The Reasons Behind the Mitzvah of Candlelighting

Why do we light candles as the Shabbat begins? We will learn the underlying reasons and consider ramifications of these reasons.

**Reasons we light Shabbat candles**

The second chapter of Shabbat discusses what oils are appropriate for lighting the Shabbat candles. The Mishna does not explicitly say that one must light the Shabbat candles. This is stated by Rav Nachman in the Gemara:

אמר רב נחמן בר ראב: הדלקת נר בשבת -harma.

What is the nature of this obligation? The Midrashim propose a few reasons:

מדרש תניחו (ורשבא) פרשת מצורע אוות ט.

This Midrash says that lighting candles is part of oneg - the pleasure we must take in Shabbat.

The following Midrash proposes a few other reasons:

פסקתא זוטahoma (לקח טוב) שמות פרשת ויקהל פרק לה סימן ג.

Three reasons are added in this Midrash:

1. **Shlom bai** – to add happiness and calm to the family on Shabbat.
2. **To avoid desecrating Shabbat if the dire need of light comes up.**
3. **Oneg Shabbat** – to avoid eating in the dark.

The Mishna many recite as Shabbat begins refers to the concerns that may arise on Shabbat. Lighting candles is mentioned in this context, mirroring the second reason:

 Whereas the Gemara expresses the importance of the first reason with a Halakhic ramification:

שלח דבון רצק אסמס לומר באתו ערב שבת עשה חנוכה: שרגת: דלקות דלקות את נה.

The aspect of shlom bai achieved through lighting candles supersedes the importance of Kiddush or Chanukah candles! This might be why Rashi explains a startling Gemara in this context:

“יתנו מלוסים מפושי שמשית סרטיית (איהן והוא) – מי התנה מלוסים מפושי – אמר רב אבottle: בדלקות וברבשא בדלקות וברבשא.
Rabbi Abahu says that the lack of Shabbat candles is worthy of the lamentations in Eicha! Why such lamenting? Rashi explains:

רashi מוסכם שבת דף כא עמוד ב
הדלקת הנר שבשבת - אלה היה לא ממון להדליק, וב成就感 שאינו ראי, והשליה והשליה והשליה באפליה

Rashi says there is no *Shalom* where there is no light, and people bump and stumble. Is this a reflection of the *shlom bait* emphasized earlier, or is this a new reason?

The Rishonim argue what is the underlying Mitzvah behind this obligation:

רש”י מסכת שבת דף כה עמוד ב
הדלקת נר בשבת - בוּדָה - יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, שביאוּדָהוּ אלִיתָ בְּכָלָם אֶלַּיִם שְׁพรรณ

ותוספות מסכת שבת דף כה עמוד ב
הדלקת הנר בשבת - פירס במקום שועדו, וה становיה י TIMER בעמקון תמר מושה עונ

Rashi and Tosafot argue whether lighting candles is part of *כבוד שבת* – the respect we must have for Shabbat, or *עונג שבת* – the pleasure we must take in it. Note that they both mention that the candles must be lighting the place where the Shabbat feast is taking place. Shibolei Ha’Leket poetically elaborates:

ספר שבולי הלקט עניין שבת סימן טו
אין שביעה אלא במירת העין. גם קהלת אמר טוב מראה עינים מהלוך נפש וסומי קהלת אמרו רבינו ז”ל לא יאכל אדם תבשילו אלא לאור הנר. הסימין אוכלין ואינן שבעין. ומי שאוכלין בשבת בלא נר בחשך ידמו. כי אינן אוכלין לשובע נפשם. עוד שמא יפול זבוב במאכל או שום דבר איסור ואינו רואהו. לפיכך אמרו רבינו הדלקת נר בשבת חובה כדי

Let us summarize the reasons presented so far:

1. **Oneg Shabbat**: In the Tanchuma it says that candle lighting is part of *oneg* Shabbat. Tosafot mirror this, saying that the Shabbat seuda must have light (and further elaborated in the Shibolei Ha’Leket). This seems to fit the third reason cited in the Midrash.

2. **Kevod Shabbat**: Rashi says that candles must be lit at the *seuda* to achieve *kevod* Shabbat.

3. **Shalom**: The Midrash adds the reason of *Shlom bait*. Rava says that due to this reason, it is more important to have Shabbat candles than Chanukah candles or wine for Kiddush.

Rabbi Abahu connects lack of Shabbat candles with the lamentations of Eicha that reference lack of *shalom*. Rashi explains that lack of light causes stumbling, resulting in lack of *shalom*. It is unclear whether this is the same concept of *shlom bait* referenced earlier.

4. The Midrash says that if the need of light may arise later on, this may cause subsequent *חילול שבת*.

Rambam says that Shabbat candles are part of *oneg* Shabbat:

רמב”ם הלכות שבת פרק ה הלכה א
הדלקת הנר בשבת – יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּתוֹ, יפכּי שַׁבָּת

And also *kevod* Shabbat!

רמב”ם הלכות שבת פרק ה הלכה ה
מסדר האמד שלולות בורש שבעת אודא לפני שיאנוורי עריך אלא לכת…” וגריך לכתבי יבודע ים ומפי כבדה השבת,

ידיהו י דלוק שולות עריך ומתיי ממעת ישל אלא לכבו חצון

Aruch Ha’Shulachan explains:
Chapter 30 in the Rambam’s book on הלכות שבת discusses kevod Shabbat. He mentions lighting candles along with setting the table, connecting the kevod Shabbat aspect of the Shabbat candles to having light at the seuda (as Rashi had). In chapter 5 he discusses oneg Shabbat more broadly. Aruch Ha’Sulchan points out that this is not in relation to the seuda, therefore must be relating to having light in general, to avoid stumbling and maintaining shalom bat.

Beit Ha’Levi explains differently:

Beit Ha’Levi analyzes the chapters differently. Chapter 30 relates to honoring Shabbat by preparing for it. In that context, the act of lighting the candles is a way of honoring Shabbat, thus relating the lighting to kevod Shabbat. Apart from that, there needs to be light at the seuda, which would relate to oneg Shabbat. Note that he is differentiating between the obligation of lighting the candles and the obligation that there will be candlelight (the act and the outcome). Later on we will question the notion that there is an obligation of actively lighting the candles.

We will analyze a few ramifications of the reasons cited and the relationship between them.

A. A Room that is already lit

Based on the previous reasoning, we can deduce the Achronim’s opinions: if there is already light: according to Aruch Ha’Sulchan it seems that nothing would be lacking. According to Beit Ha’Levi that should fulfill the oneg Shabbat requirement, but not the kevod Shabbat (which requires active lighting of the candles).

The lighting abilities we have are far more effective. Candles are only ever added for dramatic effect, never as a practical addition to insufficient light. Rav Shterenbuch therefore concludes that nowadays the candles are only a way of honoring Shabbat.

Rav Klein says that it is right to have both in mind when making the bracha:

Rav Klein agrees that the candles hold an honoring role, and not a practical one. Therefore, when reciting the bracha, it is best to have both in mind. The SSK adds another optional chumra – light the Shabbat candles when the electric lights are off:

In the next unit we will discuss the option of using the electric lights as Shabbat candles.
Away from home
Families away together

Our discussion has regarded lighting Shabbat candles at home. What must families that are not home (for example – away together at a hotel) do?

The Maharil says that if a few families are eating out together, each one should light its own candles. The Ohr Zarua is skeptical, but the Maharil insists that any added light is good and adds *shalom* and *oneg*. This is cited in the Shulchan Aruch:

The Shulchan Aruch says that it is preferable that only one family recite the bracha on the candles. The Rema says that the *minhag* is for each to recite their own bracha.

In the Maharil’s time it is easy to justify lighting additional candles. In those days it was extremely difficult to create sufficient light. Can the same be said today? GRSZ Oyerbach raises this question:

Rav Wozner answers not on a practical level, but by defining justifications for brachot:

If one is spending Friday night by someone else, one can argue that only the owner should light. But if everyone is out of their own home, none have precedence over the other. Therefore they can all justify reciting their own brachot. Since the obligation befalls them all simultaneously, they can all recite the bracha, even if one lights and recites the bracha before another.

SSK proposes another surprising reason:

Since women will be upset if they cannot light, the lighting ITSELF is considered a part of *oneg* Shabbat!

Practically, GRSZ says that it is preferable that they light in their private rooms, thus spreading the candles and not lighting them all, ineffectively, on the same dining-room table:
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Obviously this ruling should not be implemented if there is even a remote chance of danger ensuing from lighting in the private rooms. In those cases, the electric lights may be preferable. We will discuss that option in the next unit.

**Eating out and returning home later in the evening**

Rabbi Greenblatt starts off saying that presumably it is preferable to light where they are sleeping, since the place they are eating will already have Shabbat candles lit. He points out the importance of making sure that the candles will remain lit until the family returns home.

Ultimately he rules otherwise. He says that one may justify lighting where there is other light, based on the previous ruling by the Rema, regrading several families lighting in the same dining hall.

(Note that this assumes the GRSZ’s understanding of the Rema. Rav Wozner based his ruling on the equal obligation of the guests. That reasoning would not be applicable in this case.)

SSK rules that it is preferable to light where they will sleep, but says that lighting where they will eat is justifiable as well:

**Lighting at others’ houses**

The GRSZ notes the importance of keeping the candles on until they return home. Later Poskim encourage turning on the electric lights right after the Shabbat candles, that way the bracha refers to both, and there is little or no concern that those will go out before they return home:

The prevalent minhag is that the wife lights the Shabbat candles. Early sources can give us some insight into the reason this came about:

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The Midrash says that lighting the Shabbat candles is part of amending for Chava’s sin. The Rambam says that women are generally the ones who run the household, so naturally lighting the home would become a woman’s role:


So far we assumed that the family are all together. What happens if the family is not together? A person spending Shabbat separately from his family

The Maharam’s disciple points out that part of the reason we light Shabbat candles is to avoid stumbling etc. This is a need everyone has, wherever they may be. So if someone is spending Shabbat separately from his family, his wife/mother’s lighting does not help him. He needs to light where he is, to have light he can use there.

The Mordechai cites a different Ashkenazic minhag:

The Gemara (Shabbat 23b) says that when one spends the night at others on Chanukah, he should give a penny to the host, thus partaking in the candles. The Raavyah says that this should be done with Shabbat candles as well!

The Shulchan Aruch gives two caveats to the Raavyah’s ruling:

1. If no one is lighting for him at his home. By lighting at home, his mitzvah of kevod Shabbat is fulfilled (and oneg Shabbat is fulfilled where he is, as long as someone lights candles there, without the extra penny).
2. He doesn’t have a separate room. If he has a separate room he must make sure that room is lit sufficiently to enjoy Shabbat and not stumble over objects.

Lighting that is strictly intended to save from stumbling

A person is away from home, and lighting in his own room there for the purpose of simple vision and avoiding bumping into things. Does that justify reciting a bracha?

One can argue that this would depend on the machloket between the Aruch Ha’Shulchan and the Beit Ha’Levi. According to Aruch Ha’Shulchan, this is a fulfillment of oneg Shabbat, which may justify the bracha .. According to Beit Ha’Levi there is no specific category that is being fulfilled, and therefore might not justify such a recitation.

The Chaye Adam says that one should make the bracha in this case:
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Whereas Rav Yaakov of Lisa (famously the author of נתיבות המשפט, the great בר פלוגתא of קצות החושן) says that they should not:

Mishna Berurah rules like the Chaye Adam:

Though many Poskim say this ruling is only applicable if there truly is no light in their rooms. Nowadays that our primary source of light is from the electric lighting, the Chaye Adam and Mishna Berurah would agree that it is harder to justify reciting a bracha in these cases:

Once again: since Shabbat candles are being lit at home, kevod Shabbat has been fulfilled. To justify making a bracha, or even being obligated to light, there needs to be a practical need of the extra lighting, something that is often not relevant nowadays.

Men spending Shabbat together out of the house

Pri Megadim rules that men who are away together on business, and have taken their own room for that purpose, should have one person light and the rest only answer the bracha. Mishna Berurah concurs.

This applies to guys who go to Yeshivah and girls in Midrasha, to men in Miluim (reserve units), students on a college campus, etc:

Shemira Shabat at the yeshiva (yeshiva, high school) - (Rav Meir Shlesinger, Marrav)
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Summary

Reasons behind the Mitzvah of candle lighting

1. Oneg Shabbat: In the Tanchuma it says that candle lighting is part of oneg Shabbat. Tosafot mirror this, saying that the Shabbat seuda must have light (and further elaborated in the Shibolei Ha’Leket). This seems to fit the third reason cited in the Midrash.

2. Kevod Shabbat: Rashi says that candles must be lit at the seuda to achieve kevod Shabbat.

3. Shalom: The Midrash adds the reason of Slom bait. Rava says that due to this reason, it is more important to have Shabbat candles than Chanukah candles or wine for Kiddush.

Rabbi abahu connects lack of Shabbat candles with the lamentations of Eicha that reference lack of shalom. Rashi explains that lack of light causes stumbling, resulting in lack of shalom. It is unclear whether this is the same concept of Shlom bait referenced earlier.

4. The Misdrash says that if the need of light may arise later on, this may cause subsequent Chadol Shabbat.

The Rambam: in chapter 5 the Rambam writes that lighting is part of oneg Shabbat. In chapter 30 he writes that it is part of Kevod Shabbat.

Aruch Ha’Shulchan explains that in chapter 30 the Rambam discusses kevod Shabbat. He mentions lighting candles along with setting the table, connecting the kevod Shabbat aspect of the Shabbat candles to having light at the seuda (as Rashi had). In chapter 5 he discusses oneg Shabbat more broadly, relating to having light in general, to avoid stumbling and maintaining Shlom bait.

Beit Ha’levi explains that the act of lighting the candles is a way of honoring Shabbat, thus relating the lighting to kevod Shabbat discussed in chapter 30. Chapter 5 relates to the actual seuda, in which there needs to be light (but does not refer to the act of lighting, but to the outcome).

Nafka minot of these reasons:

1. Electric lighting:

Rav Shternbuch says that the practically, there is no need to add candles in our well-lit homes. Therefore there is no need to light candles for oneg Shabbat and Shlom bait. We still need to light, with a bracha, to honor Shabbat.

Mishne Halachot says that it is preferable to have kavana that the bracha will refer to the electric lighting as well.

SSK said that the opposite is preferable – that the electric lighting be off, that way the candles become necessary when they are lit.

2. Family away from home

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Families away from their homes together: Maharil wrote that they can all light. Ohr Zarua was skeptical. Shulchan Aruch said that it is preferable to not recite a bracha. Rema says that the minhag is to recite the bracha.

Presumably the Maharil was talking about a world of poor lighting, and every candle really made a difference. Can we follow his ruling in our world? Rav Wozner said that we may, since these families are all away from home, they all have the same obligation to light. So the bracha can be said by any or all of them.

SSK quotes GRSZ who says that refraining from lighting will be upsetting to the wives, so it is permissible as part of their oneg Shabbat. But if they have a private room lighting there is preferable.

3. Eating out and then returning home
Rivevot Ephraim initially says that lighting where they sleep is preferable, since the proprietors will light in their own house. At the end of the responsa he says that they may light where they eat, similar to the previous Rema.

It seems that this makes sense according to GRSZ's explanation, justifying making a bracha for the oneg of lighting. According to Rav Wozner, who based the Rema on the participant's equal obligation, that may not be applies in this case.

SSk says that lighting at home is preferable, emphasizing the importance of making sure that the candles remain lit until the family return. If the bracha refers to the electric lights as well, this should not be difficult.

4. An individual separate from his family
Tashbetz says that students who spend Shabbat away from their family should light with a bracha, since they also need to enjoy the light. Raavya raised the option of giving the proprietor a penny (as is the custom on Chanukah). Shulchan Aruch said that either is optional, but the Raavya should only be followed under the following conditions: 1. No one is lighting for him at home. 2. He does not have a private room, that would require its own lighting.

Should he make a bracha if he lights in a private room: Chaye Adam and Mishnah Berurah rule that he should. Derech Ha'Chaim and Rav Wozner say not. Divrei Yatziv and SSK say that nowadays the matter is moot, since we have electric lighting, normally the private room doesn't need candles either.

5. Men spending Shabbat together, separately from their families
Pri Megadim said that men on business together should have one person make a bracha and the rest only answer "amen". SSK says the same applies to Yeshivah boys, Midrasha girls, students, etc.

This unit opened the issue of candle lighting. Next unit will discuss lighting electric lights and whether the act of lighting is the Mitzvah, or the need to have light.