

THE CUSTOM TO LIGHT IN SHUL

However, at least nowadays, there is one important **exception** to this rule: There is a custom to light in shul, with *brachos*, before davening Ma'ariv. Although this practice does not appear anywhere in the Gemara, it is discussed by several *rishonim* and codified in the Shulchan Aruch:

Shulchan Aruch: Orach Chaim 671:7

Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488–1575)

We light Chanukah candles with a *brachah* in shul, in order to publicize the Chanukah miracle (*pirsumei nisa*). ומדליקין ומברכין (בבית הכנסת) משום פרסומי ניסא.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What do you think is the origin of this custom to light in shul?

6 REASONS FOR LIGHTING IN SHUL

There are a number of reasons to explain why we light Chanukah candles in shul. Consider the following sources. How does each source understand the basis for the *minhag* to light in shul?

Beis Yosef: Orach Chaim 671 — [REASON 1]

Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488–1575)

[The Kol Bo writes:] It appears that [Chazal] instituted a requirement to light in shul [1] **out of concern for guests and travelers who lack a house to light in**. This is similar to what we find by Kiddush, where Chazal instituted that Kiddush should be recited in shul on Friday night to aid those who plan to eat their Shabbos meal in shul...

נראה שתיקנו כן מפני האורחים שאין להם בית להדליק בו וכמו שתיקנו קידוש בבית הכנסת משום אורחים דאכלו ושתו בבי כנישתא (עי' לעיל סי' רסט).

Sefer Kol Bo — [REASONS 2, 3, 4]

(Approx. 1300s)

A universal custom has developed to light Chanukah candles in shul in order [2] **to enable those who are not proficient, knowledgeable, or scrupulous enough to light at home** to still fulfill their mitzvah. It is also [3] **a glorification of the mitzvah and a way of publicizing the miracle**, as well as [4] **a commemoration of what was done in the Beis HaMikdash**...

ונהגו כל המקומות להדליק נר חנוכה בבית הכנסת להוציא מי שאינו בקי ושאינו זריז בזאת גם כי הוא הדור המצוה ופרסום הנס וזכר למקדש...

Responsa of the Rivash #111 — [REASON 5]

Rabbi Yitzchak ben Sheshet Perfet (1326–1408)

Nowadays, [5] since the other nations of the world have control over us and persecute us, we can no longer fulfill the mitzvah of Chanukah candles in its ideal form [by lighting outside the home, in a publicly visible area]. Instead, we each light **inside of our homes**, and there is therefore **no public acknowledgment** of the miracle for anyone except for the people in one's own home. As a result of this historical development, Chazal instituted to light Chanukah candles in shul – a public place – in order to fulfill our obligation of **publicizing the Chanukah miracle**.

וכיון שעתה, שיד האומות תקפה עלינו, ואין אנו יכולין לקיים המצוה כתקנה, ומדליק כל אחד בפתח ביתו מבפנים, ואין כאן פרסומי ניסא כי אם לבני ביתו לבד, לזה הנהיגו להדליק בבית הכנסת לקיים פרסומי ניסא.

Bei'ur HaGra: Orach Chaim 671 — [REASON 6]

The Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (1720–1797)

Proof may be drawn from the Hallel [that is recited] on the first nights of Pesach, which was instituted [to be recited] over a cup [of wine] **but is [also] recited in the synagogue** for the purpose of **publicizing the miracle** [of the Exodus], as we can see in the Talmud Yerushalmi...

מדליקין. ראיה מהלל בלילי פסחים שנתקן על הכוס ואומרין בבית הכנסת משום פרסומי ניסא כמ"ש בירושלמי בענין ברכה הסמוכה לחברתה והרי אשר גאלנו שניא שאם שמעה בב"ה יצא.

As we saw in the above four sources, numerous reasons have been suggested to explain the basis for the custom to light in shul. To recap (as well as elaborate on some of the reasons):

1. The **Beis Yosef** cites those who explain that the candles are lit for the benefit of **visitors** who cannot light their own candles because they are away from home and have no lodging place. Just as the custom developed to recite Kiddush on Shabbos in shul on behalf of visitors who would eat and sleep in shul, a similar custom developed to light Chanukah candles in the synagogue for the visitors' benefit.
2. The actual text of the **Kol Bo** (which differs significantly from the citation in the Beis Yosef) mentions that the lighting is performed on behalf of **those who lack the knowledge or motivation** to light Chanukah candles themselves.
3. The **Kol Bo** mentions a second reason for lighting in shul: We light as a way of "**glorifying the mitzvah and publicizing the miracle of Chanukah.**" By lighting in the presence of an entire crowd and publicly reciting the *brachos* thanking G-d for the Chanukah miracle, we can accomplish *pirsumei nisa* in a beautiful way.
4. The **Kol Bo** also offers a third reason: *zeicher l'Mikdash*. We light in shul to commemorate the lighting that was done in the Beis HaMikdash. Although the Kol Bo does not elaborate, it seems that the Kol Bo views the synagogue as a *Mikdash me'at* – a quasi-Temple – and we therefore light Chanukah candles in the synagogue to **commemorate the lighting in the Beis HaMikdash**. In the same vein, the Shulchan Aruch rules that the Chanukah lights in the synagogue should be placed along the southern wall, just as the menorah in the Beis HaMikdash was situated in the south.
5. The **Rivash** offers yet another reason for the custom to light in shul. He writes that the synagogue lighting was instituted when people were **no longer able to light the Chanukah candles outdoors**, due to their fear of persecution. Lighting indoors undermines our ability to successfully publicize the Chanukah miracle (*pirsumei nisa*), and it thus became customary to light the candles in shul, **to compensate for the lost *pirsumei nisa***.
6. An entirely different approach may be taken by the **Vilna Gaon** in a characteristically terse remark in his commentary to the Shulchan Aruch.
Rav Moshe Soloveitchik (cited in Harerei Kedem, 166) explains the Vilna Gaon's comments to mean that alongside the **individual** obligation to publicize the Chanukah miracle by lighting candles, there is an **additional communal obligation** to publicize the miracle as well. This can be deduced from the fact that the Vilna Gaon draws a comparison between lighting Chanukah candles and reciting Hallel on Pesach, which is required both as a personal obligation (at the Pesach *seder*) as well as a **communal** obligation (in the synagogue).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

These 6 different approaches to the custom of lighting Chanukah candles in shul could yield several interesting different practical ramifications. Read the following questions, and consider: What do you think each of the above 6 opinions would have to say about lighting with a *brachah* in each case?

- Nowadays, where many communities have **resumed the practice of lighting outside by their doorposts**, is there still an obligation to light in shul?
- **When** should the Chanukah candles be lit in shul? Before Shacharis, or only at night (like regular Chanukah lighting done by individuals at home)?
- **How many people** need to be present at the lighting in shul? Does the shul need to have a minyan (10 men) present in order to light the candles?
- Is it possible to light Chanukah candles in **public settings other than in shul**?

We will now deal with each question in turn.

APPLICATION #1:
IS THERE STILL
AN OBLIGATION
TO LIGHT IN
SHUL?

QUESTION A: Nowadays, where many communities have resumed the practice of lighting outside by their doorposts, is there still an obligation to light in shul?

- According to the **Rivash [5]**, the synagogue lighting was established only to revive the element of publicizing the miracle that was lost when people began lighting indoors. Nowadays, when many communities – especially in Israel – light Chanukah candles outdoors, it stands to reason that **it is no longer necessary to light the menorah in shul** in such communities.
- However, according to the other reasons cited by the **Beis Yosef [1]**, the **Kol Bo [2,3,4]**, and the **Vilna Gaon [6]**, the custom of synagogue lighting is **not at all affected** by the fact that many Jews now light the candles outside their homes.
- That said, it is also possible that even the Rivash would agree that the custom of lighting in shul should still be observed today – since once a custom has been established and observed for many centuries, it sometimes stands on its own as an **everlasting obligation (minhag Yisroel)**, even when the original reason for the practice no longer applies.

APPLICATION #2:
WHEN TO LIGHT

QUESTION B: When should the Chanukah candles be lit in shul? Before Shacharis, or only at night (like regular Chanukah lighting done by individuals at home)?

There is a widespread custom nowadays to light Chanukah candles in shul not only at night, but **even by day**, before Shacharis. What is the basis for this custom? Some have suggested that it is based on the view of the **Kol Bo [4]** that the synagogue lighting was instituted to commemorate the way the menorah was lit in the Beis HaMikdash. In contrast to the view of many other Rishonim, the Rambam famously ruled that **the menorah in the Beis HaMikdash was lit both in the late afternoon and again in the morning**. Thus, if the synagogue candle lighting is meant to commemorate the lighting in the Mikdash, perhaps it should be lit in the morning as well.

APPLICATION #3:
IS A MINYAN
NEEDED?

QUESTION C: How many people must be present at the lighting in shul? Can the shul lighting take place if there are less than 10 men present?

- The Magen Avraham writes that if it is close to sundown on Friday afternoon, and a minyan has not yet arrived, the Chanukah candles **should** be lit at that point, “because there is *pirumei nisa* when people come afterward to the synagogue.” This can be understood in light of the position of the **Rivash [5]**, for example, who maintains that the purpose of the synagogue lighting is to provide *pirumei nisa*. Since this *pirumei nisa* can be passively achieved later when a minyan will assemble and see the candles still burning, **the candles may be lit even before the minyan arrives**.
- Rav Chaim of Brisk, however, reportedly disputed this ruling. Based on the understanding of the **Vilna Gaon [6]** that the synagogue lighting fulfills a formal congregational requirement, **the congregation must be present – in the form of a minyan – for this obligation to apply**.
- However, the Bei’ur Halachah cites Rav Yaakov Emden as saying that even according to the **Rivash [5]**, the element of *pirumei nisa* is required **at the time of the lighting**, and therefore the candles may **not** be lit before a minyan has assembled.

APPLICATION #4:
LIGHTING IN
OTHER PUBLIC
SETTINGS

QUESTION D: Is it possible to light Chanukah candles in public settings other than in shul, such as public functions or at minyanim that are not held in a synagogue?

- Clearly, if the lighting was instituted for the reason cited by the **Beis Yosef [1]** – for the benefit of guests staying in the synagogue – there would be **no need** to light in any other public setting, even if a group would assemble for Ma’ariv somewhere other than in a synagogue.
- The same would be true according to the view of the **Kol Bo [4]** that the synagogue lighting serves to commemorate the lighting of the menorah in the Beis HaMikdash, as **other settings are not viewed as a Mikdash me’at** (quasi-Temple).

- According to the **Rivash [5]**, however, since the synagogue lighting was instituted to provide *pirsumei nisa*, it is conceivable that candles **can and should** be lit for this purpose in **any public setting**. That said, one could argue that even according to the Rivash, since the custom was established specifically for the synagogue, we **cannot** extend this custom to other public settings.
- According to the approach of the **Vilna Gaon [6]** (as explained by Rav Moshe Soloveitchik), we might distinguish between an assembly for prayer and other public gatherings. As discussed, the Vilna Gaon views the synagogue lighting as an obligation that applies to the **congregation** alongside the personal obligation that applies to each household. Every group of ten men that assembles **for prayer** would certainly appear to qualify as a halachic *tzibur* (group), thus requiring Chanukah candle lighting in their presence. Based on the Vilna Gaon's analogy, **just as a minyan that takes place outside the synagogue on Pesach would presumably recite Hallel, such a minyan would light Chanukah candles as well.**

At other public gatherings (not for prayer), however, the attendees do **not** form a halachic *tzibur*, and thus candle lighting is **not** required. Indeed, it is reported in Harerei Kedem that Rav Moshe Soloveitchik's son, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, opposed the practice of lighting Chanukah candles at public functions. **This is in line with the ruling of the vast majority of poskim, who rule that brachos should not be recited if candles are lit at public functions during Chanukah, such as at a simcha or a Chanukah celebration.** These *poskim* include Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Eliezer Waldenberg, Rav Yitzchak Weiss, the Sanz-Klausenberger Rebbe, Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and Rav Shmuel Wosner.

Accordingly, **it seems difficult to allow the recitation of brachos over a Chanukah candle lighting performed outside the context of the standard lighting at home or in synagogue.** At most, as we have seen, there is room to allow reciting the *brachos* at a **minyan** held outside the synagogue, in accordance with the position of the Vilna Gaon.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How does all this apply to lighting in the White House? May a Jew light Chanukah candles in the White House, and recite *brachos* over the lighting?

SHALOM MALCHUS

In the case of the White House Chanukah celebration, however, we might consider making an exception in light of the vital concern for ***shalom malchus*, maintaining peaceful relations with the government.** Today, more than ever, the media is always looking for scandals, and some journalists pounce on every opportunity to expose perceived or real injustices perpetrated by Orthodox Jews. We can easily imagine how news could spread of Orthodox Jews "offending" the President by refusing to recite the traditional blessings over the Chanukah candles, rumors which could inflict considerable damage upon the Orthodox community's standing and reputation and would certainly create a grave *chillul Hashem*.

There are many contexts in halachah where the concern for *shalom malchus* allows for the suspension of rabbinic prohibitions, and the Magen Avraham maintains that **one may even transgress a Torah prohibition in the interest of promoting *shalom malchus*.**

Magen Avraham 656:8

Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (1635–1682)

The Gemara in Gittin... and in the story of Bar Kamtza [where the Sanhedrin was originally inclined to sacrifice an animal that had a blemish, even though it was forbidden, just to preserve their relationship with the Roman government] indicates that **one can violate even a Biblical negative commandment to prevent animosity with the government...**

משמע קצת בגיטין ד' נ' ובמעש'
דבר קמצא שמותר לעבור על ל"ת
מפני אימת המלכות ע"ש...

There is some discussion among the *poskim* as to whether the recitation of a *bracha livatalah* (a blessing recited for no necessary purpose) is forbidden by force of Torah law or rabbinic enactment, but regardless, one could argue that the concern for stable relations between Orthodox Jewry and the government overrides this halachic concern and warrants the recitation of the *brachos* anyway.

It should be noted that Rav Ovadia Yosef allows reciting the *brachos* over lighting Chanukah candles at public functions if there is a minyan present that has formed in preparation for Ma'ariv. As discussed earlier, it stands to reason that even outside the framework of a synagogue, **a group of ten men assembled for Ma'ariv are regarded as a halachic *tzibur*, which might require an act of communal candle lighting.** Thus, Orthodox guests invited to light candles at the White House Chanukah celebration should perhaps try to arrange **to daven Ma'ariv immediately following the lighting**, in which case the *brachos* may certainly be recited.

CONCLUSION

- The requirement mentioned in the Gemara of lighting Chanukah candles seems limited to **individuals** lighting in their **homes**.
- A **later minhag** developed to start lighting Chanukah candles in **shul**, and there are numerous reasons offered to explain why this custom began.
- According to most of those reasons, it follows that we **cannot** light Chanukah candles in any public settings, except for in a shul with a minyan present.
- Based on the ideas of *pirsumei nisa* and Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik's innovative understanding of a **communal obligation** to light Chanukah candles, some *poskim* allow lighting Chanukah candles as long as there is a minyan present about to daven Ma'ariv.
- In light of these views, as well as factoring in the concern for *shalom malchus*, one can permissibly light Chanukah candles at the White House with a *brachah* by arranging for a minyan to daven Ma'ariv immediately following the lighting.

DISCLAIMER:

The views and opinions presented in this sourcesheet should not be taken as *halachah l'maaseh*. Before applying these halachos to real-life situations, one must consult with a competent halachic authority.