

How Are the Sabbath Candles to Be Lit?

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Both men and women are enjoined to light Sabbath candles,¹ though in practice it is the woman who does so. Herein lies a controversy. What is the proper way to light the Sabbath candles? Should one light the candles, cover the eyes, then say the blessing: Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us by Your commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights,² which is the traditional practice; or follow the Rambam's dictum that one is required to recite the blessing before lighting the Sabbath candles; *i.e.*, not to light the candles until one recites the blessing.³

As far back as the times of Rav Sherira and Rav Hai (11th century) it was an obligation to bless the Sabbath candles, "the blessing of which is a law even though it is not mentioned explicitly."⁴

The order of the blessing is almost universal among *Ashkenazim* and a majority of *Sefardim*: "It is well known that the blessing for all *mitzvot* must be said before doing the *mitzvah* with the exception of lighting the Sabbath candles"⁵ [two other exceptions are *netilat yadayim* and *miqvah*].

What lies behind the two different views and practices? The issue seems to be which act ushers in the Sabbath – lighting, covering the eyes, reciting the blessing and then uncovering the eyes (the *Ashkenazi* practice) or reciting the blessing and then lighting the candles (Rambam's view).

According to the *Ashkenazim*, it is the blessing that ushers in the Sabbath. Thus, after reciting the blessing it is already Shabbath and therefore, one cannot light the candles: "You shall not light a fire in all your habitations"⁶ [on the Sabbath]. To avoid being a *m'hallel Shabbat* (one who desecrates the Sabbath), you introduce a legal fiction – first light the candles, cover your eyes, recite the blessing, uncover your eyes and note the glowing candles. Hence it is the *b'rakhah* that ushers in the Sabbath.

According to the Rambam, it is not the *b'rakhah* but the lighting of the candles that initiates the Sabbath.

In a way the *Ashkenazim* agree with the Rambam. Since by uncovering the eyes they "light" the candles – it is the lighting that welcomes Sabbath.

It is worth noting that until recently *Sefardim* followed the *Ashkenazi* practice: lit the Sabbath candles, covered their eyes, recited the blessing and then removed their hands from their eyes. But about 20 years ago Hagaon HaRav Ovadia Yosef suggested that *Sefardim* should follow Rambam's *halakhic* dictum. According to Rabbi Marc D. Angel, a number of *Sefardim* now follow the ruling of the Rambam.⁷

But it all boils down to, as the saying goes, which *rebbe* you follow.

- ¹ Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥaim 263:5.
- ² Qitzur Shulḥan Arukh 75:4; Arukh ha-Shulḥan 263:13.
- ³ Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Sabbath, 5:1: “one is required to bless before lighting.”
- ⁴ Otzar Ha-Geonim, Shabbat ¶85, pp. 27-28. “The institution of the Sabbath light is almost certainly pre-Maccabean. This is clear from the fact that in Mishnaic times, no one even doubted that the Sabbath light should be kindled; the only dispute was in regard to the material wherewith it might be lighted.” (Joseph H. Hertz, *Daily Prayer Book*, Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 5709-1948 p. 344). Thanks to David Greenstein for bringing this source to my attention.
- ⁵ Qitzur Shulḥan Arukh, 75:4; Arukh ha-Shulḥan 263:13.
- ⁶ Exodus 35:3.
- ⁷ Rabbi Emeritus of the Congregation Shearith Israel, New York City, so informed me in a telephone conversation 4 December 2008.