

The Halakhot of Hanukkah

The Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah

The Observance. It is a *mitzvah* to observe Hanukkah for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of Kislev. The actual “*mitzvah*” of Hanukkah, as tradition understands it, consists of kindling the Hanukkah lights in one’s home.¹ Prior to lighting the menorah, we recite the following blessings:

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh haolam asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu lehadlik ner shel Hanukkah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us through the mitzvot and commands us to kindle the light of Hanukkah.

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha’olam she’asah nissim la’avoteinu bayamim hahem bazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who performed wondrous deeds for our ancestors in days of old, at this season.

On the first night, we add the benediction *Sheheḥiyanu*.

We kindle one light for each night. The candle for the first night is placed on the right side of the eight-branched menorah (hanukkiah). On each subsequent night, an additional candle is placed to the immediate left of the previous night’s candle, so that the kindling begins with the newest light. Since these lights are holy, it is forbidden to make practical use of them; therefore, we use a special “servant” (*shamash*) candle to kindle the others. It is an Ashkenazic custom that each member of the household, including children, kindles their own Hanukkah lamp. The S’fardic practice, by contrast, is to kindle one hanukkiah for the entire household.²

Since it is traditionally forbidden to kindle fire on Shabbat, on Friday evening the Hanukkah lights are kindled before the Shabbat lights and on Saturday night they are kindled after the Havdalah ceremony.³

¹ *B. Shabbat* 21b; Rambam, *Hanukkah* 3:3. Hanukkah is properly a home observance; “the kindling of Hanukkah lights in the synagogue is no substitute for kindling them at home”; Peter Knobel, *Gates of the Seasons* (New York: CCAR Press, 1983), p. 92. Indeed, one who is away fulfills the mitzvah when one’s spouse or family kindles the lights at home (*B. Shabbat* 23a; Rambam, *Hanukkah* 4:11; *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 677:1). However, one who is not at home at the time of candle-lighting may choose to fulfill this mitzvah by lighting the candles at the place where he or she happens to be (Isserles, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 677:3; *Mishnah B’rurah*, no. 15).

² For the Ashkenazic custom see Isserles, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 671:2. For the S’fardic practice see Rambam, *Hanukkah* 4:3, *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 671:2, and *Kitzur Yalkut Yosef, Hilkhot Hanukkah* 671:4.

³ Knobel, *Gates of the Seasons*, 92; *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 679. The question of Havdalah is complicated. Some authorities (*Shulḥan Arukh* and Isserles, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 681:2) hold that we kindle the Hanukkah lights before Havdalah, because we have already said a form of Havdalah in the fourth benediction of the Saturday night *T’filah*; therefore, Shabbat has technically been concluded and it is permissible to light fire. Moreover, they continue, we

“*To Proclaim the Miracle (pirsumei nisa)*” We should proclaim in public the miraculous events that transpired in the days of the Maccabees. A number of features of Hanukkah observance are connected with this requirement. We kindle the lights at sundown, because that is the time when passers-by coming home from work are most likely to see them. When possible, we place the menorah where it can be visible from the outside. However, since the *mitzvah* of Hanukkah lies in the kindling of the light (*hadlakah osah mitzvah*) rather than in its placement, one fulfills the *mitzvah* even when the candles are not visible from the outside.⁴

According to most Orthodox authorities, we do not fulfill the *mitzvah* of Hanukkah by lighting an electric hanukkiah. They cite a number of interesting, creative, and (in our view) ultimately unpersuasive arguments in support of this position. We hold that an electric light fulfills the requirements for the *ner shel Hanukkah*.⁵

Synagogue Services. During Hanukkah, the passage ‘*al hanissim* is recited as part of the *t’filah* and in *birkat hamazon*. *Hallel* is recited during Shacharit at the conclusion of the *t’filah*. The Torah reading for each day is taken from Numbers 6:22–8:4, which recounts the dedication of the *mishkan* by the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness. On Shabbat, we read the weekly portion, and we may follow the traditional practice of adding the daily Hanukkah reading from a second scroll. If Rosh Hodesh Tevet, which occurs on the sixth or seventh day of Hanukkah, coincides with Shabbat, we might read from three Torah scrolls: the weekly portion from the first; the portion for Rosh Hodesh from the second; and the portion for Hanukkah from the third. The Haftarah readings for Shabbat during Hanukkah are Zechariah 2:14–4:7 and (if Hanukkah includes two Shabbatot) I Kings 7:40–50 (or 8:54–66).

should seek to postpone the Havdalah ceremony (wine, spices, and fire) as long as possible so as to delay the final end of Shabbat (*Mishnah B’rurah*, no. 2). Other authorities, however, find problems with this procedure and rule that Havdalah precedes the kindling of the Hanukkah lights (*Taz to Oraḥ Hayyim* 681:2). We follow this latter position, which we find to be the more logical and consistent of the two: Shabbat starts with the candle-lighting and ends with Havdalah, and the Hanukkah candles should not “intrude” upon the time marked off by these rituals.

⁴ *B. Shabbat* 23a; *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Oraḥ Hayyim* 675:1.

⁵ See in detail Freehof Institute, “[A Note on the Electric Hanukkiah](#).”