

# The Favorite Mitzvos

*Why do we like certain mitzvos over others?*

## Lighting Candles

They once did a study in Israel in which one of the questions was, “Do you or any member of your household light Shabbat candles?” And the result will probably surprise you as much as it surprised me: about 80 percent of Jews in Israel responded that they light Shabbat candles.

In America, however, the situation is a little different. Here, the percentage of Jews who light Shabbos candles is much lower. Take an informal study of Hebrew School parents in America, and you will find out that the parents who do not regularly attend synagogue, meaning, most of them, also do not light Shabbos candles.

Lighting Shabbos candles is a tradition that goes back 4,000 years.

The first person to light Shabbos candles was Sarah Imeinu, our matriarch Sarah. Not only did she light candles, but her candles would last all week, from Friday evening to the next Friday evening, as Rashi tells us. This is where the tradition of Jewish women lighting Shabbos candles originates.

On top of that, the Rebbe asked and instructed that Jewish girls from age three onwards light their own Shabbos candle in honor of Shabbos.

Now, each time we light Shabbos candles, we say the blessing, “Asher kidshanu b’mitzvosav v’tzeevanu l’hadlik neir shel Shabbos Kodesh.” That means, “Blessed are you G-d, Our G-d, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the candle of the holy Shabbos.” However, when you look for this mitzvah in the Torah, you won’t find it anywhere—not a single source in the actual text, and not even a hint.

So now comes the obvious question: if it’s not a mitzvah, how can we recite a blessing that G-d “commanded us”?

## **The Strange Text of Blessings**

But before we answer that question on that mitzvah, let’s briefly talk about another mitzvah.

There is another very popular mitzvah, especially in the United States, that has to do with lighting candles, and that is: lighting Chanukah candles. After all, the Jewish holiday celebrated by the most Jews is Chanukah. Here too, before we actually light the menorah, everyone stands around and sings the following blessing together: “Asher kidshanu b’mitzvosav v’tzeevanu l’hadlik neir Chanukah”—“Blessed are you G-d, Our G-d, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the Chanukah candle.”

And again comes the obvious question: Where are we commanded to light Chanukah candles? It’s not in the Torah, because the miracle of Chanukah occurred 1,000 years after the Giving of the Torah—so exactly when, and to whom, did G-d command that the holiday of Chanukah be celebrated?

Not only that, but we can ask the same question about the holiday of Purim.

On Purim, we read the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther—and before we begin reading it, we recite the special blessing: “Asher kidshanu b’mitzvosav v’tzeevanu al mikrah Megilah”—“Blessed are you G-d, Our G-d, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the reading of the Megilah.”

Now, Purim occurred during the Persian Exile, which was after the Destruction of the First Temple and certainly well after the Giving of the Torah—so how can we say that G-d commanded us to read the Megilah.

And there are even more mitzvos which are not from the Torah. For example, you may be familiar with the blessing we say before eating bread— at a formal event like a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah, someone is always honored with reciting the Hamotzi blessing over the challah bread. In like manner, we recite the Borei Pri HaGafen blessing over the wine every Shabbos.

But the entire concept of reciting blessings before eating is not found in the Torah!

Blessings after eating food is something else. That’s called Birkas HaMazon—and it’s explicitly in the Torah. The text in Parshas Eikev says clearly, “And you shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the L-rd Your G-d.” There, the Torah commands us that if we eat and feel satisfied, it is incumbent upon us to bless and acknowledge G-d for the food. But blessings before food?! Where does that come from?

Many of you may be familiar with the custom of washing the hands before eating. That's also a mitzvah not written anywhere in the Torah. And so are the mitzvos of reciting Hallel and making an Eiruv.

Now, you've all heard of the 613 Mitzvos. These are all written or at least hinted one way or another in the Torah. But on top of that, there are the Seven Rabbinical Mitzvos—mitzvos that are not written in the Torah but rather, mitzvos that were instituted by the Sages.

Yes, Sarah lit Shabbos candles. But that fact is not written in the Torah. So we can ask the question, "How can we constantly say 'Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us?'" This question is actually asked in the Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 23a).

## **The Answer**

This week's Torah portion of Shoftim gives us the answer to this question— and to all the other questions we just asked.

In this week's Parshah, we read in the Torah that when a person has a question and he doesn't know the answer, he needs to go to "the judge who will be in those days," meaning the rabbis of your day and age. You need to listen to them, as the Torah continues: "According to the instructions that they instruct you, and on the ruling that they tell you, you shall do." You have to do "everything they instruct you"—and the Torah adds, "Do not veer from the matter." You are forbidden to veer from what they say.

This being the case, while it may be true that the Torah doesn't actually say anywhere to light Shabbos candles, the Torah does say that you need to listen to the Sages, and that they have the power to create new mitzvos which everyone must do. That's why if the Sages order to light Shabbos candles, then I do it because G-d commanded me to listen to them.

And that is why we say the blessing, "Asher kidshanu b'mitzvosav v'tzeevanu"—"Who sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us." Because even though it wasn't directly from G-d, it came from people given special authority from G-d—and so listening to them is listening to G-d.

And here we discover an interesting phenomenon—it seems that the rabbis had much better luck than the Torah itself. For some reason, the fact is that the Rabbinical Mitzvos are much more popular than the Torah's mitzvos.

For example, a lot more people light Shabbos candles than put on tefillin, even though it's a mitzvah right in the text of the Torah to put on tefillin. A lot more people celebrate the holiday of Chanukah than the holiday of Shavuos, even though Shavuos is explicitly mentioned in the Torah, and more than once, and Chanukah is not mentioned at all anywhere in Tanach. And a lot more people are familiar with the Hamotzi blessing for bread before eating than they are with the blessing for food after eating.

Why is it this way?

## **Our Marriage with G-d**

We just marked Rosh Chodesh Elul, the head of the new month of Elul. Many of you know that the four letters of the Hebrew word Elul are an acronym for “Ani l’dodi v’dodi li,” which means, “I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me.” This verse, from King Solomon’s Song of Songs, essentially reminds us that our relationship as a people with G-d is like that of a husband and wife.

In marriage relationships we see something similar. The wife expects her husband to take out the garbage, and the husband knows that he was brought into existence to take out the garbage. So the good husband completes his life’s mission and takes out the garbage. But oddly enough, I have yet to meet a husband who does this happily. Maybe such a person exists, but I haven’t met him yet.

And when he actually does take out the garbage, out of the goodness of his heart, his wife doesn’t go over the top in heaping praises on him for the earth-shattering favor he did for her. As far as she’s concerned, that’s the minimum he needs to do, and he certainly doesn’t deserve a medal for it. Sorry, guys.

But every now and then, the good husband decides to surprise his wife—he decides to clean up the kitchen before she gets home. The whole house, not—let’s not exaggerate here!

Now when it comes to doing this, he does it happily and passionately and gladly, filled with zest and energy. True, he’ll break a few things and scare the kids along the way, but at least he’s happy about it.

And when the wife finally comes home and discovers that the kitchen is clean, she is truly surprised and happy—and then, she'll thank the good husband for it.

This whole scenario applies to our relationship with G-d too.

When it comes to the mitzvos in the Torah, these were commanded to us by G-d, so we do them. But we tend to do them simply because we have to do them, because G-d said so. With them, you don't have the energy and passion of doing something new.

On the other hand, the Rabbinical mitzvos are things that G-d did not tell us to do. Rather, the Jewish Nation wanted to surprise G-d with mitzvos that G-d did not command—and still, we do them to honor G-d.

That's why we do such mitzvos with such great passion. That's why these mitzvos are so much more popular.

And it's the same thing with G-d: such mitzvos "surprise" G-d and give Him more joy than if we did them because He said so.

On this, the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 88b) tells us, "The words of the Sages are more precious than the words of the Torah"—they are precious both to the Jewish People and to G-d, precious on Earth and precious in Heaven.

The month of Elul is upon us. And this is the time for us, the Jewish People, to surprise our "husband". It's the time for us to resolve to keep a mitzvah that G-d did not expect us to keep—and each and every one of us knows in his or her life

what that single mitzvah might be, whether it's learning Torah every day, putting on tefillin every weekday, lighting Shabbos candles, putting mezuzos on your door or whatever mitzvah you choose.

And when we surprise G-d for the good, we can be sure that He, too, will surprise us in return by presenting us with a big smile—and a happy, healthy and sweet new year.