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Shabbat Candles: Highlighting the Jewish Family and Jewish Continuity

I.

It is an iconic Jewish image – that of a woman, head covered with a scarf, hands shading her eyes, often with children at her side, as two candles glow on a white lace-draped table. In Eastern European communities candle-lighting images were often used to adorn women’s headstones, and the association of women with Shabbat candles is so enduring that even among South American Marrano communities in our own day, women continue to light candles on Friday evenings. Contemporary scholar Janet Jacobs records a daughter’s remembrance of her South American, ostensibly non-Jewish, mother’s explanation when questioned about her routine lighting of Friday night candles in church: “We are praying to ourselves. Don’t speak, don’t say anything in here. We are praying to the Holiness.”⁴³ The selected reflections below, from Rebbetzin Leah Kohn’s online class for women at torah.org, make clear the power of the moment and its accompanying prayers for today’s women:

[When I light] I feel the peace that can only come from Heaven drop onto me as I say the blessings. I say each word intensely, dwelling on its meaning before going to the next.... I pray for my family (extended), my friends, Rabbis’ families that we are close to, and finally for ourselves.

As a single woman living on her own, I light not for a family, but only for myself.... After I light I take the time to think about people that I want to pray for: MIAs, Jonathan Pollard, Iranian Jews, sick people and my family. I also ask God for guidance in my life; I want to be able to make the correct decisions in all facets of my life.

I feel the line of Jewish women that have come before me, stretching back...and I know that I am part of the chain, lighting so that those who come after me can take part. This thought brings me great comfort, I who once lived to rebel, to be apart, now I am a part.

I feel such a spiritual “rush” and an intense connection with *Hashem*. The fact that I, as a woman, have been given this job of commencing the Shabbat through the lighting of the candles is, to me, a great responsibility and an awesome privilege.⁴⁴

II.

There are numerous halakhic discussions about the *mitzvah* of lighting Shabbat candles (a practice which is not directly described in the Torah), including the lengthy discussion in the *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 20b) about the *mishnayot* known as “*Ba-Meh Madlikin*,” which now constitutes part of the Friday evening prayers. Beyond the halakhic realms, the customs that have evolved around Shabbat candle lighting underscore the centrality of family to Jewish life in general, and Shabbat in particular. R. Avraham Twerski, in discussing the common procedure for families to add a candle with the birth of each child, comments: “What a thrill it was to discover that the house was brighter because I existed, and that this brightness did not vary with my grades at school!”⁴⁵ Similarly, as Abraham Milgram has written, “No Jew ever forgets the moment of his childhood days when he stood silently and watched his mother praying before the Sabbath lights.”⁴⁶

⁴³. Janet Liebman Jacobs, “Women, Ritual and Secrecy: The Creation of Crypto-Jewish Culture,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35:2 (1996), 101.

⁴⁴. Torah.org/learning/women/class21.html.

⁴⁵. Avraham J. Twerski, *Twerski on Prayer* (Brooklyn, 2004), 255.

⁴⁶. Abraham E. Milgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia, 1971), 296.

Nowhere in the Friday evening ritual is the deep connection to Jewish family and continuity more evident than in the origin and content of the *tefillot* for candle lighting. As scholars have determined, homes during the talmudic period were comprised of two rooms. On weeknights, one candle would suffice, as it could be carried from room to room. Since such movement of flames is forbidden on the Sabbath, two candles were lit on Friday evening, one for each room. While this custom became associated with the onset of the Sabbath, initially it was not connected to any blessing or religious ritual. In the eighth century, in response to the Karaite sect's literal interpretation of the prohibition in *Shemot* (35:3), "you shall kindle no fire throughout your settlement on the Sabbath day," the Rabbis proclaimed that it was not only permitted to light candles on Friday night, but actually a religious act to do so in order to make the Sabbath a peaceful and enjoyable experience as per Yeshayahu's call to make the Sabbath "a delight" (*Yeshayahu* 58:13).⁴⁷ Similarly, the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* describes the *neir Shabbat* in terms of delight (5:1). Thus, the custom of lighting candles on Friday night has deep historical roots, as a review of the *Mishnah's* consideration of the issue proves that rabbinic authorities were seeking to modify and regulate an already ancient and firmly established institution.⁴⁸

References to candle lighting practices can be found in midrashic stories of Sarah and Rivkah, firmly associating candle lighting with women and their function as facilitators of *shalom bayit* (household peace). Midrashic tradition holds that Sarah would light candles on Friday night and they would miraculously burn until the following Sabbath. Rivkah's ability to do the same convinced Yitzchak that she was the bride for him, a wife who would continue his mother's righteous heritage (*Bereishit Rabbah* 60:16).

III.

How this *mitzvah* became the task of women has traditionally been discussed in two ways. The first is that candle lighting can be viewed as an obligation for women to replace the light in the world that the first woman, Eve, diminished through her role in the sin in the Garden of Eden. Alternately, kabbalistic approaches connect a woman's light in the earthly plane with that in the heavens, and relate woman's lighting of candles with God's bringing forth light into the world. As Friedman⁴⁹ beautifully explains:

On the eve of the Sabbath, man's first day, the youthful world, arrayed like a bride, was given to Adam, its future ruler and possessor. This is the reason why the Synagogue, at the present day, greets the Sabbath by the title Sabbath bride. So the world's illumination and consecration have left a memorial behind them in the Jewish custom of lighting a lamp at the approach of the Sabbath. In the performance of this festive and religious rite, honor is conferred upon woman. This feature of the custom throws a flood of light upon the position assigned to women by Judaism.

While the *Gemara* cites "household peace" as the compelling reason for the Sabbath candles, Friedman emphasizes the unique and critical role of women in the shaping of family life and the humanizing of the household:

Woman can quench the light of life; on her, therefore, the mother of the household, falls the duty of kindling the Sabbath Lights. In the story of the Creation man occupies a middle place between the brutes and woman. Whether he is to be lifted up out of the ranks of the bestial world, or whether he is to be thrust back into it, depends entirely upon her. After the creation of woman came the Sabbath, when the young world was consecrated amidst celestial choruses and festive illuminations. Of this consecration the wife's Sabbath Lights are a memorial. The Sabbath of the -Rabbis does not mean merely domestic quiet. It has a wider significance. It is intended to express the prosperity and well-being of the household in the fullest sense of the phrase.⁵⁰

IV.

The content of the prayers that accompany the *mitzvah* of Shabbat candle lighting further underscores women's powers and passions in elevating the Jewish family. The *berakhah* for candle lighting is straightforward, and states the obvious – it blesses God and acknowledges the *mitzvah* to kindle the Sabbath lights. In addition, the time of candle lighting has traditionally been considered an auspicious occasion for women to express their own spontaneous,

⁴⁷. Ibid.

⁴⁸. See M. Friedman, "The Sabbath Light," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 3:40 (1981): 707–721.

⁴⁹. Ibid., 714.

⁵⁰. Ibid., 717.

personalized prayers. Such personal additions to prayer are encouraged by the *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* (2:18) which teaches that prayer should not become rote and must be a true request for mercy from God. Chava Weissler, in her review of women's prayers, studied the nature and content of women's *techinot* (supplications).⁵¹ In Eastern Europe, in the 1700s, Weissler explains, women were largely illiterate in Hebrew, and brochures of *techinot* were published in Yiddish, sometimes by women, and specifically for women's use. The earliest one recorded was published in Basel in 1609, and a late eighteenth-century *techinah* entitled *Imrei Shifre*, attributed to a woman named Shifre bat Yosef, includes a section regarding lighting Sabbath candles, excerpted below:

The sages said that because Eve extinguished the light of the world and made the cosmos dark by her sin [women] must kindle lights for the Sabbath. But this is the reason for it: Because the Shelter of Peace [the *Shekhinah*] rests on us during the Sabbath, on the [Sabbath] soul, it is therefore proper for us to do below, in this form, as is done above [within the Godhead] to kindle the lights.... And when the woman kindles the lights, it is fitting for her to kindle with joy and with wholeheartedness, because it is in honor of the *Shekinah* and in honor of the Sabbath and in honor of the extra Sabbath soul. Thus she will be privileged to have holy children who will be the light of the world in the Torah and in fear [of God] who will increase peace in the world.⁵²

In this early supplication, kabbalistic notions of the mirroring of women's earthly actions and those in higher realms combine with a suggestion of how a woman's spiritual actions contribute to the continuity of Jewish life, through her family. A later *techinah*, *Shloisheh She'orim*, attributed to Sarah bat Tovim, very directly places women's efforts in the realm of the sanctified, and further connects their holy work to the spiritual well-being of their offspring:

Lord of the World, may my [observance of the] commandment of kindling the lights be accepted as the act of the High Priest when he kindled the lights in the dear Temple was accepted. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (*Tehillim* 119:105). This means: Your speech is a light to my feet: may the feet of my children walk on God's path. May my kindling of the lights be accepted, so that my children's eyes may be enlightened in the dear Torah. I also pray over the candles that my [observance of the] commandment may be accepted by the dear God, be blessed, like the light [that] burned from olive oil in the Temple and was not extinguished.⁵³

V.

How can modern women relate to these ancient supplications? Given the myriad of challenges to today's families and communities, what should a twenty-first-century woman's supplication contain? The field of -family therapy, cognizant of the many stresses afflicting modern families, has become increasingly interested in understanding resilience. What protects families from dysfunction or dissolution, or gives them their health, strength, and lasting power? Three important domains of family functioning have been identified: family organization, beliefs, and communication.⁵⁴ Families maximize their survival as a unit, and maintain the well-being of their members, when their organization offers structure without rigidity, when they inculcate spiritual beliefs that contribute to a sense of purpose, and when they facilitate communication of feelings amongst members. While a prayer alone cannot build a solid, lasting family, by addressing all of these domains in the modern candle-lighting *techinah* found in many contemporary *siddurim*, the importance placed on buttressing families and their critical role in ensuring broader Jewish continuity is highlighted. The prayer begins:⁵⁵

May it be Your will, *Hashem* my God and the God of my forefathers, that You show favor to me, my husband, my sons, my daughters, my father, my mother, and all my relatives; and that You grant us and all Israel a good and long life; that You remember us with a beneficent memory and blessing; that You consider us with a consideration of salvation and compassion; that You bless us with great blessings; that You make our households complete; that You cause Your Presence to dwell among us.

⁵¹. Chava Weissler, "Woman as High Priest: A Kabbalistic Prayer in Yiddish for -Lighting Sabbath Candles," *Jewish History* 5:1 (1991): 9–26.

⁵². *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁵³. *Ibid.*, 19. The parallel of the candle-lighting woman with the *Kohen* in the *Beit -Ha-Mikdash* prompted Weissler to title her article on these *techinot*, "Woman as High Priest."

⁵⁴. Froma Walsh, "Family Resilience Framework: Innovative Practice Applications," *Family Relations* 51:2 (2002): 130–137.

⁵⁵. Translation from the Rabbinical Council of America edition of *The Artscroll Siddur*.

Implied in this catalog of requests for blessing is a family organizational hierarchy that begins with parents and extends to their children, all the while remaining anchored to prior generations and the larger culture and context. It is an organization that, as family theorists prescribe, has a healthy degree of structure, but not a rigidity or authoritarian slant, as the prayer not only acknowledges the true Father of all families, but welcomes His guidance, support, and presence in family life.

The central section of the prayer focuses on core Jewish beliefs, and the wish for motherly success in imbuing offspring with these critical dispositions. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 23b), and later, the *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* (75:2), comment on the connection between candle lighting and praying for one's children. The Talmud quotes *Mishlei* (6:23), "For the candle is a *mitzvah* and the Torah is the light," to explain that through the lighting of Shabbat candles a woman brings the light of Torah into the world, so it is appropriate that she should pray at that time for children who will be "lit up" with Torah. As our prayer continues:

Privilege me to raise children and grandchildren who are wise and understanding, who love *Hashem* and fear God, people of truth, holy offspring, attached to *Hashem*, who illuminate the world with Torah and good deeds and with every labor in the service of the Creator.

These words are the very embodiment of the second critical component of resilient family functioning, "transcendent spiritual values and purpose."⁵⁶ This supplication, unlike those which emphasize communal needs, or include physical health or financial success, is hyper-focused on children's spiritual development. By focusing on children's success as kind, loving, and God-loving and God-fearing individuals, as opposed to those who win contests, make tons of money, or are exceedingly popular, mothers build the type of families that can truly be a light unto the nations.

The third domain identified as critical for resilient family functioning involves communication – how emotions, needs, and wants are shared amongst family members, and whether communication is negatively tinged, or hopeful and forward looking. The closing lines of the prayer may at first seem unrelated to this domain, but careful examination of their context and the entire ritual of candle lighting demonstrates their positive communicative power:

Please, hear my supplication at this time, in the merit of Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah, our mothers, and cause our light to illuminate that it be not extinguished forever, and let Your countenance shine so that we are saved. Amen.

VI.

What is communicated to children, visitors, and any who hear or observe a woman's prayer in the light of the candles? Her words connect to the glorious heritage of the past, while expressing a humble and hopeful look forward, seeing both the glowing potential of mankind as well as God's enduring, light-bringing salvation. Children witness, in the few moments of quiet devotion and in their mother's prayers for their future, a ritual ancient and modern, and thus are forever linked together in tradition. It is a powerful communication – one that, as the prayer itself hopes, will spur those observing children to illuminate their own Shabbat tables and fill the world with Torah.

The sentiments of Jewish women – single or married, young or old, in centuries past and continuing today – standing before their freshly lit Shabbat candles turn to their families, not their ability to earn a living or find a mate, while such supplementary thoughts may certainly be in their hearts and prayers. As the light of day wanes, and the peace of the Sabbath descends, the passionate words of the candle-lighting supplication focus on continuity – on children as torchbearers, both nourished by, and nourishing, the Torah way of life. In these solemn moments, women, and all those who are privileged to witness this private prayer, are reminded weekly that the key to the continuity of Jewish life lies with family, but that the strength and health of the Jewish family lies in its shining and unbroken connection to Torah.

⁵⁶. Walsh, "Family Resilience Framework," 132.