

Shabbat Blessings Guide

Lighting the Candles

When do we light Shabbat candles?

According to tradition, candles are lit before dark, no later than 18 minutes before sundown.

Why do we light two candles?

The rabbis of old explained that the two candles remind us of the two times the Ten Commandments appear in the Torah. The first time, in the Book of Exodus (20:8), we are told to “Remember the Sabbath.” The second time, in the Book of Deuteronomy (5:12), we are told to “Observe the Sabbath.” Some families light more than two candles (e.g., two candles plus one for each child).

Can we use one candle to light the others?

We light each candle with a match rather than using one candle to light the others. Tradition tells us that candles should stay in place, because even candles should not work on Shabbat. Candles should be allowed to burn out naturally. However, the havdalah candle, lit as part of the ending ceremony, is extinguished by dousing the flame in wine or grape juice.

Why do we circle the candles with our hands?

We circle our hands around the flames and bring them toward our face to symbolically welcome Shabbat into our homes, and to usher in the peace and tranquility that Shabbat can bring. This is also a time for the person reciting the blessing to say a personal prayer, often for good health and for blessings on friends and family.

Why do we cover our eyes?

Traditionally, blessings are said *before* the ritual or action is performed. For example, we recite the Kiddush before we drink the wine or grape juice. However, Shabbat begins once we say the blessing over the candles, and traditionally one does not kindle a fire on Shabbat. So we light the candles first, and then cover our eyes as we recite the blessing so that we do not enjoy the Shabbat light until after we have completed the blessing.



Blessing the Children

Who were Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah?

Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah were our matriarchs, the wives of our patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were loyal and compassionate, and their tenacity in overcoming challenges and obstacles made them role models for future generations.

Who were Ephraim and Menasheh?

Ephraim and Menasheh were the sons of Joseph, the grandsons of Jacob, and the great-great-grandsons of Abraham. It is written, “Jacob blessed his grandsons saying: In your name shall Israel invoke blessing, saying, ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh.’” In invoking their names when we bless our sons, we are hoping that, like Ephraim and Menasheh, our sons will grow up to be good men, kind to both their siblings and their families.





Blessing over Wine

Do we drink directly from the Kiddush cup?

In some families, each person takes a sip directly from the Kiddush cup and passes it along until everyone has taken a drink. Other families pour from the Kiddush cup into smaller cups, enough for each family member. It is a tradition to fill the Kiddush cup (on Friday night, Saturday morning before lunch, and during havdalah) to overflowing as a reminder of the abundance of Shabbat.

Blessing over Bread

Why two ḥallot?

It is written in the Torah that while the Children of Israel were wandering through the desert for forty years, God sent down a daily portion of manna for them to gather and eat. On Friday, God sent down a double portion so that the Israelites would not have to gather food on Shabbat. The two ḥallot remind us of that double portion of manna.

Why do we cover the ḥallot?

A story passed down for generations explains that since the candles and wine are always blessed first, the ḥallot are covered so they will not feel slighted at being last.

Why do some families tear ḥallah instead of cutting it?

Because knives can be associated with weapons, some families tear ḥallah with their hands as a reminder that Shabbat is a time of peace, when we dream that the nations will put aside their weapons of war.



Havdalah



When is havdalah held?

The havdalah service, marking the end of Shabbat, is traditionally held when there are three stars visible in the sky (about 30–45 minutes after sunset.) At the end of the havdalah ceremony it is customary to wish one another *shavua tov*—“a good week.” Many families discuss their hopes for what they want to accomplish during the week ahead.

What do the spices represent?

The sweet smell of the spices is intended to offset the sadness of the end of Shabbat and the return to the ordinary work week.

Why does the havdalah candle have more than one wick?

The multiple wicks represent the “fiery lights” referred to in the havdalah blessing. They also symbolize the weaving together of Shabbat into the rest of the week.

