. (An exception to this could be when each family or individual brings their own food, so that they are not forming a household together.)

On the other hand, many women feel a strong personal commitment to light Shabbat candles every week, as an individual act of *kevod Shabbat*. Perhaps this is why, in many communities, it is customary for each woman to light two candles of her own,[[17]](#footnote-17) with a *beracha*, even when she is a guest at someone's home or is participating in a communal meal, and why there is no parallel custom for men.

Shulchan Aruch cites a dispute as to whether a woman may recite her own *beracha* if she lights where other women have already lit. He rules that only one woman should recite a *beracha*; Rema rules that each woman may recite one.

Shulchan Aruch OC 263:8

Two or three heads of household eat in one place, there are those who say that each one recites a *beracha* over his lamp, and there are those who hesitate in the matter. And it is correct to be careful regarding a doubt with *berachot* and for only one to recite a *beracha*. Rema: But we don’t practice thus.

Shulchan Aruch Harav offers a logical explanation as to why a guest should not light her own Shabbat candles, but concludes that the custom is for her to light.

Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav OC 263:15

But if she [a woman] relies on the table [and food] of the head of the household, she cannot recite a *beracha* there unless the room is specially designated for her or for her husband. For otherwise, she is not obligated to light there at all, for the obligation of the Shabbat candles doesn’t fall upon her at all since she is included among the household members of the head of the household and is exempted through his candle…And there are those who dispute this, and thus has the custom spread in these countries.

What are the grounds to allow a guest eating with the host's household to recite her own *beracha* in the vicinity of the meal? Maharil writes that each additional candle contributes towards *oneg Shabbat*, so there is no concern of *beracha le-vatala*, a *beracha* in vain:

Responsa Maharil 53

…Two or three heads of household eat in one place, each one recites a *beracha* on his own lamp, even though there is already a great amount of light. And in my humble opinion it seems to me to [make this view] sit well, that anything that adds light has more *shalom bayit* and extra rejoicing by enjoying the light in each and every corner…

Similarly, in some communities it is customary for adult daughters returning home to light candles with a *beracha* alongside their mothers, even though this is not strictly necessary:

Aruch Ha-shulchan OC 263:7

…The daughters of Israel have the practice that each of them recites her own *beracha* even when they are at their mother's. Because they [women] are commanded more [in the mitzva] as was explained, each and every one recites the *beracha*, and it is good that each one recite the *beracha* in a distinct space.

As Aruch Ha-Shulchan notes, women's sense of responsibility for the mitzva carries over into practice even where it is not strictly necessary. In recent decades, especially following a coordinated campaign by Chabad beginning in the mid-1970's, a custom for young daughters living at home to light alongside their mothers had become increasingly widespread.

Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, "The Light that Influences" *At Alit* (From a *sicha* following *Shabbat Bereishit* 1975), p. 135

Behold in these days, one should make an effort that every daughter of Israel light a candle for herself with a *beracha*, including young girls who have reached the age of educability. And it is possible to explain to them the matter of lighting the Shabbat candle, with the additional explanation that this is a mission from God, and He Himself gives strength to this little girl, that through her lighting a candle in her candlestick, she brings in light and leads to the dwelling of the Shechina—Judaism and Godliness—in the home.

When the female head of the household lights candles, she may discharge the obligation of anyone in the home eating at her table. Therefore, daughters and guests who plan to light candles with a *beracha* should preferably do so before her. Though, as Aruch Ha-shulchan suggests, each person lighting should ideally also light in a distinct space, this is not generally practiced. Lighting in a different space would be a requirement, though, for those who follow Shulchan Aruch—and not Rema—regarding whether adding light is sufficient grounds for reciting a *beracha*:[[18]](#footnote-18)

Responsa *Az Nidberu* 6:68

…Therefore, the daughters light candles before the mother. And according to what was said, behold there is a great halachic support for their *beracha*, and afterwards the mother lights on the basis of the custom that a number of heads of household light in one home, because whatever adds light adds rejoicing…And all this is for Ashkenazim who are drawn after Rema…and it was already explained that in a different room, according to all opinions, they [the daughters] can recite a *beracha* from the outset without any uncertainty, when she lights it prior to the mother…

A man wishing to light Shabbat candles could likewise do so in other rooms of the home, though men in this scenario are typically instructed not to recite the *beracha*.[[19]](#footnote-19)

What to Light

What type of candles do we light? In Talmudic times, the candle was typically an earthenware oil lamp, with an aperture for inserting a wick. The Mishna devotes a chapter (*Berachot* 2) to detailing which materials are acceptable for use as oil or wick on Shabbat. In addition to Rabbi Yishmael's concern that the oil not have a foul smell, other considerations are that the materials used be of sufficient quality that they maintain a steady light and not tempt one to move the lamp in order to increase its light. (Tilting a lamp or candle could run afoul of the Biblical prohibition of extinguishing a light on Shabbat.)

A Talmudic passage expresses a preference for lighting the Chanuka candle with olive oil, and Tosafot take it as a matter of course that the same preference applies to Shabbat candles:

*Shabbat* 23a

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: All oils are good for the candle, and olive oil is most choice.

Tosafot *Shabbat* 23a

But for the Shabbat candle it is clear that olive oil is most choice, because it is drawn more into the wick than all of them [other oils].

Wax candles, which consist of fuel reconfigured as a sort of outer wick around a proper wick that burns with a flame, are similar in that way to oil lamps and have become a very common option for Shabbat candles.[[20]](#footnote-20) Paraffin is another popular option because it creates a steady light.

What about electric lights, which do not have a wick or a reservoir of fuel, and do not burn with a flame?

A number of halachic authorities maintain that one may light electric Shabbat candles. Beit Yitzchak, a late-19th-century authority, specifies the presence of a filament, which has clear independent substance, as one reason to permit:

Responsa *Beit Yitzchak* YD 120:5

Regarding the matter if one can recite the *beracha* of "*le-hadlik ner shel Shabbat*" over a gas light or over electric light, it seems in my humble opinion that one can recite the *beracha* and discharge the mitzva obligation. And in my opinion one can say "to light the candle," because any light that clings to oil or a wick is called a candle, and here also the light clings to the vessel and in the platinum [filament] of its head through the glow-light or in the coals in the *bagech*-light [apparently a type of coal gas lamp], and one cannot say that it is something without intact substance…for here the electricity, and how much more so the gas, has substance…

A number of halachic authorities maintain a preference for a light bulb with a filament today, although such bulbs are no longer in general use. Some authorities add an additional concern: Perhaps one may not recite a *beracha* when turning on electric lights for Shabbat, since this act does not bear a close enough resemblance to kindling with oil.[[21]](#footnote-21) Some aspects of this concern could be met by using a light operated by battery power, where the energy stored in the battery stands in for the oil.

*Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah* II 43, note 22

I heard from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, that one should distinguish between electric light that comes from a power station, for this is considered at the moment of lighting like someone lighting without oil, since one just relies on a new current being created at the station each and every moment …which is not the case if one lights a battery-operated flashlight where the current is already stored and found within it, it makes good sense that we can also recite a *beracha*…

Israel's Zomet Institute markets a set of battery-operated incandescent lights for travel that are designed to resemble Shabbat candles, so that they are clearly *li-chvod Shabbat*.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is an important factor. Electric lights not being recognizably associated with ritual is one reason why, in practice, relying on electric lights is typically limited to a pressing situation:

Responsa *Yechaveh Da'at* 5:24

In a place where it is possible to obtain oil or wax candles, it is certainly preferable to use them to discharge the obligation of lighting Shabbat or Yom Tov candles, since they are recognizably made in honor of Shabbat or Yom Tov. And it is proper to have intention with the *beracha* prior to lighting, also to discharge with his *beracha* lighting the electric lights that he will light afterwards. And in any case in a place where there is absolutely no possibility of obtaining oil or wax candles, it is possible to recite a *beracha* and to light electric lamps, and we discharge the obligation of lighting through them.

As Rav Ovadya suggests, there is room to integrate electric lights into the modern-day candle-lighting ritual, since the light of the Shabbat candles should enhance our experience of *oneg Shabbat*, and nowadays electric lighting makes the greatest contribution. So, for example, Rav Binyamin Silber recommends that a woman light the electric lights for Shabbat before lighting her Shabbat candles, without pausing between the actions, so that her *beracha* can cover both:

Responsa *Az Nidberu* V 3:3

The matters are clear that a woman who lights candles, she herself should light the electric [lights] and not interrupt through speech [between the actions] and then the *beracha* also counts for the electricity even though she lights it beforehand, since according to the fundamental halacha in our opinion, lighting the electric [lights] is effective for the Shabbat candles…

Rav Yehoshua Yeshaya Neuwirth mentions that option, as well as the possibility of having the electric lights off before candle-lighting, and having another household member light them afterwards:

*Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah* II 43:34

Halachic authorities debated if it is possible to recite the *beracha* over Shabbat candle-lighting in an illuminated space…[Note 171: And I heard from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach…since our sages established the oil for glorifying the mitzva, and it is known and recognizable that it is in honor of Shabbat, it is considered both for benefit and for rejoicing …]…It is good to recite the *beracha* of lighting in a way that will satisfy all opinions. It is fitting therefore that a woman light the Shabbat candles and recite a *beracha*, and only after that one of the household members should light the electric lamps…or that a woman should light the electric light in honor of Shabbat before lighting candles, and have intention through her *beracha* for this light as well.

The footnote here in the name of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach is particularly important. Once we recognize electric lights as part of the ritual, one can ask why the traditional candles are still necessary. He responds that from a functional standpoint, it is not clear that they are, but they have taken on a ritual significance that cannot be undone.

Eight hundred years ago, Ra'aviyah saw the second candle as establishing the ritual significance of the Shabbat lights, in honor of Shabbat. In the 20th century, Rav Shlomo Zalman sees use of any flame as serving that purpose.

# Where to Light

As we saw above, Tosafot identify *oneg Shabbat* with eating by candlelight, while the concept of *shalom bayit* seems to refer to having lighting throughout the house. Or Zarua writes that we should first light around the home and then at the table:

Or Zaru'a II Laws of Erev Shabbat 11

It is a fitting custom to first light all the candles in the home and afterwards the candles on the table, for that candle [on the table] is the one that comes for *kevod Shabbat.*

Nowadays, when electric lights illuminate most of the home, and when concerns about fire safety have grown, candles are typically only lit in a safe spot in view of the Shabbat table.

The exception is if someone eats dinner in another's space but either will return home or otherwise has one's own living space for Shabbat. In this case, even though (as above) many women have a custom to light near the meal, Shulchan Aruch rules that one should light candles with a *beracha* in the living space:

Shulchan Aruch OC 263:6

Young men who travel to study away from their homes must light a Shabbat candle in their rooms and recite a *beracha* over it.

Travelers are instructed to light for Shabbat in the dining room or adjacent to their sleeping quarters, to fulfill the mitzva by creating *oneg shabbat* and *shalom bayit* in that space.

*Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah* II 45:9

Thus is the halacha for householders who are in a sanitarium or a hotel and the like…the custom is that each woman lights candles with a *beracha* in the dining room…And in any case, since each family has a designated room, even if it only serves for sleeping, it is good that one woman light Shabbat candles in the dining room with a *beracha*, and the others light, with a *beracha*, each in her room.

However, lighting in the room only provides *oneg Shabbat* if a household member remains in the space after lighting to benefit from the candles, or returns to the space when the candles are still lit. Additionally, because of concerns for fire safety, lighting traditional candles in one's sleeping quarters may be unsafe, illegal, and simply dangerous. Therefore, guests in in a hotel, or patients and visitors in a hospital, or students living in a dorm, can fulfill the mitzva with electric lights, set before Shabbat so that they will provide benefit when returning to the living quarters.[[23]](#footnote-23)

When lighting in one's room is the best option, Chief Rabbi Rav Mordechai Eliyahu permits lighting a battery-powered incandescent light there:

*Kol Eliyahu* (Rav Mordechai Eliyahu) 6

A woman who is staying In a hotel that doesn’t allow for kindling candles in the rooms, can light a battery-operated flashlight in her room and recite a *beracha* over it (when the bulb has a filament, which is not the case for an LED bulb or the like, but cannot recite a beracha over a regular electric lamp in the room. A woman who recites a beracha in her room over the light of a flashlight must benefit from its light.

More recently, Rav Re'em Ha-Kohen, of Yeshivat Otniel, rules that the **best** approach nowadays to lighting in a hotel is to light electric lights, preferably incandescent ones, in one's room with a *beracha*, set to remain lit at least until after returning from dinner:[[24]](#footnote-24)

Rav Re'em Ha-Kohen, Shabbat Candles in a Hotel, Ba-Sheva, 12.2012

Therefore, in my humble opinion, the best suggestion is to ensure there are electric Shabbat candles or just electric lamps, *le-chat'chila* with incandescent bulbs, and to connect a timer so that the electric bulbs will be lit at the time that they return to the room, and to recite a *beracha* over them. In my humble opinion, it is proper for every self-respecting hotel to provide its guests with two electric Shabbat candles of a high halachic standard with a timer.

In a communication to Deracheha, Rav Baruch Gigi, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, maintains that it is preferable to light in one's hotel or hospital room with a regular electric light from which one will truly derive *oneg Shabbat*, and that this is usually preferable to lighting in a mass candle-lighting area, but he maintains that no *beracha* should be recited on lighting the electric light.

To summarize, while all agree that no one should light a flame for Shabbat candles in any way that puts themselves or others at risk, preferred practice for lighting when staying in a hotel or hospital room is still debated.

The various opinions often reflect different emphases in understanding the mitzva. Lighting candles *en masse* away from the table may emphasize the ritual and *kevod Shabbat* aspects of the mitzva, while reliance on electric lights may be said to prioritize the functional aspects and *oneg Shabbat.*

*Why does the mitzva of candle-lighting loom so large?*

Perhaps candle-lighting began as a more functional mitzva, but for generation after generation, Jewish women have seized upon and amplified its spiritual meaning, pouring wishes for shalom bayit (peace in the home), and kevod (honor) and oneg (pleasure) of Shabbat into the acts of lighting, and praying afterwards.

Many of the Spanish and Portuguese conversos and their descendants held on to lighting Shabbat candles for generations, even when forced to relinquish other mitzvot.

Candle-lighting is a cherished mitzva, fulfilled with affection, thick with history and emotion. For many of us, a mother's or grandmother's candles are among our earliest imprinted memories, so that the candles come to symbolize not only Shabbat, but also Jewish womanhood itself.

Women have actively helped to shape almost every aspect of this mitzva, from imbuing meaning into the number of candles lit, to developing customs to ensure that the candles not be forgotten, to insisting upon lighting them (or stand-in electric lights) in any location, even where halacha does not seem to warrant it. And in almost every area of this halacha, our sages have embraced women's initiatives, recognizing the depth of spiritual intuition from which they have sprung.

Moments before the candles are lit, the house is typically aswirl with action as the last preparations for Shabbat fall into place, and then, suddenly, we kindle the small flames and it's as if that, and not the sunset, calls Shabbat into being. God sanctified the Shabbat day, but our lighting makes it felt. Rebbitzen Adina Russek puts this well:[[25]](#footnote-25)

Rebbitzen Adina Russek, "How do you feel magic by" [CANDLE LIGHTING REFLECTIONS](https://www.theshabbosproject.org/en/resources/candle-lighting-inspiration), The Shabbos Project

I was 11 years old when I was invited for the first time to experience what Shabbat was. I remember the beautiful silver chandeliers that the owner of the house lit up, caught my attention. I saw her close her eyes for a few moments, pray, and then with a big smile, wished Shabbat Shalom to her husband and children. Suddenly the house was filled with light, the whole atmosphere changed, as if it was magic! Since then, and until my first Shabbat as a married woman, I had observed different customs in the number of candles that are lit: Some light two, others add a candle for each child, for each grandson, daughter-in-law and son-in-law... some women prefer to use olive oil and others use the classic wax candles, but the question that accompanied me the most was how was I going to light my candles and be able to feel the same magic and holiness as I had felt when I was 11 years old. Our sages teach us that to acquire *kedusha –*holiness, one has to elevate material things, giving them their spiritual value....I can light the candles in an automatic way as if I were lighting the stove to cook or I can think of the light that I am bringing into my home, light of Torah and *mitzvot*. With a little reflection and study on the *mitzvah* of *hadlakat nerot*, we can discover endless options to elevate and beautify this *mitzvah*, thus bringing much holiness to our homes. This is what magic feels like!

# Further Reading

Rav David Auerbach, *Halichot Beitah*, ch. 14.

Rav Yehuda Brandes, "*Mitzvat Hadlakat Ner Shabbat*," *Mada Toratecha*, available [here](https://bmj.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/MT.Shabat.11.pdf).

Rav Yehoshua Yeshaya Neuwirth, *Shemirat Shabbat Ke-hilchetah*, ch. 43-45.

Yisrael Ta-Shema, "*Ner shel Kavod*." *Minhag Ashkenaz Ha-kadmon.* Jerusalem: Magnes, 1999, pp. 125-135.

1. *Pesachim* 5b

Learn from it: Kindling was mentioned separately to distinguish [between liability for different acts of labor on Shabbat]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bei'ur Ha-Gera OC 529:1

*Oneg* is on Shabbat itself and *kavod* is on erev Shabbat… [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Yeshaya* 58:13

If you restrain your foot from Shabbat, from pursuing your needs on My holy day, and you call Shabbat an *oneg* [pleasure] and the holy [day] of God honored, and honor it [by refraining] from doing your ways, from seeking your needs and speaking of matters.

Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 30:1

Four things were said regarding Shabbat, two from the Torah, and two rabbinic that are made explicit by the prophets. Those in the Torah, *zachor* [remember] and *shamor* [keep]. And those made explicit by the prophets, *kavod* and *oneg*, as it is said, "And you will call Shabbat an *oneg* [delight] and the holy [day] of God honored. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 5:1, infra. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Available here: https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14194&st=&pgnum=34 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mordechai *Shabbat* Ch. 2 273

It seems that on Yom Kippur which is not Shabbat, we do not recite a *beracha* over lighting the candle, for they were only concerned for *shalom bayit* on Shabbat, because of *kevod Shabbat*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rambam, Commentary on the Mishna, *Pesachim* 4:4

There are people who say that lighting a candle leads him to look at his wife and he will come to have relations. But others say that the light leads to embarrassment, and if there is no light, he will come to sexual thoughts and have relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One possible reference is the mishna in Shabbat. It mentions lighting on Yom Tov in the context of ruling out lighting from an oil which would be considered consecrated, since we don’t burn consecrated items on Yom Tov.

Mishna *Shabbat* 2:2

We do not light on Yom Tov with [impure consecrated] oil [that must be] burned. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ra'aviyah I *Shabbat* 199

The *beracha* on the Shabbat candle is explicit in the last chapter of *Berachot* in the Yerushalmi, that one must recite the *beracha*: Blessed are You Lord our God King of the world Who has sanctified us with His *mitzvot* and commanded us to light the candle of Shabbat." And on that of Yom Tov he recites the *beracha* "to light the candle of Yom Tov." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Halichot Beitah* 14:25

Women are accustomed when not at home to suffice with lighting only two candles, even though at home they would light more. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mishna Berura 263:6

To add - There are those who have the practice of lighting seven candles corresponding to the seven days of the week, and there are [those who light] ten corresponding to the Ten Commandments and they don’t all need to be on the table. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Available here: https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/words-matter/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Aruch Ha-shulchan 263:7

Even if the husband wishes to light - she has the ability to protest him…except for a woman the first Shabbat postpartum who presumably is not clean, the husband recites the *beracha*… [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Shabbat* 23b

Rav Huna was accustomed to passing and teaching at the doorway of Rabbi Avin the carpenter. He saw that he was accustomed to many candles… Rav Chisda was accustomed to passing and teaching at the doorway of home of the father of Rav Shizbi. He saw that he was accustomed to many candles… [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rabbi Akiva Eiger, *Shabbat* 31b

The Tanna wanted to hint to what that is brought in *Tikkunei Zohar*, that the head of the household sets up the candles and his wife lights. Because of this he [the Tanna] taught "and in **lighting** the candle" to say that he did not impose **setting up** upon her. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Later, he adds that the custom is for a man to light the candles and quickly extinguish them in advance, to make candle-lighting easier:

Rema Shulchan Aruch OC 264:9

…Rema: And in any case, they are accustomed to light the wick and to extinguish it sot that it will be singed and the light catch well.

Mishna Berura 264:28

In any case they were accustomed - Even with a candle that is [already] singed like ours they do thus. And the man should do this in advance, and it will be beneficial, that the woman will not [need to] linger at her lighting when its time comes. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Women typically only light two candles when away from home. See footnote 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Available here: https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=880&st=&pgnum=115 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Beiur Halacha* 263:6

If he is at home with his wife and she recites the *beracha* in one place, it is as though he recited the *beracha*, and naturally all the rooms in which he lights are exempted thorough the *beracha*…which is not the case if he is not at home and he has a designated room for himself… [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Although the mishna rules against using wax in place of oil, e.g., melted in a lamp, the reservation does not apply when the wax is wrapped in a solid state around a wick. In any case, modern wax candles are typically made of petroleum-derived paraffin, which is different from the mishnaic beeswax.

Mishna Shabbat 2:1

With what do we light and with what do we not light? We don't light…not with pitch and not with wax…

*Shabbat* 20b

And not with pitch…It is taught in a baraita: Up till here are the unfit wicks, from here and on the unfit oils. That is clear! We needed it to teach about wax. What might one have thought? It [wax] is also not fitting for wicks. This comes to teach us [that wax is fitting for wicks].

Rashi ad loc.

**From here**: That he not put a piece of pitch or wax in a lamp in place of the oil. **It is needed for wax**: Because they are accustomed to making a sort of long wick with the wick inside it as we do.

Shulchan Aruch OC 264:7

If one wrapped pitch or wax or tallow around the wick, one can light with them. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Responsa *Mishpetei Uzziel* I OC 7

According to the view of Rabbeinu Tam and Tur, like whom it makes sense and as we say, one does not discharge the obligation of lighting with an electric lamp, since the kindling is a mitzva and with an electric lamp there is no kindling. For moving the switch does not kindle but rather draws the current and the fire stopped up within it flows and is automatically caught by the filament, and further that the filament is not kindled but rather is heated (See Rambam, Laws of Shabbat 9:6), and therefore one should not recite a *beracha* over this lighting that does not discharge the obligation of Shabbat candle-lighting. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See more here: http://www.zomet.org.il/eng/?CategoryID=198&ArticleID=494 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Peninei Halacha* Shabbat 4:6 6 What Procedure Should Be Followed When Two Families Dine Together (Official Translation)

In a hotel where everyone dines together….There is another possible solution. One woman may light in the dining room while the rest fulfill the mitzva with a *berakha* by lighting an incandescent bulb in their bedroom…. Even for those who follow the Rema, it is preferable to light an electric light in one’s room than to light in a way that some maintain should not be accompanied by a *berakha*. Furthermore, lighting an electric light in the room serves more of a purpose than lighting many candles in the dining room. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Available here:

https://www.inn.co.il/Articles/Article.aspx/10888 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Available here: <https://www.theshabbosproject.org/en/resources/candle-lighting-inspiration/p3> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)