

SHABBAT: Laws & Customs

Erev Shabbat: Sabbath Eve arrives every Friday and before you know it Sabbath preparations are in high gear. There's last minute shopping, cooking, table setting, bathing and dressing. For some, Sabbath preparation starts on Wednesday, as menus are set, company is invited, flowers are ordered, the house is cleaned, special dishes and table wear are made ready, and cooking begins.

Candle lighting: Candle lighting, or in Hebrew, hadlakat neirot, is one of three mitzvot, obligations, unique to all Jewish women, however men may also light Shabbat candles. Beginning the Sabbath by lighting candles originates in the mishnah. When the oil lamp was eventually replaced by candles, it became custom to have at least two lights, representing the mitzvot of zachor (Exodus 20:8) and shamor (Deuteronomy 5:12). However, in many homes, the custom is to light a candle for each member of the family. Candles are lit approximately eighteen minutes before sunset, so no one lights candles once the Sabbath has begun. Today, almost every Jewish calendar lists the correct times for weekly candle lighting, including candle lighting times for holidays.

Blessing the candles: After the candles are lit, you may cover the eyes and say the blessing. Others have the custom of drawing the hands to the face three times, as if drawing in their light and warmth, then reciting the blessing.

Barukh atah adonai eloheinu melech haolam asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu lehadlik ner shel shabbat.
Blessed are you Lord our G-d, King of the universe who has sanctified our lives through His commandments, commanding us to kindle the Sabbath lights.

Friday Night: Kabbalat Shabbat, the Friday night service, is recited to oneself at home or with the congregation at the synagogue. The davening consists of six introductory psalms which represent the six days of the week, and the motifs of king and queenship as in the song of L'Kha Dodi, (See Religious Meaning).

Maaariv: Maariv, the evening prayer service, follows Kabbalat Shabbat, culminating in the Amidah, the silent prayer which is repeated by the chazan, or leader. At its conclusion, before returning home, it is customary to wish everyone a Good Shabbat, or in Hebrew, Shabbat Shalom, a peaceful Sabbath.

Blessing the Children: Once home, it is customary for the father to bless each of his children. This custom is believed to originate from the blessings Isaac gave his sons Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27:49), as well as from the blessings Jacob gave to Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menasseh (Genesis 48:20).

The blessing is given by placing your hands on the heads of your son(s) or daughter(s) and reciting the following:

For a boy:

Ye simcha Elohim k'efrayim v'che-menasheh.
May G-d make you as Ephraim and Menasseh

For a Girl:

Ye simcha Elohim k'Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, v'Leah.
May G-d make you as Sarah, Rebbekah, Rachel and Leah.

Continue For Both:

Yevarechecha Adonai V'yyishmerecha, Yaer adonai panav eilecha v'chuneka. Yisa Sdonai panav eilecha v'yaseim lecha shalom.
May G-d bless you and guard you. May the light of G-d shine upon you and may G-d be gracious to you. May the presence of G-d be with you and give you peace.

This weekly blessing is a powerful, shared moment. Blessing your children may be done in private, but mostly, it is done in front of family and guests at the Sabbath table. It is a wonderful opportunity to bond with your children and let them know how much they are loved and cherished. Often, children will remind parents that it is time for their blessing, which is something they look forward to and do not wish to miss.

Kiddush: Kiddush is the Hebrew word for sanctification, which comes from the same Hebrew root as Kadosh, meaning to make separate or holy. The kiddush is the prayer by which the rabbis decided we sanctify Shabbat before sitting down to the first of three Sabbath meals. The Hebrew text can be found in any siddur. Here is a translation:

And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. The heaven and the earth were finished and all their arrrya. And on the seventh day G-d finished the work which G-d had been doing, and G-d ceased on the seventh day from all the work which had been done. And G-d blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it G-d ceased from all the work of creation which had been done. (Genesis 1:31)

Blessing over the wine or grape juice: The kiddush is usually said over wine or grape juice, so it is appropriate to say a bracha, or blessing, before the wine is consumed.

Baruch ata adonai eloheinu melech haolam, borei pri hagafen.
Blessed are you ruler of the universe, who created the fruit of the vine.

The kiddush is said over wine as a reminder that everything in our world has holy and unholy potential. Wine can be misused and cause irresponsible behavior, or it can be elevated to the holy by using it to sanctify G-d's name.

The Kiddush continues:

We praise you adonai our G-d ruler of the universe who hallows us with mitzvot and favors us with the holy Shabbat, lovingly and graciously bestowed upon us, a memorial of the act of creation, first of the holy assemblies, a remembrance of the going forth from Egypt. (Genesis 2:1)

You have chosen us and hallowed us from among all peoples by lovingly and graciously bestowing upon us your holy Sabbath. We praise you, O G-d, who sanctifies Shabbat. (Genesis 2:3)

Netilat Yadayim: At the conclusion of kiddush, hands are ritually washed as a remembrance of spiritual purification rites performed by the Kohanim, priests, at the beginning of the temple service.

Hands are washed by pouring two cups of water on each hand using a special washing cup. A blessing is then recited before making the hamotzei, the blessing over bread.

Baruch ata adonai aloheinu melech haolam asher kidshanu b'mizvotav v'tzivanu al netilat yadayim.
Blessed are you Lord our G-d, King of the universe who has sanctified us through his commandments, and commanded us to wash our hands.

It is customary not to talk from this point on until the blessing is made over the bread.

The Hamotzei: Two covered, braided or twisted loaves of challah, a traditional Jewish bread, are used at each of the Sabbath's shalosh seudot, three festive meals, eaten every Sabbath. Meals require two loaves of bread in remembrance of the double portion of manna G-d caused to rain down every Friday during the Israelites journey through the desert. The Jews were able to collect enough bread to last through Shabbat, when no manna fell.

Baruch ata adonai elohenu melech haolam, hamotei lechem min ha-aretz.
Blessed are you ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the ground.

After the blessing, the bread is uncovered and sprinkled with salt as a reminder of the temple, in which salt was used at each sacrifice and the bread distributed among guests. Most people use a knife to cut the challah, but some prefer to pull apart the challah by hand. The reason for this is that no instruments made of metal, which was used in making weapons, were allowed to touch the mizbe'ach, the sacrificial altar.

The meal: The Friday night meal must be fully cooked before candle lighting. Some families leave their ovens on throughout Shabbat or leave them on a timer. Another popular method of keeping food warm is using a hot plate or blech, a Yiddish word for a metal cover that covers the stove top. Simply leave one or two back burners on low and food will stay warm. (Safety First! Be very careful in setting up your blech. Do not create a fire hazard. And, if small children are present, take steps to prevent their curious hands from being burned.)

Zemirot: In many homes, there is a custom to sing zemirot, songs, specially designated for Shabbat, during the meal. Many date back to the Middle Ages, however it is also popular to sing modern Israeli or Hebrew songs.

Divrei Torah: Speaking Torah or discussing the weekly Torah portion is a widespread custom among families and a wonderful way to engage children and other family members in wide ranging topics for discussion. Many children who attend Jewish Day Schools will come home Fridays with Parsha sheets, a brief summary of the Torah portion which will be read in Synagogue the following morning. Parsha sheets often come with a list of discussion questions parents can review with their children. This is a wonderful endeavor and can be repeated at each Sabbath meal.

Grace after meals: The Grace after meals, or Birkat Hamazon, is sung after any meal, (not just on Shabbat), where bread is eaten. The following represents the main components of the prayer, which can be found in any siddur, weekly prayer book.

Psalm 126: This introductory psalm was written at the time when the Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile.

Zimun/ Invitation: This responsive section precedes the actual birkat hamazon, and asks someone to lead the benching, usually a cohen, after which the group answers in unison.

Blessings for Food: This paragraph cites the biblical source for Birkat Hamazon (Deuteronomy 8:10) and thanks G-d for the land of Israel.

Blessing For Jerusalem: Short prayer for the well-being of Jerusalem.

Asking For Peace: A short prayer asking that the peace of Shabbat fill the whole world.

Maker of Peace: Final hope that G-d will bring peace to the world.

Oneg Shabbat: An oneg Shabbat is a small party, usually consisting of deserts and munchies, which takes place at one's home or in the synagogue. It is sometimes referred to by Hasidim as a Tish, and is a chance for friends to get together for singing and Divrei Torah. It is a social gathering and allows the community to celebrate Shabbat together.

Shabbat Morning: After breakfast, which traditionally consists of cakes or pastries, families make preparations for the synagogue, where communities gather for a morning of prayer usually followed by a congregational kiddush. Hot coffee or tea is permitted, but the water must be kept hot in an electric pot which should be filled and plugged in before Shabbat. Coffee may not be freshly brewed.

Synagogue Service: Prayers begin with the morning service, Shacharit, which leads into taking out the appropriate Torah scrolls for laning, chanting the weekly Torah portion. The Torah portion is divided into seven subsections. Seven men are called upon for aliyot, special blessings recited before and after each subsection is chanted. The first aliya is reserved for a Kohan, a descendent of the priestly Tribe. The second aliya is reserved for a member of the Levite Tribe. The remaining five aliyot are parceled out to Jews not descended from the priestly sects. These Jews are known as Israelites.

Once the Torah portion is read, the open scroll is lifted off the reading table and held high so that all the congregation can see the words written on the parchment. The scroll is then bound and covered.

Haftorah: Following the Torah reading, a designated selection from one of the Prophets is read. The Haftorah selection always relates somehow to the Torah portion just read or an upcoming Jewish Holiday. The Haftorah is preceded and followed by its own set of brachot, blessings.

The custom of reading the Haftorah is in remembrance of the Roman occupation of Israel when Jews were forbidden from reading the Torah. Instead, the Jews began to read selections from the Prophets which in some way related to the weekly Torah portion. Reading the Haftorah has been a part of the Shabbat service ever since.

Drasha: Following the Haftorah reading, the Torahs are put away. When the congregation is seated, the rabbi traditionally delivers his weekly drasha, or talk. Topics may range from current events involving the Jewish community, the state of Israel or may focus on issues affecting the local community.

Mussaf: The prayer service continues with the Mussaf which commemorates the additional Sabbath service which was performed on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Mussaf consists of the Sh'mone Esrei prayer, literally translated as 18 blessings. Sh'mone Esrei, is read silently and then repeated by the chazan. The end of the service is usually sung and is a good opportunity for children to participate.

Junior Congregation: Many synagogues offer children of school age an opportunity to lead their own Shabbat services. Often concurrent to the adult service, junior services are slightly abridged as well as an excellent opportunity for children to take an active role in the synagogue. For children under school age, many synagogues have play groups or baby sitting services.

Kiddush: After davening, the congregation usually joins in a different room to hear kiddush and eat a light array of foods before returning home for the second Sabbath meal. Kiddush is purely social and allows the congregants to get to know each other, speak to the rabbi and socialize.

Inviting Home Guests: It is a popular custom to invite guests for Sabbath meals. Not only does it add to the enjoyment of the day, it is a way to reach out to Jews less familiar with how a traditional Jewish family celebrates and honors the Sabbath. Invitations may be spontaneous or made in advance.

Afternoon Classes: In many communities where there is an active synagogue, Talmud classes or lectures on other topics are available in the afternoon before minchah, the afternoon prayer service. Sometimes they are led by the rabbi or sometimes they are led by learned members of the congregation. Everyone is welcome free of charge.

Youth Groups: Another popular option for children on Shabbat afternoon is participating in youth groups such as Bnei Akiva, the religious Zionist movement, or in groups like Pirchei or Bnos Torah, Orthodox groups for boys and girls that also meet weekly. A quick check in the community's calendar or with the local synagogues will let you know when and where groups meet.

Sleeping: Sleeping, is one of the most popular after lunch activity among Sabbath observers. If you can manage it, sleeping, is the most looked forward to rest of the entire week. Take advantage of it if you can.

To the Park: The local neighborhood park or playground is where you find most observant families on long, summer, Shabbat afternoons. If sleep is not possible, and going to classes are not an option, watching your children play at the park is next best. One of the best signs of a large Sabbath observant community is the number of children and parents in the park on Shabbat afternoon.

Seudat Shlishit: The third and final Shabbat meal takes place in the afternoon in between minchah and maariv prayers. Hands are washed and Hamotzei is made over two challot. A light dairy meal is usually served. At the end of the meal, Birkat Hamazon is recited.

Minchah & Maariv: Toward the end of Shabbat, the afternoon and evening prayers of minchah and maariv are recited at the synagogue. During minchah, a small section of the next week's Torah portion is recited.

Havdalah: The concluding prayer, havdalah, which literally means separation, marks the exact moment when Shabbat ends and the week begins. At this time, a very beautiful service takes place.

You will need:

•A kiddush cup, •a braided, twisted candle with multiple wicks, •a special spice, or besamim box (or container); •a match, or lighter; and, •wine or juice.

The exact text of havdalah can be found in any siddur. The following are the three main blessings of the havdalah ceremony:

The first blessing: baruch ata adonai, elohenu melech haolam, borei meenay besamim.
Blessed are you, Adonai our G-d, Ruler of the world, who creates all kinds of spices.

The second blessing: Baruch ata adonai, elohenu melech haolam, borei meenay ha'eysh.
Blessed are you, Adonai our G-d, Ruler of the world, who creates the light of fire.

The third blessing: Baruch ata adonai, elohenu melech haolam, hamavdil ben kodesh le'chol, ben or le'choshech.
Blessed are you, Adonai our G-d, Ruler of the world, who separates the holy from the ordinary, the light from the darkness.

At the start of the ceremony, lights are turned off, and a child, if old enough, is usually given the honor of holding the lit candle.

After an introductory paragraph, the blessing over wine is said, but the wine is not drunk. Then the blessing over spices is said, and the spice box is passed around for everyone to smell. The reason spices are used, (and they may be any kind, like cinnamon or allspice) rabbinical legends says, is that when the neshama yetera, the additional Shabbat soul, leaves us at the close of the Sabbath, the remaining soul suffers a letdown. The spices, the rabbis said, would help perk up the remaining soul to get through the week until the next Sabbath.

Then the blessing over the fire is said. As the blessing is recited, it is customary to spread your hands around the flame, so you can see the light reflected in your fingernails and palms. Finally, the one reciting havdalah drinks the entire cup or passes it around for everyone to take a sip. A few drops of wine are spilled on a plate and the candle is extinguished.

After havdalah everyone wishes each other a good week, or in Hebrew, a shavua tov, and the official cleanup begins.

Melava Malka: In some communities, a special party called a melava malka is held with singing and dancing. Sometimes a small band is hired. Hebrew for escorting the queen, a melava malka prolongs the feeling of Shabbat and is another opportunity for the community to get together and socialize.

Procedure for Lighting Shabbat and Yom Tov Candles

Traditionally, the candle-lighting is the role of the woman of the house. However a man living alone must light candles for himself. The ceremony of lighting the candles should, ideally, be attended by all members of the household. Creating an atmosphere of family participation in the act of ushering in the Shabbat serves to foster the celebratory spirit of Shabbat observance by imbuing it with the enjoyment that comes of family rituals performed together. All present normally stand for the ceremony.

The usual practice is to light at least two candles, but if this is not possible, one is sufficient. They are said to be in remembrance of the two expressions used by the Torah in recording the fourth commandment: "Remember the Shabbat" (Exodus 20.9) and "Keep the Shabbat" (Deuteronomy 5.12). They are also said to symbolise man and woman. Some families have the custom to add an additional candle for each child born into the family. The candles are lit in the room where the festive meal takes place.

After lighting the candles, the woman covers her eyes with her hands and recites the blessing with her eyes covered. Some women have a custom to first gesticulate three times with their outstretched arms, waving them toward themselves in an embracing and beckoning gesture of welcome and greeting to the incoming Shabbat.

Many women further enhance the ceremony by chanting the blessing in a traditional family melody which is passed down from mother to daughter. Spoken or sung, the blessing should be recited aloud and the others present respond with "amen."

It is a widespread custom for the woman to remain in the same posture for a few moments after the blessing while offering up a silent prayer of her own. For the rest of the family, those few moments are ones of quiet meditation. She then greets all the members of the family individually, in turn, with a Shabbat greeting -- again, either spoken or in song.

Two things about this procedure are worth examining a little more closely. Firstly, if the mitzvah of candle-lighting is of rabbinic origin, how can we say, in the blessing, that God has commanded us to do so? The answer is that mitzvot of rabbinic origin are said to be divinely mandated by the biblical verse (Deuteronomy, 17.11) "You shall act in accordance with the law that they will teach you and according to the judgment which they will tell you ..."

Secondly, why the practice of covering ones eyes for the blessing? This is because a blessing recited over the performance of a mitzvah is usually required to precede the mitzvah, not follow it. The blessing is meant to herald the act, proclaiming that it is being performed in fulfillment of a religious obligation. However, the act of reciting this blessing is regarded as ushering in the Shabbat; halachically, one accepts the Shabbat by this blessing. This being the case, one would then be forbidden to light a flame. Therefore the lighting of the candles must precede the blessing. But, in an attempt to retain a semblance of the usual order of events in performing a mitzvah, i.e., the blessing preceding the act, we close our eyes immediately after lighting the candles so as not to look at the light, and only open our eyes and make use of the light after reciting the blessing.

On Yom Tov, it is permitted to light a candle provided it is done so in the manner prescribed by halachah for lighting a flame on Yom Tov. Therefore, strictly speaking, the above does not apply in the case of Yom Tov. Nevertheless, for the sake of consistency, the same procedure is also followed on Yom Tov.