



Women and Chanukah Lighting



Should Women Light? If So, Why Don't They?

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Growing up, everyone in my family lit the Chanukah menorah. Everyone, that is, except my mother. After my father lit, we would go in the order of the children, from oldest to youngest, including my sisters. I imagine that if you grew up in an Ashkenazic home, your family followed a similar practice. There's only one problem: it doesn't really make much sense. If my mother didn't light, then why did my sisters – especially after they became Bat Mitzvah? And if adult women should light, shouldn't mothers light as well?

Discussing the obligation of women to light candles on Chanukah, the Gemara (Shabbat 23a) leaves little room for doubt:

אשה ודאי מדליקה, דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: נשים חייבות בנר חנוכה שאף הן היו באותו הנס
A woman certainly does light, for Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, "Women are obligated to light on Chanukah, for they too were in that miracle.

What was the nature of women's participation in the Chanukah miracle? The Ba'alei Tosfot (Megillah 4a) offer two explanations.

פירש רשב"ם שעיקר הנס היה על ידן בפורים על ידי אסתר בחנוכה על ידי יהודית... וקשה, דלשון "שאף הן" משמע שהן טפלות, ולפירושו היה לו לומר "שהן"? לכך נראה לי שאף הן היו בספק דלהשמיד ולהרוג.

Rashbam writes that the essential miracle took place by their hands – on Purim through Esther, on Chanukah through Yehudit...yet this is difficult, for the language of "they too" implies that they were secondary, and according to [Rashbam's] explanation it should have said, "for they [were in the miracle]"? Therefore it seems that "they too" were subject to the possibility of annihilation and death.

While Tosfot view women's obligation to light emanating from a shared sense of danger and

doom, according to Rashbam, halachah obligates women to light the candles on Chanukah because they were the primary motivators for Jewish salvation. Without the actions of Yehudit, who

spurred her brothers to fight for the honor of all Jewish women, the victory of Chanukah would never have taken place. Rashbam's explanation only highlights the ironic situation that nowadays, many if not most women do not personally participate in a rabbinic commandment that they themselves initiated.

In his halachic codification of women's obligation to light on Chanukah, Rav Yosef Karo in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 675:3)

quotes the Gemara directly teaching us that,

אשה מדליקה נר חנוכה, שאף היא חייבת בה
A woman lights the Chanukah candles, for she too is obligated in it.

Sounds straightforward, right? Not really. Because when we look earlier where Shulchan Aruch (671:2) describes the basic obligation to light one additional candle per household each night (following Sephardic tradition), Rema adds,

ו"א דכל אחד מבני הבית ידליק, וכן המנהג פשוט
And some say that every member of the household should light, and that is the simple [accepted] custom.

So everyone lights, including the women and children, right? Wrong. On the spot Mishnah Berurah (671:9) invokes the halachic concept of *אשתו כגופו* and writes that "every member" should light, "except for his wife, for she is like his body". If that's true, what then did the Shulchan Aruch mean when he wrote that "A woman lights the Chanukah candles?" Mishnah Berurah (675:9) explains that it doesn't mean that she *should* light for the family, but that she *can*. Her level of obligation is similar to that of a man, so she may therefore light the candles for the household. He writes,



ועיין בתשובת עולת שמואל סימן ק"ה דלדידן שמדליקין כ"א בפ"ע. מ"מ אשה אינה צריכה להדליק דהויין רק טפילות לאנשים. ואם רוצים להדליק מברכות דהוי כשאר מ"ע שהזמן גרמא דיכולות לברך וכשארין האיש בבית תדליק האשה דהוי בת חיובא ובברכה.

And see the Teshuvat Olat Shemuel (105), that according to [our tradition], that everyone lights individually, a woman is not required to light for they are only secondary to the men. And, if they wish to light they recite their own blessing, for this is like any other time-bound positive commandment where they are able to recite the blessing. And when there is no man in the house, the woman should light for she is obligated, [and she should light] with a blessing.

All of this leaves us wondering: if a woman's obligation to light is identical to that of a man, why do we invoke the principle of *אשתו כגופו*? The question is better than some of the answers found in halachic literature. Chatam Sofer (on Shabbat 21b) writes that because Jews used to light outside, it was seen as a lack of modesty for women to light as well. In a printed shiur on this topic¹, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein wonders how it could be immodest for women to light outside writing, "It is difficult to assume that women of old never went outside." Indeed. In his summary² of the issue, Rav Eliezer Melamed writes,

ונשים נשואות נהגו שלא להדליק נרות, מפני שהדלקת בעליהן נחשבת כהדלקה שלהן, ש"אשתו כגופו". ובהרבה בתים גם בנות שהגיעו לחינוך ונערות נהגו שלא להדליק נרות. ומכל מקום אם ירצו להדליק, רשאיות להדליק בברכה. ונראה שטוב לעודד את הבנות שהגיעו לחינוך להדליק נרות לפחות עד הגיען לבת מצווה, כי ההדלקה מקשרת אותן לתורה ולמצוות. ואם ירצו להדליק גם אח"כ, תבוא עליהן ברכה. ואפילו אשה שבעלה מדליק נרות, אם תרצה למרות המנהג להדליק בעצמה - רשאית להדליק בברכה

Married women had the custom not to light candles, for their husbands' lighting was considered like their own lighting, for "his wife is like his body." In many homes, girls who

reached the age of education and young women had the custom not to light the [Chanukah] candles. Nonetheless, if they wish to light, they may do so with a blessing. And it seems appropriate to encourage young girls who have reached the age of education to light candles, at least until the age of Bat Mitzvah, for their lighting connects them to the Torah and the Mitzvot. And should they wish to light after this point as well, may a blessing come upon them. And even a woman whose husband lights candles, if she wishes despite the prevalent custom to light herself, she may do so and recite a blessing.

Bottom line:

- Single women and widows who do not live in a household with an adult must certainly light Chanukah candles on their own.
- If one's husband is not home to light, a woman must light for the household.
- Regarding married women lighting for themselves, I'll leave you with Rav Lichtenstein's words:

In the house of Rav Soloveitchik of blessed memory, it was the custom that the women did light, and that is how I practice in my house. As we have seen, according to the simple halachah, women have the identical obligation to light as men. He who is of the opinion that the law is different – let him bring proof to support his position.

When my father was alive, my mother never lit Chanukah candles of her own. Last year (and the years before that), my wife did not light her own candles. But after taking a more careful look at the sources, I'm beginning to wonder. Maybe she should.

I think I'll leave it up to her.

¹http://www.lookstein.org/articles/women_and_chanukah.pdf

²<http://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/shiur.asp?id=3043> (the article can also be found in *הלכות זמנים – הלכה*)