



## Electric Lights as *Neirot Shabbat*

לעילוי נשמת  
 יואל אפרים בן אברהם עוזיאל זלצמן ז"ל

**Question:** When someone does not have candles with them or is not allowed to light a flame, can she fulfill the *mitzva* of *neirot Shabbat* with electric lights?

**Answer:** The *mitzva* of *neirot Shabbat* has a dual purpose – to provide an atmosphere conducive to a pleasant Shabbat (Rambam, Shabbat 5:1); to show respect for Shabbat (see *ibid.* 30:5). Regarding electric lights, there are two main questions to consider: 1. Is turning on the light considered an **action** that “fits the mold” of the *mitzva*? 2. Is the fuel/light combination valid for *neirot Shabbat*?

**Quality of the action:** To oversimplify, when one switches on a light, he connects wires in a way that allows electricity to flow to the fixture and operate it. *Acharonim* debated whether that

is considered a direct act or if we view it as *gerama* (indirect causation) – just a removal of the separation between the sides. We agree with the approach that views this as direct (see Yabia Omer II, Orach Chayim 17), which indicates leniency here but in the context of Shabbat prohibitions obligates people fully for what is accomplished by connecting an electric circuit. Others also claim (see the Rambam’s language – Shabbat 5:1) that there is no need for an action of lighting, but of making sure that lights are lit (Tzitz Eliezer I, 20:11; see Har Tzvi, OC I:143). According to this approach, it is not important whether turning on the light is a direct action.

**Source/type of light:** Some question whether electricity fits the prototype of the *mitzva*. Levushei Mordechai (OC III, 59), using Chanuka candles as a precedent, argues that it is invalid because it lacks a classic fuel that one needs to light. Others distinguish between Chanuka, which is commemorating a specific event involving oil, whereas regarding Shabbat, the main thing is the desired light (Yabia Omer *ibid.*). An interesting “proof” (see *ibid.*) that one does not need a classic fuel is the story of the miraculous lighting of Shabbat lights from vinegar (Ta’anit 25a). Rav SZ Auerbach is cited (Shemirat Shabbat K’hilchata 43:(22)) as saying that the source of the light must be

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present at the time of lighting, which exists in a battery-operated light, but not the home's electricity, which needs constant refreshing from outside. Also, the light does not look like that of a flame (Tzitz Eliezer ibid. is concerned that it looks like a torch). These issues can apply even to an incandescent light, where the light comes from a hot, glowing filament, all the more so to other technologies such as fluorescent and LED. Still, those who focus on the result of a nice atmosphere that helps people and provides honor for Shabbat, should not care about the scientific distinctions on how the light is created.

Regarding the bottom line, there is no question that one who cannot light standard candles should use electricity, putting them on at the time of candle lighting with the intention of using it for the *mitzva*. It is also clear that this suffices to not apply the *minhag* (Rama, OC 263:1) that one who forgot to light one week, has to add an additional candle the rest of her life. (If it was truly not possible to light candles, she is anyway exempt from this penalty because of the extenuating circumstance – Mishna Berura 263:7).

The existence of significant opinions on both sides of the debate whether one fulfills the *mitzva* could lead us to a conclusion that it is better not to make a *beracha* (see Radiance of Shabbat p. 12). However, we agree with the approach that part of relying on this best possible solution is to make the *beracha* as well (Shemirat Shabbat K'hilchata ibid.). Realize that part of the *mitzva* is that it should be clear that one is lighting for the *mitzva*. In our days, while there is a challenge raised by the fact that most of our light for Shabbat is provided by electric lights (see idea of a halachic solution for this - ibid. 34), the candles have the advantage of being clearly done for Shabbat. When one is putting on normal electric lights he would have had even without a *mitzva*, the *beracha* seems to have added value. ■

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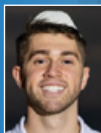
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