

Rabbi Evan Hoffman
Parshat Vayakhel

Sabbath candles and sectarian controversy

For over two millennia, Jews have ushered in the Sabbath by lighting candles shortly before sundown on Friday afternoons. There is ample literary evidence for the popularity of this practice in the first century CE. The Roman poet Persius mocked the Jews for their devotion to lighting Sabbath candles. He described “the sabbath of the circumcised” as a day “when the lamps wreathed with violets and ranged round the greasy window-sills have spat forth their thick clouds of smoke (Satire V).” Josephus noted that Sabbath candles were becoming increasingly popular all over the Roman Empire, including among converts and among semi-proselyte God-fearers: “The multitude of mankind have had a great inclination to follow our religious observances. There is not any city of the Grecians, nor any of the barbarians, nor any nation whatsoever, wither our custom of resting on the seventh day... and lighting up of lamps are not observed (Against Apion 1:147).” Seneca complained about the Judaization of the Roman world, making explicit reference to the loathsome – in his view – practice of lighting Sabbath candles. “Let us forbid lamps to be lighted on the Sabbath, since the gods do not need light, and men do not take pleasure in soot (Epistulae Morales 45:47).”

There is no Scriptural text mandating the kindling of Sabbath lights. Even in the Mishnah, where an entire chapter is dedicated to the matter of Sabbath candles, there is no mention of the provenance of the custom. Instead, the sages there focus on suitable and unsuitable types of wicks and oils (Mishnah Shabbat 2:1). The closest to an explicit Tannaitic statement requiring the kindling of Sabbath lights is a list of three things that a man must say to the members of his household before nightfall on Friday: “Have you tithed? Have you prepared the Eruv? Light the candle (2:7).” Still, and not surprisingly, an Aggadic text retrojects Sabbath candles onto a heroine of the ancient Biblical past. Sarah’s Sabbath candles are said to have miraculously remained lit from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve (Genesis Rabbah 60:16).

In the early Amoraic period, the legal status of Sabbath candles finally received proper attention (Shabbat 25b). In contrast to pre-Sabbath bathing, which was regarded variously as a discretionary matter (רשות) or commandment (מצוה), the lighting of Sabbath candles was regarded by Rav as an obligation (חובה). Rabbi Joshua ben Levi associated Sabbath candles with domestic tranquility, or *shalom bayit* (Shabbat 34a). He cited the verse: “And thou shalt know that thy tent is in peace; and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt miss nothing (Job 5:24).” Rashi explained that Sabbath candles are a means of honoring the Sabbath (שבת כבוד), insofar as they facilitate eating the Sabbath feast in a suitably illuminated environment. (The Talmud teaches that one cannot enjoy a meal unless one sees the food one is eating (Yoma 75b).)

Alternatively, the obligation to light Sabbath candles is a fulfillment of the requirement to take delight in the Sabbath (שבת עונג). The Midrash adopts this view (Tanhuma Noah 1), and cites the verse “If thou turn away thy foot because of the Sabbath, from pursuing thy business on My holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight (Isaiah 58:13).” Rambam, too, regarded Sabbath candles to be a matter of *Oneg Shabbat* (Hilkhot Shabbat 5:1). A further, and mystical, explanation for the Sabbath candles is that they atone for Eve’s sin in the

Garden of Eden. She brought death into the world and snuffed out Adam's soul, symbolically regarded as the candle of God. Women make amends for that primordial transgression by lighting candles weekly (Yerushalmi Shabbat 5b).

Modern academic scholars have postulated an altogether different historical explanation for the origin of Sabbath candles, namely, that that practice developed as an attempt by the Pharisees to push back against the competing halakhic views of other sectarian groups. The Samaritans, Sadducees, and Dead Sea Sect all held that no fire could lawfully be maintained by a Jew on the Sabbath even if the fire has been kindled on Friday and was not anyway manipulated after the onset of the Sabbath. The claimed Scriptural basis for this is: "Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the Sabbath day (Exodus 35:3)." James Alan Montgomery, in his book *The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect*, thusly described those who worshipped at Mount Gerizim: "They follow strictly the injunction of Exodus not to light a fire on the Sabbath, nor may they use any contrivance to keep their food warm, which must all be cooked the day before." Abraham Geiger and Jacob Z. Lauterbach advanced the sectarian conflict theory for the origins of Sabbath candles by pitting the Pharisees against their usual nemesis, the Sadducees. More recently, Professor Vered Noam has added the Dead Sea Sect to the roster of Jewish groups who forbade fire on the Sabbath. Support for this theory can be adduced from a line from that sect's Temple Scroll אל איש יער אל שבת לפני אש גחלי איש יער אל, which seems to forbid all fires, even those kindled before the onset of the Sabbath. Further support regarding these views of the Dead Sea Sect's beliefs can be mustered from Josephus' description of the Essenes: "They are stricter than any other of the Jews in resting from their labors on the seventh day; for they not only get their food ready the day before, that they may not be obliged to kindle a fire on that day (Wars of the Jews 2:8:9)."

The Pharisees were wont to alter, or to direct, ceremonial or ritual practices to counter what they regarded as erroneous viewpoints held by other groups. The fanfare associated with harvesting barley for the Omer sacrifice, done to blunt the Sadducean interpretation of "on the morrow of the Sabbath," is the most famous example of this phenomenon (Mishnah Menahot 10:3). Another example was the practice of rendering impure the priest who burned the red-heifer (Mishnah Parah 3:7). To suggest that prescribing the lighting of Sabbath candles was similarly motivated is an entirely plausible theory. Further support for it can be found in the priority the sages gave to Sabbath candles over Hanukkah candles or Kiddush wine (Shabbat 23b). While the Talmud claims the reason is the overarching importance of domestic tranquility, that position seems inconsistent with other Talmudic passages that regard publicizing the Hanukkah miracle as an act of supreme importance. More likely, the unstated, though real, reason for prioritizing Sabbath candles was the need to achieve a rabbinic victory in the sectarian battle over the meaning of Exodus 35:3.

There is no rabbinic text that explicitly mentions a sectarian divide over the legitimacy of maintaining on the Sabbath a flame lit on Friday. However, two Midrashic passages do allude to such a controversy. Mekhilta compares the laws governing the Sabbatical year with those governing the weekly Sabbath. It is forbidden to plow a field during the sixth year of the Sabbatical cycle to ready the field for sowing during the seventh year. It might have been thought that it is similarly forbidden on Friday to light a candle, insulate hot food, or make a bonfire for home heating to enjoy on the Sabbath. The reasoning would be: Violations of rules regarding the Sabbatical year do not result in capital punishment;

violations of the Sabbath *are* a capital offense; hence, logically, if there is a prohibition applicable in the sixth year of the Sabbatical cycle regarding getting ready for the ensuing seventh year thereof, all the more so should there be prohibitions concerning preparations on Fridays for the coming Sabbath day. Nevertheless, the Midrash concludes that, in fact, no such prohibitions pertain to Fridays because Scripture's wording is "on the Sabbath day"; thus, only actions performed *on* the Sabbath day proper are prohibited (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael Vayakhel Shabbata 1).

Pesikta Zutreta, a comparatively late Aggadic work, asserts that there was never a disagreement about the permissibility of maintaining a pre-existing flame on the Sabbath and that it has been widespread Jewish practice – since, indeed, the days of Moses -- to light candles weekly on the eve of the Sabbath (Lekach tov Exodus 35). (Some may conclude that, through this over-the-top ahistorical argument, the Pesikta doth protest too much.)

Why did the editors of the canonical rabbinic works omit mention of the sectarian debate about Exodus 35:3? One explanation is that the sages generally preferred not to give a platform to Samaritan, Boethusian, or Sadducean views (Menahot 65b). Another possible reason is that the House of Shammai's opinion about labors begun before the onset of the Sabbath and that continue after nightfall was similar to those of the Pharisees' sectarian rivals. While the Shammai-ites made an exception for a pre-existing flame, they otherwise prohibited performance on Friday of labors that will continue – even without active human involvement – after nightfall (Mishnah Shabbat 1:5-8). Because the Shammai-ites represented the right-wing of the Pharisaic spectrum and often espoused halakhic views that nearly aligned with those of the Sadducees and the Dead Sea Community, the redactors of the Talmud probably preferred not to call attention to that fact.

The Talmud makes no mention of a blessing to be recited over the Sabbath candles. The earliest references to such a blessing are found in the ninth century responsa of the Babylonian Geonim. The Geonim felt it necessary to muster many proofs for the legitimacy of such a blessing. Why? Because there is a strong halakhic preference not to add to the liturgy any blessings not expressly recorded in the Talmud. Rav Natronai asserted that a blessing over the Sabbath candles is appropriate because the Talmud regards the kindling of those lights to be an obligation (Teshuvot Rav Natronai Gaon Orach Chaim 66). He justified the words of the blessing, "Who has commanded me to kindle the Sabbath lights," by citing the Talmud's discussion about the blessing over Hanukah candles (Shabbat 23a). Even though God did not directly command the lighting of Hanukah candles, the sages justified the recitation of a blessing by citing "Thou shalt not turn aside from the verdict they shall declare (Deuteronomy 17:11)" and "Ask thy father and he will declare unto thee, thine elders and they will tell thee (32:7)." Both verses are understood to set down an affirmative obligation to abide by rabbinic enactments. From this is derived an indirect Biblical obligation to perform rabbinically-originated mitzvot.

Rav Amram Gaon records the blessing over Sabbath candles in his Siddur, though, curiously, his wording there implies that it was a man (not a woman) who made the blessing over candles that were lit in the synagogue (not at home). In the early eleventh century, Rav Sherira Gaon and Rav Hai Gaon were asked whether the recitation of a blessing over the Sabbath candles is merely a custom or, instead, a full-fledged law. The last of the Geonim

of Pumbeditha ruled that reciting the blessing was halakhah and not just customary (Teshuvot Ha-Geonim Mussafiya 82).

In enacting a post-Talmudic blessing over Sabbath candles, the Geonim were battling against the Karaites, who had revived the strict interpretation of Exodus 35:3 and forbade maintaining pre-existing fires on the Sabbath. In adding a blessing, the act of lighting candles was transformed by the Geonim from one of many preparatory acts performed on Friday in advance of the approaching Sabbath, into a solemn religious moment of transition between profane and sacred.

In the medieval period, the blessing was not universally accepted, even among Rabbanites. Tosafot (Shabbat 25a) cited a view that no blessing ought to be recited over Sabbath candles because blessings are not recited over utilitarian, or functional, obligations. Hand washing at the end of a meal is done as a safety precaution lest one be blinded by Sodomite salt. No blessing is recited over that act. Similarly, Sabbath candles mundanely provide illumination. Had there already been a lit flame in the room, there would be no obligation to light a candle specifically in honor of the Sabbath. Rabbenu Tam rebutted these arguments, insisting upon the recitation of a blessing and requiring that a pre-existing flame be blown out and relit before sundown so as specifically to honor the Sabbath.

However, Rabbenu Meshulam, a fellow twelfth century French rabbi, argued against reciting a blessing over Sabbath candles because blessings may only be properly recited when the action undertaken is the conclusion of the fulfillment of the mitzvah. In his view, the mitzvah is only completed much later, when dinner is eaten by the light of the candles. Rabbi Isaac rebutted that argument, positing that the mitzvah is indeed fulfilled immediately because the candles allow the householders to prepare the dinner table unhindered by darkness (Mordecai Shabbat 262).

Several Ashkenazic Rishonim claimed to have seen recensions of Yerushalmi Berakhot chapter 9 in which the wording of the blessings over the Sabbath and Yom candles are recorded (see Ra'aviyah 1:199, Or Zarua 2:11). Our editions of Yerushalmi contain no such material.

The major codifiers all ruled that a blessing must be recited over the Sabbath candles, pushing aside a minority view that lingered for four centuries (Tur Orach Chaim 263; Shulhan Arukh Orach Chaim 263:5). The enthusiasm with which women adopted the ritual, and its associated liturgy, likely played a significant role in determining the halakhic positions of the various decisors. Thus, what began as a tactic in a sectarian confrontation morphed into a cherished rite for generations of pious Jewesses.