

The Shabbat Candle Survey

Category: Bereishis, Chayei Sarah

The difference between men & women lighting Shabbat candles.

The Shabbat Candle Poll

“Hazorfim” is an Israeli company which specializes in silverware and Judaica, established in 1952 by three Jews who immigrated to Israel from Romania. One of their most famous products is their candlesticks. They manufacture a whole variety of them and they are sold worldwide.

In 2016, the company commissioned a survey to find out how many women in Israel light Shabbat candles. The results were very impressive. It showed that 56% of respondents light candles every Friday evening, while another 21% do so irregularly. Only 24% stated that they do not light Shabbat candles at all.

Interestingly, of those who light candles regularly, 26% are not currently religious. Another fascinating detail: the majority of women who light Shabbat candles are young—67% are between the ages of 18 and 24.

Perhaps the most touching statistic is this: 37% of women who light candles shared that they started as little girls, lighting alongside their mothers.

The First Candle-Lighter

The first woman to light Shabbat candles in Jewish history was Sarah, our matriarch, as we learn in this week’s Parsha.

At the end of Chayeh Sara, after the Torah describes the match between Isaac and Rebecca at length—how Abraham sent his servant Eliezer to Haran (on the border of modern-day Turkey and Iraq) to find a wife specifically from his family, and how Divine providence guided the journey—it concludes with Rebecca meeting Isaac. The Torah says, “And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah, his mother, and he took Rebecca, and she became his wife” (*Genesis 24:67*).

How did Isaac know she was his destined soulmate (*bashert*)? Rashi explains that

as long as Sarah was alive, her Shabbat candles miraculously stayed lit from one Friday to the next. When she passed away, the miracle ceased, but when Rebecca entered the tent and lit the candles, the miracle returned. This, for Isaac, was the ultimate sign that she was the right match.

The Rebbe points out something fascinating about this story:

Isaac married Rebecca three years after Sarah's passing. Since Abraham observed all the commandments, it's reasonable to assume that when Sarah passed away, Abraham continued lighting Shabbat candles every Friday. Yet, during those three years, no miracle occurred with the candles. Only when Rebecca came and lit the candles did the miracle return, with the flames burning from Shabbat to Shabbat.

What was missing in Abraham that the miracle didn't take place. Why didn't his candles burn from Shabbat to Shabbat?

The key to answer this question could be found in another story, involving Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa.

Rabbi Chanina's Prayers

The Talmud recounts that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who lived at the end of the Second Temple period, was renowned for his piety and the power of his prayers. People from all over sought his blessings, earning him a reputation as a miracle worker.

The Talmud in *Brachot* (34b) shares an incredible story about Rabban Gamliel, who was the leader of the Jewish people at the time. When his son got seriously sick, Rabban Gamliel didn't rely on his own spiritual status to pray for his recovery. Instead, he sent two Torah scholars to ask Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa to pray for the boy.

Rabbi Chanina went straight up to his attic and prayed. When he came back down, he told the scholars, "You can head back now; the fever's gone."

The scholars were stunned and asked, "How do you know? Are you a prophet?" Rabbi Chanina, ever humble, said, "I'm not a prophet nor the son of a prophet. I just have a way of knowing—if my prayers come out smoothly, I know they've

been answered. If they don't, I know they haven't."

The scholars took note of the exact time he said the fever was gone. When they got back to Rabban Gamliel, they found out that at that very moment, the fever had broken, and his son had even asked for water to drink.

It's an amazing story—Rabbi Chanina was a Rebbe who was able to do real miracles.

The Gemara continues with a similar story: Rabbi Chanina once went to study Torah under Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. At some point, Rabbi Yochanan's son became ill. He turned to Rabbi Chanina and said, "Chanina, my son, please pray for mercy on his behalf so that he may live." Rabbi Chanina placed his head between his knees and prayed fervently, and the child was healed.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, overwhelmed by gratitude, admitted, "Had I banged my head between my knees all day long, my prayers would not have been heeded. But Rabbi Chanina's prayer was effective."

His wife, incredulous, asked him, "Is Chanina greater than you?" After all, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was the head of the academy and the undisputed leader of the Jewish people. The Talmud is filled with his halachic rulings—and yet it was Chanina's prayers, not his, that brought salvation?

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai gave his wife a fascinating answer: "No, Chanina is not greater than I am. But he is like a servant before the king, while I am like a minister before the king."

A minister holds an important position in the king's court. His opinions are valued, his advice is sought, and his role is essential. Yet, despite his high status, the minister has limited access to the king. There are set times and protocols for when he can meet with the monarch.

A servant, on the other hand, may not hold the same prestige. His opinions are not solicited, and he has no formal authority. However, he enjoys a unique advantage: he lives in the king's palace. The servant can enter the king's private quarters at any time, as though it were his own home. So he can present his request to the king at any moment he chooses.

The Answer

This story teaches a powerful lesson: you can be the president of the Sanhedrin, the greatest sage of your time—yet for a special kind of blessing, you might need to turn to someone like Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa. Each person has their own unique relationship with G-d, and some requests can only be made by those with a specific role or connection.

This brings us back to Sarah and Rebecca. G-d created the world such that the home is the domain of the woman. While the home belongs equally to both spouses, the leadership of the household is entrusted to the woman. Therefore, the mitzvah of “bringing light to the home” was given to her; she possesses the unique intuition to fulfill this role.

So, when Abraham lit Shabbat candles, it was nice, but it didn't have the same power. That kind of miraculous transformation was tied to the role of those specifically tasked with creating a bright, sacred home. Sarah fulfilled this role, and when Rebecca took on that responsibility, the miracle of the ever-burning candles returned (Toras Menachem vol. 78 pg. 252).

The Rebbe's Instructions

When the Rebbe launched the Campaign to light Shabbat Candles, he encouraged girls from a very young age to light one Shabbat candle, and encouraged married women to light two.

At one point, someone asked the Rebbe why he didn't emphasize the importance of unmarried men lighting Shabbat candles. After all, the *halacha* requires a man living alone to light candles, just as Abraham lit candles after Sarah's passing. This person even shared that he felt a sense of happiness and spiritual fulfillment each time he lit Shabbat candles.

The Rebbe replied, “It is better to spend Shabbat in a home where the candles are lit by the woman of the house” (Otzar Hamelech v. 1 pg. 262).

The message is very clear: every person has their unique mitzvah that connects them to G-d and serves as the channel through which they bring blessings and even miracles into the world. Men lay *tefillin*, women light Shabbat candles,

Kohanim bless us with *Birkat Kohanim*, and so on.

Well, we all hope for G-d to perform miracles in our lives. The best way to merit these miracles is by carrying out those mitzvot He entrusted to us. In this way, we too can light a candle that will burn from Shabbat to Shabbat. It might not be visible to our physical eyes, but the spiritual light will illuminate our week and fill it with holiness and warmth.