

The Number of Candles in the Context of Mitzvas Ner Shabbos¹

By: ARI Z. ZIVOTOFISKY

The mitzvah to demarcate² the start of Shabbos by lighting special candles is an important and ancient law with several rationales offered. Interestingly, despite the attention given to its details, such as which fuel and wicks may and may not be used, as early as the Mishnah and Gemara, there is no discussion as to the number of lights. Starting in the early medieval period, there is mention of a custom to have two lights, and in subsequent centuries, there are references to other customs. Today there is a common belief that when a woman lights Shabbos candles on Friday afternoon, the preferred number of candles corresponds to the number of members of her household. Furthermore, many assume that this is their family custom going back generations. Upon investigation of the history of Shabbos candles, it seems that over the last several hundred years there were indeed a variety of customs regarding how many candles to light, but the practice to base the number on the number of household members is among the most recent, with no classical sources, and it is certainly not obligatory.

¹ Note that in Rabbinic language “*ner*” (as in “*ner Shabbos*,” the phrase used to describe the Shabbos lights) referred to a clay lamp (or some other utensil in which a small fire was lit), and in that period clay oil lamps were the standard means of illumination. (In the Torah, “*ner*” referred to the receptacle, fuel, and wick altogether.) In fulfilling the mitzvah to light a Shabbos “*ner*” today, many people use oil, albeit usually not in a clay lamp, while many others use candles, and indeed since the time of *Tosafos* wax candles were the standard in Ashkenaz (see *Tosafos, Shabbos* 20b sv *ad kan*). For the sake of convenience, “candle” will be used in this article.

² In addition to the explicit reasons for *ner Shabbos* given in the sources and discussed below, it may be that *Chazal* intended that lighting candles be among the final *melachos* performed before ceasing *melachah* before Shabbos. That this was part of the process of separation from *melachah* might be discerned from the Rambam’s placement of this mitzvah. For more on this, see: Asher Ben-zion Buchman, “Mishneh Torah—Science and Art,” *Hakirah* 9 (Winter 2010), 199–220, in particular 203–207.

Ari Z. Zivotofsky is a Professor of Neuroscience at Bar Ilan University. He also writes and speaks widely on topics of Jewish interest.

History

The mitzvah to light Shabbos³ candles is not mentioned in the Torah, but it is a very ancient enactment which the Gemara termed a “*chorah*,” an obligation (*Shabbos* 25b), and this is emphasized by the Rambam (*Hilchos Shabbos* 5:1). Its details and practice are well documented in the Mishnah and *Tosefta*, and the Mishnah (*Shabbos* 2:7) includes instructing that candles be lit as one of the three final items in the pre-Shabbos check list.

The lighting of Shabbos candles was already widespread before the time of the Mishnah as attested to by non-Jewish writers. Seneca, a Roman philosopher, was bothered by the diffusion of Jewish customs around the Mediterranean. In an effort to stem this phenomenon, he wrote in the 60s of the first century: “let us forbid lamps to be lighted on [i.e. for] the Sabbath, since the gods do not need light.”⁴ A friend and younger contemporary of his was the Roman poet and satirist Persius. He describes the start of Shabbos as “when the lamps wreathed with violets that are arranged around the greasy windowsills have spat forth their thick cloud of smoke, when the floppy fish tails are curled round the dishes of red ware and the white jugs are filled to their brim with wine.”⁵ Clearly, a prominent feature of Shabbos⁶ in the first-century Roman Empire was the kindling of lights at its start.

³ Yom Tov candles are a different story because unlike Shabbos, on which fire may not be transferred, one may transfer a flame on Yom Tov. The Bavli does not record an obligation to light Yom Tov candles. *Hagabos Maimoniyos* (*Hilchos Shabbos* 5:1; 13th century) records an obligation to light Yom Tov candles and cites from the Yerushalmi two different versions of the *berachah*. Rav Yosef Kapach (commentary to Rambam, *Hilchos Shabbos* 5:1; so too *Aruch HaShulchan* OC 263:12) observes that the quoted Yerushalmis are not found in our edition of the Yerushalmi and that the Yemenite custom is indeed not to make a *berachah* on Yom Tov candles. For the rest of Jewry, although Yom Tov candles are a later development than Shabbos candles (around 12th century), Yom Tov candles are lit and a *berachah* is recited (*Shulchan Aruch*, OC 263:5, 514:11). The topic of Yom Tov candles will not be addressed herein.

⁴ Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1976), p. 433.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

⁶ This is true for Rabbanite Jews; neither Sadducees nor Samaritans lit Shabbos candles.

Why Light?

Three reasons are offered for this mitzvah: *oneg* (delight, joy of) *Shabbos*, *kvod* (honor of) *Shabbos*, and *shalom bayis*.

The concepts of *oneg Shabbos* and *kvod Shabbos* are derived from a verse in Isaiah (58:13): “If you restrain your foot because of the Sabbath, from performing your business on My holy day, and call the Sabbath ‘a delight’ [*oneg*] and God’s holy [day] ‘honored’ [*mechubad*], honored by not doing your activities, not pursuing business nor speaking about it.”

From the use of the word “a delight,” the Rabbis derived the concept of “*oneg Shabbos*,” which according to some authorities (e.g., Ramban, see *Mishnah Berurah* 242:1) is a Biblical obligation. The Gemara (*Shabbos* 118b) asks, “with what does one delight in Shabbos” and responds with a list of food delicacies from their time. From this it is learned that *oneg Shabbos* includes having meat, wine, and dainties (*Shulchan Aruch*, OC 250:2) and whatever other food is deemed well-regarded in one’s time and place (*Mishnah Berurah* 242:1). In addition to food and drink, *oneg* also includes an afternoon nap (*Rema* 290:1), marital relations (Rambam, *Hilchos Shabbos* 30:14), and Torah study (Meiri, *Shabbos* 118b quoting Yerushalmi). Having light is also considered *oneg Shabbos*.⁷

Oneg from light relates to the manner in which the meal is eaten. The Torah (*Devarim* 8:16) describes the Divinely provided manna in the desert as being a “hardship,” and there is a midrash that states that the verse about the manna is the source for the obligation to light Friday night candles. How so? One explanation in the Gemara (*Yoma* 74b) about the manna being a hardship is that despite it having a variety of tastes, all the Israelites actually saw was the manna. This was a hardship similar to that experienced by a blind person who, according to the Talmud (*Yoma* 74b), is never fully satisfied with his food because he cannot see what he is eating. *Torah Temimah* (*Devarim* 8:16, note 30) explains that if eating without seeing the food is a hardship, then eating Friday evening without light would be the opposite of *oneg*, and hence the Rabbis required that there be light at the Friday evening meal and that the light stay lit at least until the end of the meal (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 75:2). The light obviously could not be lit on Shabbos itself as this is one of the few

⁷ See *Tanchuma, Noach*: 1 which cites the verse from Isaiah and elaborates on how the Shabbos candle is *oneg*. *Tosafos* (*Shabbos* 25b sv *hadlakas ner* and sv *chovah*) explains that the obligation to light is because of *oneg Shabbos*. Meiri (*Shabbos* 25b) says that light is the primary form of *oneg* because there is no *oneg* without light.

actions explicitly forbidden by the Torah on Shabbos (*Shemos* 35:3)⁸ and it is thus lit before Shabbos. The *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 263:2) and *Mishnah Berurah* (263:1) mention that lighting Shabbos candles is included in the obligation of *oneg Shabbos*.

A second reason for the mitzvah of Shabbos candles is based on that same verse in Isaiah (58:13) that says that Shabbos is to be honored, i.e., *kvod Shabbos*. *Kvod Shabbos* is usually expressed via a hot shower on Erev Shabbos, preparing special clothing, and not eating a large meal Friday afternoon.⁹ So too, having a special light burning in its honor from before Shabbos starts is a form of *kvod Shabbos*. The Gemara (*Pesachim* 53b; *Shulchan Aruch* OC 610:1) says that when Yom Kippur falls on Shabbos and there is no need for light to enhance a meal, candles are nonetheless lit because of *kvod Shabbos*. So too Rav Achai Gaon (*Sheiltos, Tetzarveh* :63) and Rashi (*Shabbos* 25b sv *chovah*) mention that Shabbos lights are because of *kavod* (light at the meal is *kavod*), because an important meal is always held where there is illumination.

A third reason for lighting Shabbos candles is “*shalom bayis*,” peace within the house. Rashi explains that people suffer if they sit in the dark

⁸ Note that the Karaites twisted this verse to mean that there should not be any light burning during Shabbos. They thus sat in dark, cold homes on Friday night and ate cold food Shabbos day, while the Rabbanites had candles and heat Friday night and hot food such as *chulent* Shabbos day. For hundreds of years the mitzvah of Shabbos candles was a central point of polemics between the Rabbanites and Karaites. Already in the *Mechilta* (*Shemos* 35:3[5]) the Rabbis explicitly stated that while on Shabbos one may not kindle a light, one may kindle a light on Erev Shabbos for Shabbos use. Many see this *Mechilta* as a polemic against the Sadducees and other deniers of the Oral Law (see *Torah Sheleimah* 14: p. 320 and 23: pp. 125–129). So too the need to make a *berachah* on lighting was a point of contention well into the period of the Rishonim, as the *berachah* is post-Talmudic and first mentioned by Rav Amram Gaon. See BM Levin, “*L’toldos Ner shel Shabbos*,” in *Essays and Studies in Memory of Linda R. Miller*, NY, 1938. On the background to the *berachah* on Yom Tov candles see the thorough article “*Birkas Hadlakas Ner shel Yom Tov*,” Rav Ratzon Arusi, *Sinai*, Nisan-Iyar 5739 (85:1–2:55–91). Rav Arusi sees in Rambam’s formulation that in addition to all the other reasons, Shabbos candle lighting is an affirmation of *Torah she’be’al peh*, and hence unlike other aspects of *kavod* and *oneg* it merited a *berachah*. See *Shu”t Beis HaLevi* 1:11 for a discussion of the *berachah* as well as about *oneg* vs. *kavod*.

⁹ *Shabbos* 113a and 118b; Rambam, *Hilchos Shabbos* 30:2,7; *Mishnah Berurah* 242:1 (see also 242:6 that eating *pas Yisrael* instead of *pas palter* is considered *kvod Shabbos*). Gra (OC 529:1 sv *she’zehu*) explains that in general *oneg* includes things done on Shabbos itself while *kavod* includes things done in preparation for Shabbos.

(Rashi, *Shabbos* 23b sv *shalom bayis*), and without light there can be no peace because people walk and bump into things when it is dark (Rashi *Shabbos* 25b, sv *hadlakas ner b'Shabbos*). Similarly, the Mordechai (*Shabbos*, *siman* 294) says that the obligation to light Shabbos lights is because of *shalom bayis* so that people don't stumble and trip on wood or stone.¹⁰ This is so significant a component that Rava stated (*Shabbos* 23b; *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 263:3; 678:1) that it is obvious that if one is so poor that he can only afford either Chanukah candles, wine for *Kiddush*, or Shabbos candles, Shabbos candles take precedence due to *shalom bayis*. Based on the reason of *shalom bayis*, any illumination that contributes to basic household functioning is part of this mitzvah.

The three reasons may be viewed as complementary and not in conflict. For example, the Rambam mentions both *oneg* (*Hilchos Shabbos* 5:1) and *kavod* (*Hilchos Shabbos* 30:5). The *Aruch HaShulchan* (OC 263:2) says that the lights in the dining room are for *kavod* and those in other rooms because of *oneg*.¹¹

Who Lights?

This mitzvah applies to the household as a whole, not to each individual (Rambam, *Shabbos* 5:1; *Aruch HaShulchan* 263:5,7) and in theory can be fulfilled by any member of the household. However, for a variety of reasons¹² this mitzvah has been assigned to and adopted by the lady of the

¹⁰ Based on this reason, Rav Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (d. 1909; *Rav Pe'alim OC* 4:30) says that ideally one should have light all night so that if one wakes up in the middle of the night one will not trip. He notes that most people do not do this because if they wake up they simply go back to sleep and thus do not have need for light. Furthermore, this does not apply if one is sleeping on the roof or porch and has illumination from the moon or stars. Rav Chaim David HaLevy (1924–1998; *Mekor Chaim* vol. 3, 110:2 [p. 51–52]) says that in fulfillment of this requirement, the custom is to leave a hallway light on all night, thereby providing some light to all rooms and thus if one needs to get up at night one won't stumble in the dark.

¹¹ See *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasab* 43: n. 6, for an explanation of this and *oneg* and *kavod* in general. See also Rav YD Soloveitchik, *Shiurim L'Zecher Avi Mori*, vol. 1, pp. 50–68, on *kavod* and *oneg*. On the relationship between *oneg* and *kavod* and the position of the Rambam, see Rav Yitzchak Mirsky, *Hegyonai Halachah*, Mossad Harav Kook, 1989, vol. 1:7–20. For an extensive discussion of possible ramifications between the different reasons, see Rav Eliav HaKohen Silverman, *Meishiv Nefesh*, 5770, ch. 2, pp. 21–30.

¹² See *Yerushalmi*, *Shabbos* 2:6; Rambam, *Shabbos* 5:3; *Tur OC* 263; *Shulchan Aruch OC* 263: 3; *Magen Avraham OC* 263:7; *Baal HaTurim*, *Shemos* 27:20, sv *tetzarveh*; *Aruch HaShulchan OC* 263:7. This assigned role is implied in *Shabbos* 2:6.

house, and even if the husband wants to light, she has priority (*Magen Avraham* OC 263:6).^{13,14}

¹³ Women are involved in discussions regarding customs of this mitzvah. One of the most famous examples is regarding when to make the *berachah* on Yom Tov candles. Regarding Shabbos, if one were to make the *berachah* before lighting, that would be considered accepting Shabbos and then one may no longer light. That would not be the case on Yom Tov when one may transfer fire. And indeed Yosef the son of Rav Yehoshua ben Alexander HaCohen Falk (d. 1614), in his introduction to his father's commentary to the *Tur* (*Derishah/Perishah*), extols the virtues of his mother Baila. He describes her as a learned woman who, among other things, sought to correct what in her mind were two common errors women made in lighting Yom Tov candles. One of them was that the *berachah* should indeed be made prior to the lighting, unlike on Shabbos. *Magen Avraham* (OC 263:12), rejecting Baila's position, derogatorily quotes Rabbi Eliezer's line (*Yoma* 66b) that "*ein chochmah b'ishah*" and says that we do not distinguish between Shabbos and Yom Tov candles. See also *Mishnah Berurah* 263:27 and *Yechaveh Daas* 3:34.

Possibly related to this is the women-only practice of stretching out (and waving) the hands and covering the eyes/blocking the flame. The usual explanation for this is that with the *berachah* the woman accepts Shabbos and then would no longer be able to light. She thus lights, blocks out the light (not necessarily covering her eyes), says the *berachah*, and sees the light (*Rema* OC 263:5). The *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 263:5) says to recite the *berachah* first and Rav Ovadiah Yosef (*Yabia Omer* 2: OC:16 & 10: OC:21; *Chazon Ovadiah, Shabbos* 1: pp. 165–172) ruled that women and men, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, should say the *berachah* before lighting. Then after lighting, they should close their eyes, spread their hands, and pray for a long happy marriage, worthy children, and the coming of the Redemption (*Chazon Ovadiah, Shabbos* 1: pp. 177–8).

An alternate explanation of the origin of waving the hands/covering the eyes relates to how women standardly prayed and not to the need to "hide" the light before the *berachah*. See Yisrael Ta-Shma, "*Kisui HaEinayim B'Eis Hadlakas Ner Shabbos*," in *Minhag Ashkenaz HaKadum* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 136–141. In support of this theory is a custom in which the woman only waves the hands and does not cover her eyes (*Rivevos Ephraim* 2:115:64).

¹⁴ There is a general rule that if one "steals" a mitzvah from another, one is obligated to compensate the person with ten gold coins, "*asarah zehuvim*," a not-insignificant sum (*Chullin* 87a; *Shulchan Aruch* CM 382:1). Rav Yaakov Emden (d. 1776) seems to be the first to raise the question of this penalty in regard to a husband who "steals" the wife's mitzvah of candle lighting (or separating challah). In *Mishnah Lechem* (the second edition to his commentary to the Mishnah, *Lechem Shamayim, Challah* 2:3), he suggests regarding challah that just as the wife "pays the price" for neglecting the mitzvah, it is her reward to earn, and thus a husband who snatches the mitzvah owes his wife ten gold coins. In his Siddur (*Beis Yaakov*, p. 136, note 24; *Siddur Amudei Shamayim*, p. 336a, note 24) he similarly says (and refers the reader to *Mishnah Lechem*) that while the

Some people have the custom that not only the female head of house, but all women and single girls also light Shabbos candles with a blessing (*Aruch HaShulchan* OC 263:7).¹⁵ Rav YD Soloveitchik said this was non-controversial and was done in Europe, and indeed, that is what his daughters did (Rav Hershel Schachter, *MiPinei HaRav*, 2001, p. 62). However, this practice is not mentioned in the earlier sources. Rav Moshe Feinstein held that single girls should not light Shabbos candles with a blessing (Rav Aharon Felder, *Rishumei Acharon*, vol. 2 [2013], p. 24 [263:1]) and Rav Ovadiah Yosef also felt strongly that they should not do so with a *berachah* and responded several times to those who encouraged the practice (*Chazon Ovadiah*, Shabbos 1: pp. 194–202; see sources in *Yalkut Yosef* 263:14: note 28). It is interesting that of all groups it is Chabad that is encouraging daughters living at home to light with a *berachah*, in that the founder of Chabad *chassidus* explicitly ruled (*Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, *Kuntres Acharon* OC 263:5) that they may not recite a *berachah*.¹⁶

In the absence of the mother/wife, it is preferable for the husband/father to light and not one of the children (Rav Yehoshua Neuwirth, *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 43, note 46).

The actual lighting is the woman's job, but the husband should set up the lights (*Tosafos Rabbi Akiva Eiger*, *Mishnah Shabbos* 2:6; *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 263:5; *Mishnah Berurah* 263:12, 264:28) and immediately before Shabbos gently remind the household to light (*Mishnah Shabbos* 2:7; *Sheiltos Tezaveh*: 63; Rambam, *Hilchos Shabbos* 5:3).

husband is tasked with setting up the candles, if he preempts his wife and lights the Shabbos candles he owes her ten gold coins as compensation for “stealing” her mitzvah and *berachah*. Chida (d. 1806; *Machzik Berachah*, OC 263:3) cites Rav Emdem and adamantly rejects his position. Rav Chaim Bin-yamin Pontrimoli (d. 1873; *Pesach HaDevir* OC 263:4–5) has a long discussion on this topic. For a different perspective, see *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* (OC: 263: *kuntres acharon*:2) that lighting candles is actually the husband's obligation and the wife is merely his emissary.

¹⁵ Chabad began an aggressive campaign encouraging this practice starting in the mid-1970s. See on this Rabbi J. David Bleich, “Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature: Sabbath Candles for Young Girls,” *Tradition*, 16:1 [summer, 1976].

¹⁶ This paragraph refers to when the single persons are in the house in which a female head of house lit. If they are living independently, they should light in their abode.

How Many Lights?

In the very early sources there is no discussion of how many lights should be lit. This may be because it was more than just a ritual—it was a practical matter of having light where it was needed, and thus it seems that the minimum was one light but that wherever light was needed, one would light there as well. More were not legislated, possibly because of economic reasons, and there is no indication in the early sources of any custom to standardly light more than one.

The minimum requirement of one light in order to fulfill the mitzvah was subsequently codified, and in extenuating circumstances that is deemed sufficient (*Mishnah Berurah* 263:9, 22, 45). The *Pri Megadim* (*Eishel Avraham* OC 263:11) explains that the *berachah* is “*Yhadlik ner shel Shabbos*,” with *ner* in the singular even if one lights more than one, because the fundamental mitzvah is one light.

At some point in the early Middle Ages a practice developed in Ashkenaz to light two candles, and it is first recorded by Rav Eliezer ben Yoel HaLevi of Bonn (d. ca. 1225; *Ra’aviyah*, p. 265–6). This custom eventually became the universal standard custom and various reasons have been proffered to explain why two.¹⁷ The most common explanation is that they correspond to the two phrases—*zachor* (*Shemos* 20:8) and *shamor* (*Devarim* 5:12)—used in the Ten Commandments regarding Shabbos observance (*Shulchan Aruch* OC 263:1).¹⁸ Some even braid two wicks together to show that *shamor* and *zachor* were uttered by God simultaneously (*Mishnah Berurah* 263:5).¹⁹ The *Bach* (OC 263 sv *u’ma’sbekatav*, defended in *Magen Avraham* 263:1) mentions what he describes as an old custom initiated by the great predecessors in commemoration of *shamor/zachor* to bring two intertwined wax candles to light in shul.

Another related explanation for the custom is based on the famous story (*Shabbos* 33b) of when Rabban Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) and his son Rabbi Elazar left the cave after thirteen years. On Erev Shabbos they saw a man running with two myrtle branches. They asked him what they were for and he explained they were for *kvod Shabbos*. They asked

¹⁷ See Gedalyah Oberlander, *Minbag Avoseinu B’Yadeinu (Shabbos kodesh)*, 2010, Monsey, pp. 11–16.

¹⁸ The custom of lighting two candles transferred to Yom Tov candles as well despite the reason of *shamor/zachor* not applying.

¹⁹ In Yemen until recent times some women lit only one candle. Note also they made the *berachah* before lighting and only the woman of the house lit, but not daughters (see Zohar Amar, *Differing Halachic Customs Between “Baladi” Yemenite and other Jewish Communities* [Hebrew], 2017, p. 59).

why one was not enough and he said it was for *shamor/ zachor*, to which Rashbi exclaimed how the *mitzvos* were beloved to the Jews. Some suggest that the custom to light two candles developed based on this story (*Maharsha, Chidushei Agados, Shabbos* 33b, sv *chad kneged*).

A theory²⁰ has been advanced that this practice began specifically in the northern Ashkenaz communities where in the summer, sunset is very late and the evening meal was eaten, even on Fridays, outdoors and when it was still daylight. Thus, the Shabbos candles, which were clearly initially intended to be lit for the purpose of using their light, lost their role of providing useful light and became solely a ritual for *kvod Shabbos*. Not only was its light not needed in that circumstance, but because it was now solely a ritual, they began to treat its light as prohibited for use. In the winter, when light was needed, two candles would be lit, the ritualistic one and one (or more) to provide illumination. Hence, a custom developed to light two candles.

Eventually other customs developed, many under kabbalistic influence. Rema (263:1) says that instead of the traditional two, one may light three or four candles, and, he notes, that is what some have the custom to do. Others had practices of lighting seven (for the days of the week)²¹ or ten (for the Ten Commandments; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 75:2; *Mishnah Berurah* 263:6 quoting *Magen Avraham* 263:2 in name of the *Shla*). *Kaf HaChaim* (263:9) quotes a custom to light six on Yom Kippur, five on Yom Tov and four on Rosh Chodesh to parallel the number of *aliyos* and Rav Chaim Binyamin Pontrimoli (d. 1873; *Pesach HaDevir* 263:1) notes this was the custom in Izmir in the mid-19th century. The Bnei Yissaschar (*Maamarei HaShabbos*, 3:8 and 6:21) quotes a practice that he said was followed by some of his Rabbinic predecessors of lighting thirty-six lights every Erev Shabbos in honor of the thirty-six hours that the primordial light existed. Rabbi Shmuel Bondi (1794–1877; introduction to *Turei Zahav*, 5763, p. 16) describes his grandfather's [Rabbi Avraham Naftali Herz Scheuer of Mainz, Germany; 1753–1822] great love for Shabbos by noting that his grandfather's practice was to light thirty-one candles every Erev Shabbos, at the end of his life he lit forty-five, and

²⁰ Israel Ta-Shma, "Ner Shel Kavod," *Tarbitz* 45 (5736), 128–137.

²¹ Or to represent the seven *sefiros* (Ben Ish Chai, year 2, Noach:1). If one lights seven candles, they should be aware that use of a seven-branched candelabrum may run afoul of the Biblical prohibition related to making a seven-branched *menorah* resembling that found in the Temple (see *Shulchan Aruch YD* 141:8; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 168:6; *Yabia Omer* 1:YD:12; *Yechaveh Daas* 3:61; *Mishpat U'zziel* 2:YD:18; Rav Yitzchak Isaac HaLevi Herzog, *Pesakim U'Kesavim*, vol. 4, YD: 43–48).

before his death he requested that for the first year fifty-two candles be lit every Shabbos in the room where he used to study. In response to the request of an English nobleman, Leon Modena, known in Hebrew as Yehudah Aryeh mi-Modena (1571–1648; Venice, Italy), published in 1637 a description of Jewish customs for non-Jewish readers entitled *Historia de' riti Hebraici*. It was translated into Hebrew in 1867 as *Shulchan Aruch* of Rav Yehudah Aryeh mi-Modena and on p. 54 (section 13) he says that about half an hour before sunset women are obligated to light an oil lamp with at least four or six wicks that will burn well into the night.

Whichever custom one follows, it is important, barring unforeseen circumstances, to follow it consistently, to the extent that, according to *Pri Megadim*, if the woman lit fewer than that number one week it was as if she had not lit candles and she must thereafter add an extra candle (*Pri Megadim, Eishel Avraham*, 263:3). Although *Mishnah Berurah (Biur Halachah*, 263, sv *she'sbachechab*), *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* (43 note 27), and Rav Ovadiah Yosef (*Chazon Ovadiah, Shabbos 1*: p. 173–4) disagree with this ruling, the mere fact that *Pri Megadim* rules that way emphasizes the importance of the individual custom.²² Nonetheless, common practice is that even those who light more than two when at home, when away light just two, and this is even without an explicit statement of such intent when she began lighting the additional candles (*She'arim Metzuyanim b'Halachah* 75:13).

Rav Chaim Binyamin Pontrimoli (*Pesach HaDevir* 263:1) entertained the possibility that two candles were not a minimum but the ideal number. Once it was established as representative of *shamor* and *zachor*, adding candles destroys that symbolism. While eventually backing off from that concern, he endorses a suggestion that two be lit separately from any others that are added to that number, thus preserving the symbolism. This is similar to the custom recorded from the Burgenland, Austria

²² Rav Yehudah Zvi Blum (1872–1917; *She'eiris Yehudah OC*:23) was asked in 1916 about the fact that during the war the price of candles rose twenty-fold and the candlesticks had to be turned over for the war effort and thus women wanted to know if they could light fewer candles than they had been accustomed to. He concludes that he sees no great mitzvah in the additional candles and they were an innovation of the women. He bemoans that these women think that these lights are the essence of Shabbos observance and in the meantime permit young girls to comb their hair and commit other serious Shabbos violations and their only “righteousness” is lighting many candles. Therefore, he rules, they may decrease the number of candles they light, should be careful about the other laws of Shabbos, and happily observe Shabbos.

(Mattesdorf) region prior to WWII in which they lit seven or eight wax candles and two with olive oil (Rav Bunim Yoel Taussig, *Minbagei HaKehilos*, vol. 2, p. 173 [*Shabbos* 12]). In a note on that custom, Rav Yechezkel Goldhaber, the editor of the volume, mentions two other communities in the region where they lit three candles, and three communities where they would light based on the number of people in the household.

One Per Child

The practice, to light, in addition to the basic two, an additional candle for each child in the family has been gaining in popularity in recent years.²³ What is surprising is that this practice is not mentioned in any of the classic sources. The earliest²⁴ mention of this practice seems to be in 1903 in *Likutei Maharich* (vol. 2, p.13b [1903 and 1964 ed.]), a work written by Rav Yisrael Chaim Friedman (1852–1922), Rabbi of Rachov, today in Ukraine, near the Ukrainian/Romanian border. He mentions the standard two, says that one may feel free to add and thus there are customs of four, seven, and ten. He then says that some women have a custom to add one every time a son or daughter is born. He gives no reference or early mention of the custom but finds support for it in the Talmudic statement (*Shabbos* 23b) that as a reward for being meticulous with beautifying (*Tur*, OC 263) Shabbos lights one will be blessed with sons and sons-in-law who are Rabbinic scholars (*Mishnah Berurah* 263:2). Thus, these women, according to his explanation, add a light each time a

²³ Rav Wosner (*Shevet HaLevi* 7:10:2) was asked about a man who did not have a family custom to light a candle per child who married a woman who had that custom. The wife wanted to continue her family custom while the husband objected, saying that a married woman takes on her husband's family customs. After analyzing the letter-of-the-law financial responsibility for Shabbos candles, Rav Wosner concludes that because Shabbos candles are about *shalom bayis*, the wife may maintain her family customs even if there is an added expense.

²⁴ Since this mention at the turn of the 20th century, this practice has gained in popularity and can be found in many other sources. Shortly after the practice is first mentioned in writing, Rav Ephraim Shlomo Zalman Weingort (1844–1912) wrote in his will (*Birchas Ephraim*:21; found as an appendix to his grandfather's *Pischei She'arim* by Rav Yissachar Weingort) that his descendants should light a candle each Erev Shabbos for each child born to them. However, he places this in the context of his practice to light candles for Rav Meir Baal HaNeis and says that when they light the candles they should say that they are being lit for the *neshamah* of Rav Meir Baal HaNeis and for *kevod Shabbos*, etc. ... Thus it seems less related to regular Shabbos lights and more related to Rav Meir Baal HaNeis and not reflecting a normative Erev Shabbos practice.

son or daughter is born so that in the merit of the additional light they will have sons and sons-in-law who are Rabbinic scholars.²⁵

An alternate suggested explanation for this practice is given by Rabbi Menashe Klein (1924–2011). He was originally from Ungvar, now in Ukraine and not far from where Rabbi Friedman was from. His suggested rationale (*Mishneh Halachos* 7:35; see *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 43:note 51 who has a problem with this reason) is based on a custom mentioned by the Maharil, that if a woman misses lighting one Shabbos, even through no fault of her own, from then forward she should light an extra candle.²⁶ In the past, a post-partum woman was considered too weak to light the first week after giving birth such that the husband customarily lit (*Olas Shabbos* 263:4; *Mishnah Berurah* 263:11). Thus, it was

²⁵ A possible hint that the merit of each candle yields a scholarly descendent might be found also in *Shabbos* 23b. The Talmud reports that Rabbi Avin the carpenter lit “many” candles and was blessed with two Torah scholar sons. *Tosafos* (sv *huchi garsinun*) understands the “many” as two, hence two great sons were foretold by the two lights and were born. The Gemara continues that Rav Shizvi’s parents merited him because of their meticulousness in lighting candles. *Tosafos* understands that only one candle was lit and thus one great son emerged. This can be understood as a one-to-one correspondence in the number of candles and the number of worthy sons/sons-in-law.

²⁶ This custom, first mentioned by the Maharil (d. 1427), is codified by *Rema* (*OC* 263:1) who phrases it that if she forgot she henceforth lights three candles, thus, inter alia, assuming that the average person was lighting two. The Magen Avraham (263:3), quoted by the *Mishnah Berurah* (263:7), explains that it is meant as a visible reminder so that she will be more careful in the future. Hence, if she forgets again she has to add another additional candle in the future. Because it is meant as a reminder, if she failed to light through no fault of her own, there is no need to add an extra candle. Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Iggeros Moshe YD*: 3:14:6) thought that the penalty applied even to a woman who neglected to light while visiting at her mother’s house where her mother lit. Some authorities hold that this penalty only applies to women not men and on Shabbos not Yom Tov (Rav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner quoted in *Kovetz miBeis Levi*, vol. 11, p. 32, n. 11, where he inter alia disagrees with the above cited *Iggeros Moshe*; *Shvus Yitzchak*, vol. 8, chap. 1, n. 18 [p.6] in the name of Rav El-yashiv, cf *Mishneh Halachos* 7:37, *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 43, n. 29, 35). *Shevet HaLevi* 5:33, *Kinyan Torah* (Horowitz) 6:9:3 and *Tzitz Eliezer* 21:11 all discuss whether the penalty applies even if there were electric lights on in the house in honor of Shabbos but she forgot to light candles and they all conclude that it does.

The Chida (*Shiurei Berachah* 263:1) quotes Rav Shmuel Shaar Aryeh who says that even better than penalizing her to light an extra candle each week is to tax her with henceforth providing a poor woman with the resources to light Shabbos candles.

assumed that for each child she had, she “missed” a week and would therefore subsequently have to add a candle. This explanation does not satisfactorily explain why for the single delivery of twins two candles were added. It also does not agree with the Magen Avraham’s position that for an *ones*, an unavoidable occurrence, there is no penalty, nor with the idea that she actually did not even miss her obligation—which was fulfilled by her husband’s lighting.

Rabbi Klein also suggests the possibility that this custom may be related to the Rambam’s position (*Hilchos Chanukah* 4:1) that just as for *mehadrin* on Chanukah the head of the house lights a candle for each member of the household, so too on Shabbos the woman fulfills the obligation for the whole household and lights a candle for each member of the house. This rationale is also suggested by Rabbi Yitzchak Darzi (*Shvus Yitzchak*, vol. 8, 7:3) who notes that it is not a perfect parallel in that in the Rambam’s Chanukah scheme candles are only lit for household members over bar/bat mitzvah while the Shabbos candle custom adds a candle from when the new member is born.

The halachic sources over the years describe the minimum obligation as well as the varied customs that had developed regarding how many candles to light. The idea of lighting a candle for each member of the household is not found until the *Likutei Maharich* in the very early twentieth century. While usually lack of evidence is insufficient to assert evidence of lack, considering the number of halachic works on this topic that detail the various practices, the absence of any mention or hint of such a practice can likely be taken as proof that there was no such practice.

Not only is there no traditional source for adding one for each child until the twentieth century, it seems that for most of history no one would have done such a thing. The most prosaic reason is financial. For many Jews throughout history it was simply not an option to splurge on so many extra lights each Friday afternoon. People who could afford it likely did as the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (75:2) writes, it is a mitzvah to increase the number of candles; the more light, the better (*Shabbos* 23b; *Mishnah Berurah* 263:25; *Maaseh Rav* 112 and 140). But for most Jews that was not feasible. An indication of this may be found in the sources that discuss the penalty for a woman who forgot to light one week and the inclusion of the instruction that one who could not afford to add an extra candle should merely add to how long her candles burn.

A more sobering rationale why this practice was likely non-existent was the unfathomable to the modern ear rate of child mortality. With rates of one quarter to one third of all children not reaching adulthood in mid-nineteenth century Europe, there was not a house in which multiple children did not live past their first birthday, and certainly not to

adulthood.²⁷ It is highly unlikely that women would establish a practice of lighting an extra light for each newborn with the knowledge that so many of them would not survive and that she would then have a constant reminder of the loss when she lit candles every Friday afternoon.

The Effect of Electric Lights

As noted above, the obligation of Shabbos lights was originally enacted in order that there be light in the house on Friday night. The reasons for this enactment included increased *oneg* by virtue of the food being seen and thereby enjoyed and *shalom bayis* because people would not bump into each other and into objects. In the last 150 years a technical revolution has occurred and our homes are now fully illuminated day and night with electric lights. The light from the candles, no matter how many, seems negligible and does not significantly add light, sort of a modern version of the Talmudic (*Chullin* 60b) phrase *שרגא בטיהרא מאי אהני*. Does this affect the mitzvah of Shabbos candles in general and the issue of the number of candles in particular?²⁸ In addition to the primary light in the

²⁷ The statistics are astounding. See: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/children-woman-death-vs-survival> . Even before the actual data, it is clear that most children did not reach childbearing age. If the global fertility rate was higher than 4 children per woman, the population should have doubled every generation. It didn't. From 10,000 BCE to 1700 CE the world population grew by only 0.04% annually. A high birth rate (there was no effective birth control) and little growth can only be explained by the sad reality that a high percentage of children died before they themselves could reproduce. Some examples: In Germany in 1850 the average woman had 5.0 children of whom 2.4 died before age 5; in Hungary in 1864 it was 5.03 and 2.09; Romania in 1865, 4.4 and 1.65; in Austria 1850 it was 5.1 and 2.08. Western Europe was only slightly better. UK in 1850 was 4.85 and 1.2, Netherlands in 1850, 4.89 and 1.44, and France in 1850, 3.49 and 0.83. More continued to die before reaching adulthood. In eastern Europe the average woman was burying 2 to 3 children! That was the norm. The argument has been made that among Jews the child mortality rate was significantly lower than among the general population (see https://econ.biu.ac.il/files/economics/seminars/jewish_childcare_29_march.pdf), but it was still quite high.

²⁸ This is a separate question from the issue of using electric lights for the mitzvah itself. Many permit using them and reciting a *berachah* because the electric lights accomplish the goal of the mitzvah, which is that there be light. *Shemiras Shabbos K'bilchasah* (43:4) rules that as long as they are turned on with the intention of *kvod Shabbos*, a *berachah* may be recited. In fn. 22 he cites a long list of concurring sources, the earliest probably being Rav Yitzchak Shmelkis (d.

dining room, it is required that there should be light in every room in which light will enhance the Shabbos experience, with an emphasis on the room used for the meal (*Rema*, OC 263:10; *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* OC 263:1, 5; *Mishnah Berurah* 263:2, 31, 45; *Biur Halachah* 263:6, sv *bachurim*).

The propriety of making a *berachah* on lighting candles when there is ambient light in the room is not a new question. *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 263:8) cites two opinions regarding making a *berachah* when two or three people are eating and thus lighting in the same room. Since there is a doubt, the *Shulchan Aruch* says not to make the *berachah*. *Rema* says that the Ashkenazic custom is to make a *berachah*, and the Beis Yosef had previously justified this position of the Maharil by explaining that more light adds more *shalom bayis* and additional *simchah*. For those following the *Shulchan Aruch*, a guest, even a married daughter in her parents' home, would light without a *berachah*, while according to the Ashkenazi practice she would recite the *berachah*.

The difference between the discussion in prior generations and the issue with electric lights, is that lights today provide so much light that the light of the candles is almost negligible. Because of this, it is recommended that when the electric lights are turned on Friday afternoon, it be done with the intention of "*kevod Shabbos*" (*Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 43:32). It may be that electric lights suffice for *oneg*, but even today *kevod* is via candles, as is evident from fancy dinners at which candles are lit (*Teshuvos VeHanbagos* 2:157:4). Others suggest that the electric lights be turned off before candle lighting, turned back on with the intent of having them on for the sake of the mitzvah, then the candles be lit and the *berachah* recited, having in mind both the electric lights and the candles,²⁹

1906; *Beis Yitzchak*, YD 1:120:5). *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* points out that Rav SZ Auerbach distinguishes between a battery-operated and a plug-in (AC) light. Rav Ovadiah Yosef also permitted the use of electric lights for the mitzvah of *ner Shabbos*, citing many sources, although he says that oil or wax is certainly preferable (*Yechaveh Daas* 5:24). To those sources can be added Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin (*Edus L'Yisrael* [1980] p. 122) who says one may make a *berachah* on an electric light but one should have a light specifically for Shabbos; Rav Moshe Soloveitchik who once told his hospitalized wife that she could make a *berachah* on electric lights (Rav Hershel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav*, 1994, p. 155–156); and Rav Moshe Feinstein, who said that a *berachah* should not be recited (Rabbi Simcha Bunim Cohen, *The Radiance of Shabbos* (New York: Mesorah, 1986) p. 12, 13 and 19).

²⁹ *Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 43, notes 166 and 171. See there for Rav SZ Auerbach's questions of how we can even make a *berachah* on an oil light today when we never use it for light and his answer is that it is on the joy of fulfilling the decree of *Chazal* and because it is clear that it is light for the honor of

or alternatively turn off the electric lights, have the woman light candles with a *berachah*, and then another member of the house (who has not yet accepted Shabbos) turn the lights back on (*Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah* 43:34).³⁰ This also helps with the requirement that Shabbos lights be lit specifically for Shabbos (*Rema* 263:4; *MB* 263:20). Nonetheless, this is not an absolute requirement and Rav Yitzchak Yosef noted that the custom is not to be careful about turning the electric lights off and then on (*Yalkut Yosef* 263:8). The *hiddur* noted above to have additional illumination on Shabbos has been greatly simplified due to the ease with which houses are illuminated nowadays.

In light of the above, it seems that all women today are in actuality “lighting” a large number of lights (if we include the electric lights), and the candles are only a small part of the mitzvah.

While Shabbos candles are obligatory and also have the eminently rational reasons of *kavod*, *oneg*, and *shalom bayis*, *Chazal* also attributed deep spiritual significance to this special mitzvah. Because of this, it is suggested to look at the candles at the start of *Kiddush* (*Rema* OC 271:10). As God finished the creation of the world, the Torah says that He blessed the seventh day (*Bereishis* 2:3). Among the midrash’s (*Bereishis Rabbah* 11:2) suggestions about the nature of the blessing is Rabbi Elazar’s suggestion that the seventh day was blessed with (the Shabbos) light. He demonstrates this by relating the miracle that once occurred to him in which he lit the Shabbos light on Friday afternoon and found it miraculously still burning and full of oil on Motza’ei Shabbos. Similarly, the midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 60:16) describes what happened when Yitzchak welcomed his new wife Rivkah into the family (*Bereishis* 24:67). It describes four³¹ spiritual commonalities between Rivkah and her deceased mother-in-law, Sarah. One of them was that the Shabbos light would miraculously burn continuously from Erev Shabbos to Erev Shabbos. Similarly, it once happened that the daughter of the saintly Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa lit the Shabbos light with vinegar instead of oil

Shabbos. This instruction of turning off the electric lights was also given by Rav YD Soloveitchik (Rav Hershel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav*, 1994, p. 156). It was also the practice of Rav Moshe Feinstein (*The Radiance of Shabbos*, p. 20 and *Teshuvos VeHanbagos* 2:157:6), and the recommendation of Rav Ovadiah Yosef (*Chazon Ovadiah, Shabbos* 1: pp. 215–217).

³⁰ Rav Moshe Feinstein said the electric lights in the home do not preclude reciting a *berachah* on Shabbos candles for married women, as their lighting is a Rabbinic enactment and lighting includes an element of *kevod Shabbos* (Rav Aharon Felder, *Rishumei Aharon*, vol. 2 [2013], p. 24 [263:1]).

³¹ *Rashi, Bereishis* 24:67 cites only three of them.

and yet it burned until Havdalah (*Taanis* 25a). One who is meticulous regarding Shabbos lights will merit righteous descendants (*Shabbos* 23b) and it is one of the items that the accompanying angels look for in a house on Friday night (*Shabbos* 119b). *Yalkut Shimoni* (beginning of *Beha'aloscha* [רמז 719]) attributes the wonderful light, the “light of Zion,” in the messianic era (Isaiah 60, Zephaniah 1, Malachi 3) to the merit of the mitzvah of Shabbos candles.

The unique and inseparable relationship between the Jews and this mitzvah is evidenced by an outside source. On Saturday Jan 1, 2000, the NY Times published an imaginary issue of how they envisioned the Friday, Jan 1, 2100 issue of the NY Times. And there, on the bottom of the front page is a reminder for Jewish women to light Shabbos candles! Despite all the changes in the world that they predicted, it was clear to these writers that in 2100 Jewish women will still be lighting Shabbos candles. 