



A Light Unto The Nations

Why are Jews obsessed with candles? What is G-d's mission statement for creating the world?

Jewish Lights

We all know what a havdalah candle is. Every Motzaei Shabbat we recite the blessing over fire as part of the ceremony signifying Shabbat's departure and the onset of a new week. Why is this blessing recited on Saturday night and not on any other day of the week?

The explanation relates to our Parsha. Adam was created on Friday afternoon and the sun didn't set that night. This is why Torah doesn't say about the seventh day, "And it was evening..." — for the sun shone brightly for all of world's first Shabbat. But Saturday night, when Shabbat ended, Adam saw darkness for the first time and needed light. G-d then gave him the wisdom to strike two rocks together and find fire (Shulchan Aruch Harav 298:1).

This is not the only time we light candles. Jewish women light candles every Friday night (and on the eve of every major holiday). For this there are three reasons.

1. Lighting candles is one of the ways to fulfill the mitzvah of honoring the Shabbat.
2. To heighten the pleasure of Shabbat — it's not very pleasurable to eat a meal in the dark (Shulchan Aruch Harav 263:4).

3. To keep the peace in the home by preventing fights between husband and wife.

On any weekday, people can light candles whenever they wish. On Friday night, however, if a man comes home after sunset when it is forbidden to light candles, he can trip and fall. If that should happen, he will immediately blame his wife — and this will lead to a tense and unhappy feeling at home. To protect us from this, the sages made it a mitzvah for women to light candles before the sun sets.

But why does the responsibility fall on the woman?

The obvious answer is that the women are at home keeping house anyways. But this answer isn't so relevant in our times when many women have their own careers. There is an explanation that I know many of you won't like but I'll say it anyways. Women light candles on Friday night to make up for the darkness Eve, the very first woman, brought to the world when she convinced her husband to eat from the tree of knowledge (Midrash Tanchuma, see Pinat Hahalacha p. 120).

There is still another, more positive explanation. A candle symbolizes the flame of life. Since it is the woman who brings life to the world, lighting the candles is her right.

Someone once told me that when he brought the girl he married home to meet his family, his grandmother was convinced that she wasn't Jewish and she constantly badgered him about it. One Friday night she joined her fiancé's family for Shabbat dinner. After the meal, she was helpfully clearing the table when she blew out the candles and put them back on the shelf. When Grandma saw this she began to yell, "You see! I told you she's not Jewish. Which Jewish girl doesn't know that you don't put out the Shabbat candles?"

You see, Jews are infatuated with candles! Parents hold candles as they accompany the groom and bride are to their chupa. This is

symbolic of G-d's revealing himself in the form of fire when he 'married' the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.

When, G-d forbid, a Jew dies, we commemorate the extinguished flame of life by lighting a "neshama candle." Chassidim light five one for each level of the soul; *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshama*, *chaya* and *yechida*.

But even though we have explanations for each candle we light, there must be one all encompassing reason for all of the candles in our tradition.

G-d's Mission Statement

The Midrash Tanchumah (B'ha'alosecha) says, "G-d tells the Jewish people, 'If you are careful to light candles for Me, I will protect you from every evil.'" This leads to the question: What is so special about candles that it earns us divine protection?

This week we read the story of the world's creation. The very first utterance G-d says is, "Let there be light!" and, as you must know, there was light.

The Rebbe asks: Why was light created first when it wasn't needed until the sixth day when Adam was created (or at least until the third day when the vegetation was created)?

The answer is that this first utterance was G-d's mission statement. When someone opens a new business, he is always careful to clearly define his goal, the objective of his business, usually money, lest he lose sight of the objective and get caught up in trivialities.

G-d proclaimed that the purpose of the new world, the new business, was "let there be light." As the prophet Isaiah said, "Be a light unto the nations," we must constantly examine our actions to ensure that they are all bringing the world closer to its objective of becoming a

world shining with G-dly light, the light of Torah and Mitzvos (Simchas Torah 5726. Likutei Sichos v. 18 p. 7).

Don't Be a Nudge

How exactly do we “light up the world”? Why did the prophet tell us to be ‘a light unto the nations’ — why not teachers or mentors for the nations?

The answer is that light is unobtrusive, it doesn't change anything. When man lights a candle in a dark room full of people who can't see where they're going or what they're doing, he helped them all find their way. Yet he hasn't changed anything in the room, nor has he mentored the people and he hasn't become a self-proclaimed ‘savior.’ He has simply brightened their world enabling the people to find their own way.

That's what it means to be ‘a light unto the nations.’ “Being a light” doesn't mean giving spiritual guidance to everyone we meet. We don't have to preach, teach or change the world. We simply need but to bring to light the fact that this is G-d's world by setting a ‘shining’ example.

How can we do this?

Just as the actual Shabbat candles quietly brighten the atmosphere around the Shabbat table so too, should we quietly exude such pleasantness — that people should want to know us, to know where the light comes from. By making one's home a pleasant and upbeat and by doing mitzvos with a smile, a Jew shines, lighting up the world around him.

By doing this we enable the people around us to find the path of the righteous on their own. So, all of the candles in our tradition are there to remind us of our strongest weapon: light.

Let's all be shining lights!