



Laws and Customs of Chanukah | 5784-2023

Chanukah begins on the **25th of Kislev**, which this year corresponds to Thursday night, **December 7th**. The last day of Chanukah is the **3rd of Tevet**, beginning Thursday night, **December 14th**, and ending at nightfall on Friday, **December 15th**. These are days of *hallel ve-hoda'ah*, praise and thanksgiving, and of contemplating the role of miracles in our lives. We commemorate Jewish resistance and military strength as well as the miracle of the long-lasting oil when rededicating the Second Temple. We celebrate retaining our Jewish identity against powerful forces of assimilation that took place in the 2nd century BCE.

The foremost ritual observance of these days is the lighting of candles in our homes and in public gathering places. Many laws and customs, from liturgical to gastronomical, have developed around these days as well. One of the central motivating values of the holiday's observances is *pirsumei nisa* – publicizing the miracles – to ourselves, our communities, and the broader world.

1. Chanukah Candles and Setting up the Chanukiah

While there are a few customs regarding who lights and how many candles, our widespread custom is to have every member of the household light, and to correlate the number of candles to the respective night of Chanukah, excluding the helper candle (*shamash*). On the 1st night we light one candle, on the 2nd night we light two candles, and so on. However, if this poses an economical hardship or safety hazard, one can fulfill the mitzvah by having each member of the household light **one** candle per night. One can even fulfill the mitzvah by having just one member of the household light a **single** candle per night on everyone's behalf.

👉 Candles or oil may be used for the lighting of Chanukah candles as long as they last at least 30 minutes after nightfall. For details about exact timing, please see “Time and Duration of Lighting” on pp. 2-3. Please note: an electric *chanukiah* should not be used unless there is no other choice. In that case, most agree that a blessing should not be said. Olive oil is recommended because the miracle of the oil occurred with olive oil. Chanukah is unique in that there is also an element of *hiddur mitzvah* - beautifying the *mitzvah* of candle lighting, such as by using nice, tall candles that burn smoothly or by lighting a beautiful *chanukiah*.

👉 The *chanukiah* is set up by adding each new night's candle to the left of the previous (ie. inserting candles from right to left), and lighting from left to right (i.e. lighting the **new** candle first).

👉 A *chanukiah* is anything which can hold candles or oil – even a series of candle holders will do.



👉 One may not derive functional benefit from the Chanukah candles. Therefore, a *shamash* (helper candle) is lit as well. This (together with overhead lighting) resolves many complicated questions that would otherwise arise.

👉 The *chanukiah* should be arranged so that a viewer can see each light distinctly from the next one. Note that semi-circular or wave patterns may be allowed - although not preferred – feel free to contact one of the clergy for further guidance. In addition, multiple *chanukiot* should be separated so that each can be seen individually.

👉 The lights of the *chanukiah* should all be at the same height; however the *shamash* can be higher or lower and should be set apart to distinguish it from the other lights.

2. Location of the Chanukiah

In Rabbinic times, the *chanukiah* was placed in the doorway (on the left side, opposite the *mezuzah*) facing the public domain in order to publicize the miracle (*pirsumei nisa*) to passersby. One who did not have direct access to the public domain lit in a window facing that area. If it was dangerous to light in those places, one simply brought the *chanukiah* to a table inside.

👉 Nowadays, for those who have houses, lighting in the doorway is still a desirable option if it is safe and can be guarded from wind. However, most people with houses and those who live within 20 *amot* (~30 feet) of the ground, follow a widespread custom to light in a window. This fulfills the mitzvah of publicizing the miracle to those in their own home, and additionally to those who pass by. Because the rabbis estimate that people tend not to look up above 20 *amot*, those who live on higher floors of an apartment building can fulfill their obligation of publicizing the miracle by lighting in the presence of members of their household. In that case, there is no need to light the *chanukiah* in the window, although the prevailing custom is still to do so.

👉 For those lighting **alone**, it is recommended to light in the window even on higher floors, as the lights will be visible to surrounding neighbors from their windows. This fulfills *pirsumei nisa* to passersby according to some opinions.

3. Time and Duration of Lighting

👉 There are many opinions about the preferred lighting time. Our custom is to light candles at sunset, which is at **4:28pm** each night of Chanukah this year. Most *poskim* recommend lighting at nightfall, which is at **5:13pm**. Either way, the candles should remain lit until at least **5:43pm** (30 minutes after nightfall). If one cannot light at nightfall, one should light as soon as possible afterward. While technically, one may light until daybreak, it is strongly preferred to light only while people are still awake in the house in order to perform the mitzvah of *pirsumei nisa* to those household members.

👉 The candles must remain lit for at least **30 minutes** to fulfill the mitzvah.



👉 On Friday afternoon, the Chanukah candles should be lit first - **before** the Shabbat candles. Since this lighting is performed earlier in the day than usual, and the candles need to burn past nightfall, we use candles or oil that will last about an hour and a half¹.

👉 On Saturday night, Chanukah candles may not be lit until after nightfall, when Shabbat is over. In synagogues, the custom is to light the Chanukah candles **before** *Havdalah*. At home, there are various customs for the order of *Havdalah* and lighting Chanukah candles:

- ❖ Some recite *Havdalah* and then light Chanukah candles (in order to begin with the more common mitzvah – *Havdalah*)
- ❖ Others begin with Chanukah candles and then recite *Havdalah* (preferencing *pirsumei nisa*). In this case, one must end Shabbat before lighting candles. Here are two options:
 - a) Recite the *Maariv* prayer, including *Atah Chonantanu* (*Havdalah* formula) in the *Amidah*.
 - b) Recite the *Havdalah* phrase “*Barukh Hamavdil bein kodesh le-chol*” before lighting.

👉 Each night of Chanukah, when the time has come for lighting, one should refrain from other activities (business, study, eating, and the like) until one has lit. In general, one should try to come home to light candles at nightfall. If that is not possible, one should light at the earliest opportunity on arriving home. Still, one may also wait until the whole family has gathered for the value of *pirsumei nisa* as long as there is a designated way to remember to light the candles².

👉 There is a strong custom for women to refrain from (house)work for the first half hour after the lights have been lit in commemoration of their critical role in the miracles of Chanukah.

4. Celebrating Chanukah When Away from Home

The situations of one who is not in one's own home at night are diverse and complicated. Some brief guidelines are given here; please feel free to ask a member of the clergy team if you have more questions:

- ❖ If one will not return to one's home until after everyone has gone to sleep, one should have a representative light for them at home.
- ❖ If someone lit for you, you may still light upon returning home, without a blessing.
- ❖ One staying in a motel/hotel should try to light there.
- ❖ Those who cannot light in their location should strive to have a representative light for them in their home.
- ❖ A guest in someone else's home should strive to light in the host's home or to acquire a share in the host's lighting with a minimal financial contribution.

¹ Larger candles are available at any Judaica shop and tea lights are also a good option.

² A strong recommendation is to leave a reminder such as a note or alarm



- ❖ One who lives in a dormitory should light in one's room where possible and safe. Otherwise, if there is a common dining hall, one may light there.

5. Safety First!

It is paramount to ensure that safety measures are undertaken under all circumstances.

👉 If one cannot light Chanukah candles with candles or oil due to safety reasons, such as in a hotel, motel, dormitory, or on a plane **or**

👉 If one is lighting Chanukah candles and then leaving the home for a long time, such as for Friday night services or a Friday night meal

the following Halachic options are offered by Rabbi Linzer [here](#):

If it is not possible or safe to light with candles or oil, the next preference is to use battery-powered **incandescent** lights. In this case, Rabbi Linzer rules that one **may** recite the traditional blessings over the battery-operated lights.

As a last resort, one may use battery-powered **LED** lights such as the electric tea lights. Since there is a Halachic controversy over whether these lights truly “count” as Chanukah lights, the recommendation is **not** to recite the blessings over **LED** lights.

Please do not leave your home with candles unattended (unless they are protected in a way where there is no chance of fire). The candles need only burn for a half an hour (except for Shabbat), therefore if one needs to leave their home they may blow out the candles after half an hour.

6. The Blessings

We begin by lighting the *shamash* and then move on to reciting the blessings. On the **first** night we recite **three** blessings, found on **p. 897** in the Koren siddur:

- 1) *Lehadlik Ner Shel Chanukah* (to light the light of Chanukah)
- 2) *She'asah Nissim La'avoteinu* (Who performed miracles for our ancestors), and
- 3) *Shehechyanu* (Who gave us life).

On all subsequent nights we only recite the **first 2 blessings** after lighting the *shamash*.

Once the blessings are recited, we light the candles and it is customary to sing the songs *Hanerot Hallalu* and *Maoz Tzur* found in the siddur. Some are careful to begin saying *Hanerot Hallalu* as soon as the first candle is lit, since that is the basic fulfillment of the commandment to light, and others say it after all lights have been lit. Both customs are acceptable!



7. Liturgy

👉 Full *Hallel* is recited all eight days of Chanukah in recognition of each day representing a unique miracle.

👉 *Al Hanisim* (for the miracles) is recited in the *Modim* (Thanksgiving) blessing of the *Amidah* and the *Nodeh* (Thanksgiving) blessing of *Birkat Hamazon* all eight days. If forgotten, it need **not** be repeated. However, if one remembers that one did not recite it before saying God's name in the conclusion of the blessing, one can return to the insertion point, insert it, and complete the blessing. If one did not remember until after the blessing, one can insert it in the concluding supplication paragraph of the *Amidah* or in the *Harahaman* section of *Birkat Hamazon*.

👉 There is no mention of Chanukah in the *AlHamichya* after-blessing.

👉 As with many other joyous occasions, *Tachanun*³ is omitted along with other small changes to the prayer service. We add *Mizmor Shir Chanukat Habayit L'David* (Psalm 30) as an additional *Shir Shel Yom* at the end of *Shacharit*. The Torah portions of the tribal princes' Tabernacle gifts are read daily.

👉 On *Rosh Chodesh Tevet* (December 12-13), in addition to *Al Hanisim*, we add the following:

- ❖ *Ya'aleh V'Yavo* to the *Birkat HaMazon* (Grace After Meals) and the *Amidah* prayers
- ❖ An additional *Sefer Torah* is removed from the Ark and the *Rosh Chodesh* portion is read in 3 Aliyot **before** the Chanukah reading⁴.
- ❖ The *Mussaf* prayer for *Rosh Chodesh* is recited with *Al Hanisim* added.

8. Additional Customs

👉 It is customary to consume dairy in commemoration of a heroine of Chanukah – Yehudit – who fed an oppressive Greek tyrant dairy to tire him, and then was victorious over him.

👉 There is a widespread custom to eat foods with oil to commemorate the miracle being taking place with oil. *Sufganiyot* (jelly donuts) and *latkes* (potato pancakes) are two prime examples.

We wish you a bright and happy Chanukah!



³ As *Tachanun* is a mildly mournful prayer, we omit saying it on festive occasions

⁴ This follows the rule: *Tadir v'eino tadir, tadir kodem*. As *Rosh Chodesh* happens more often than the eight days of Chanukah, we read that Torah portion first.