



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Night Five: For Whom Do We Light? **Karolyn Benger, Class of 2026**

Hanukkah is known as the Festival of Lights. We wish each other *Chag Urim Sameach*, a happy festival of lights, and we sing in [Al Hanisim](#): “Your children came to the Holy of Holies in Your House, and they cleansed Your Palace and purified Your Temple and they kindled lights in the courtyard of Your Sanctuary.” Whether in remembrance of the Macabee’s victory over the Greeks and Hellenized Jews or the miracle of the oil, we observe this holiday by lighting the menorah. The most quintessential thing about Hanukkah is light.

Light has a deep significance in Jewish liturgy and history. [Proverbs 6:23](#) states, “The commandment is a lamp, the Torah is light.” In rabbinic literature, the ability to illuminate one’s home is deeply important; fire or candles are meaningful as a source of heat and light. [Avot D’rebbe Natan 6:2](#) tells how Rabbi Akiva would use his wood’s light to study and its heat for warmth. Light is seen as uplifting and joyous and is continually used as a metaphor for Torah, a person’s soul, and even the Jewish people themselves. As stated in [Shabbat 22b](#), “the lighting of the menorah is testimony to mankind that the Divine Presence rests among Israel.” Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf notes, “light is the overarching, central, definitive metaphor for Jewish understanding of all of reality.”

According to the rabbinic tradition, we are obligated to light candles on Hanukkah because of our obligation to publicize the miracle of the holiday. It is taught in the [Talmud on Shabbat 21B](#) that candles are lit at the entrance of the house or in a courtyard facing public property. [The Shulchan Aruch](#) says, “lighting candles is a mitzvah performed in order to proclaim the wonders of Hashem and express our deep gratitude for the miracles...”

Based on this we understand that the act of lighting the menorah is not sufficient to fulfill the mitzvah. Instead, the lights themselves need to be seen. But who is meant to see them?



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Tracing different halakhic texts over time we see varying approaches to answering this question. The Gemara mentions Hanukkah lights being in a public space ([Bava Kamma 6:6](#)) but does not address whether this space is exclusive to Jews or if non-Jews are meant to see the light as well. [The Shulchan Aruch](#) provides great detail about the height requirements for lighting candles in front of one's house. Yet, in 1563 when the Shulchan Aruch was compiled, most Jews lived exclusively among themselves. Perhaps this means that we light at our front doors only so our fellow Jews can see?

Although most of the earliest texts about Hanukkah don't explicitly answer this question, these sources were predominantly written in places where Jewish communities lived in exile. Were these public displays of our miracle or our victory a warning to others? Is it a sign to our oppressors that another miracle will come? Or are they a signal of hope to other Jews living under oppression that we have overcome hardships before, and we will do so again?

It is possible that, just as the practice of lighting changed over time, the reasons and understandings for who is intended to view the light changed as well.¹

The idea of signaling our Jewish faith to the outside world has deep roots in our history, all the way back to the time of the Exodus. While slaves in Egypt, B'nai Yisrael were instructed to kill a lamb and smear its blood on our doorposts as a sign for the Angel of Death to pass over their homes. This was an extreme, public recognition of Jews as separate. Perhaps it was this very act which brought strength to other Jews who may have been unsure about whether to act were it not for evidence of their stauncher neighbors doing so.

Similarly, Hashem commands the Jewish people in [Deuteronomy](#) to mark their houses with a sign. The mezuzah in our doorway simultaneously serves as a reminder to each household member to observe mitzvot while calling out to other Jews, letting them know this is a Jewish home and they are not alone. Interestingly, many Ashkanzi Jews in the Middle Ages did not place a mezuzah on the outside doorposts of their home for fear of Christian antisemitism; rather, it was affixed internally.² Therefore we see a

¹ See J. Jean Ajdler, "The Order of Lighting Hanukkah Candles: the Evolution of a Custom and the Influence of the Publication of the Shulchan Aruch," *Hakirah the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, 7 (2009)

²Ibid.



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publicly commanded display shifted inward.

Just as was the case for the mezuzah, over time Ashkenazi Rabbis decreed it was not safe to light the menorah outside for fear of Christian reprisals. Instead, they instructed people to light inside their homes either inside a front or back door. The Shulchan Aruch instructs one to light candles in the doorway with the mezuzah on their right and the menorah to their left. Based on the specificity of locating the menorah in relation to the person lighting the candles, it would seem the light is meant for the individual and not for those beyond the household. [As the Rema states](#), “now, when everyone kindles inside, there is no recognition for the public domain.”

What began as a public display, a reminder to the Jewish people that the time of our oppression will come to an end, shifted to an internal lighting reminding us of the victory and miracle during periods of darkness and threats. Living in exile, without any guarantees of safety, Jews lived precariously. Fears of pogroms, hostilities, banishment, and tax levies were all too real and forced Jews to be very conscious of how they behaved in the public square. Publically lighting a menorah, with its public display of Jewish pride and power, was simply too dangerous. However, rather than surrendering our ability to fulfill this mitzvah, Jews under oppression found a way to reframe it.

While lighting the menorah inside reduced our ability to publicly proclaim the miracle, it also ensured our people’s ability to observe this mitzvah without fear of reprisal and to remember the generations of Jews before them who fought for self-determination under difficult circumstances. And so too, our children, who see the light, maintain this mitzvah throughout the years. Whether in remembrance of the miracle or the victory, the light’s purpose transformed; now, it is meant to be seen by every Jewish child, their children, and their children’s children. The lights of the menorah call out to other Jews across time to remember our collective history.

Today, the Jewish people are facing a different set of challenges. Israel is at war with those who wish to destroy it, while Jews in the diaspora are witnessing an escalation of antisemitism. The halakhic tradition tells us we are no longer obligated to light publicly, especially in the moments when our existence feels precarious. We can remain inside, allowing the lights of the menorah to brighten our homes.



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Thankfully, though, most of us are no longer living with the threat of pogroms and banishment; we are no longer at the mercy of the rulers who hold our people's safety hostage. We have guaranteed rights, political power, and our own state. More than any other year, this year we should seek out the public square for lighting the menorah. We should declare with pride, we are Jewish, and we remember our victory and the miracle. We should call out to other Jews and strengthen them to join us.

The lights of the menorah are meant for our descendants to keep the mitzvot and remember. But they are also meant for all of the Jewish people to know we are a strong, vibrant people. Today we light to remember the victory and proclaim the miracle. May there be another one soon.

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