

B”H
Yeshivat Benei N’vi’im
Koshertorah.com

A Review of the Halakha of Lighting the Shabat Candles According to Sephardic Halakha

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
Copyright © 2002 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.*

☆ **Question:** *I was asked by one of my dear Talmidim what is the proper order for lighting the Shabat candles according to both the minhagim of the Sephardim and the Mekubalim? He also asked me why is it that HaRav Ovadiah Yosef apparently does not hold by the minhagim of the classical Sephardic Sages?*

Answer: B’ezrat HaShem, the answer to the first question will reveal to us to a Halakhic disagreement that will also expose us to some very important information about the relationship between Sephardic Halakha and the Kabbalah.

In the Shulkhan Arukh (O.H. 263:5), Maran Yosef Karo writes, “*When one lights, one says the blessing Blessed are you HaShem, our G-d, King of the universe, who has made us holy by the observance of His mitzvot, and commanded us to light the Shabat lights.*”

The RaMA comments and says, “*There are those who say that the blessing comes before the lighting and there are those who say that the blessing is recited after the lighting. In order to meet the requirement that a blessing be said immediately before the act to which it pertains one should not derive any enjoyment from [the lighting] until after the berakha. One should place one’s hand in front of the light after the lighting and recite the blessing. Afterwards, remove the hand. This fulfills the requirement. This is the minhag.*”

As is known to all *shomrei mitzvot* Jews whenever we perform an act that requires the recitation of a blessing, we first recite the blessing over the act and only then is the act performed. This is the general rule (*oveyr l’asiyato*) The RaMBaM (Hilkhot Berakhot 11:7) holds like this and apparently so does Maran Yosef Karo (S. A., O.H. 263:5).

The reason underlying the RaMA’s opinion is that a woman accepts the forbiddance of Shabat work once she recites the candle blessing. According to this view, if she were to first recite the blessing, thus accepting the forbiddance of Shabat work, how then can she proceed to perform the forbidden act of striking a match, creating fire, and lighting the candles? In order to avoid this confusion, the order was reversed and the lighting is done first, the woman immediately closes her eyes, recites the blessing, and only then sees the candles lit after she recited the blessing. Although this may not be considered the proper order, there exist precedents in Halakha to support this practice (ref. Ohr L’Tzion, 2, 18:3).

While the opinion of the RaMA, as expected, defines the accepted minhag amongst Ashkenazim, strangely many Sephardim have also adopted this practice, going against the opinion of Maran Yosef Karo and the RaMBaM. The reason for many Sephardic women acting in this manner is

not because they have accepted an Ashkenazi *Humra* upon themselves. Rather, there is a mystical reason underlying the Ashkenazi practice that is absent from those Sephardim who observe otherwise. While the Kabbalah is not usually of concern with most matters of Halakha, with regards to this matter, the opinion of the Mekubalim is important and relevant, especially in the Sephardic communities.

Since the days of Maran Yosef Karo, the Sephardi Aharonim in general have accepted Kabbalistic minhagim as binding Halakha. This was often the case with Maran Karo himself, as it was later with Maran HaHida and even more so with the Ben Ish Hai and the Kaf HaHaim. One simply need to check these authorities to see that their accepted rule was that the minhagim of the Ari'zal were accepted as binding Halakha even when in contradiction to Maran Karo. Examples of this are numerous and we will pick up on this topic later.

With regards to our issue in discussion Rabbeynu Yosef Haim of Baghdad writes in his Ben Ish Hai (S.S. Noah 8), *“Women only accept the Shabat with the lighting of the candles only after they are all lit. . . . After she finishes lighting, she immediately casts from her hand the match with which she lit, covers her eyes with her hands, closes her eyes, and recites the blessing. There is a Kabbalistic reason for the closing of the eyes at this moment.”*

The Ben Ish Hai is not alone in his support for the minhag of the RaMA being accepted Sephardic practice. This minhag has been accepted by almost all contemporary Sephardic authorities, including:

1. **“Kaf HaHaim Sofer”** (O.H. 263:34);
2. **“Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh of HaRav Rafael Barukh Toledano”** (134:27);
3. **HaRishon L'Tzion HaRav Mordechai Eliyahu** in his “Darchei Halakha” (Haga'ot to the Ganzfried Kitzur) 75, note 8, and in his siddur “Kol Eliyahu,” Laws of Hadlakat Nerot, Berakhot 1 (page 338);
4. **HaRav Shalom Massas** (the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem) in his siddur “V'zarah HaShemesh” (page 192);
5. **HaRav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul** in his “Ohr L'Tzion” (Vol. 2, 18:3). *Although he does mention that both methods of observance are acceptable and whichever observance that one observes one should continue to do so. Yet, he mentions the minhag of the Ben Ish Hai first, implying that it takes precedence.*
6. **HaRav Haim David HaLevi** (the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv) in his “Mekor Haim” 60:5. *Although Rav HaLevi states that the Ikar HaDin is to bless first, he states “now already the minhag is to bless after the lighting.”*
7. **Maran HaHida**, (HaRav Hayim Yosef David Azulai) the greatest Posek of the Sephardi Aharonim, years before the Ben Ish Hai, also wrote to first light and then recite. Reference his Mihazik Berakha (O.H. 263:4) and Shoel V'Nishal (2, 58).

An interesting note about all these authorities mentioned is that while they accept the minhag outlined in the Ben Ish Hai, none of them state the Kabbalah reason for doing so. Many of these Poskim acknowledge that according to the “Ikar HaDin” (the essential law) the minhag should be in accordance to Maran Karo and the Shulkhan Arukh. Nonetheless, here the great Halakhic rule applies: *“Minhag b'Yisrael Torah He”* (the accepted minhag has the authority of Torah law) (Hida, Mihazik Berakha 261:7). Therefore, where the minhag does not follow Maran Karo, his Halakhic opinion is not accepted.

This is true even with regards to minhagim not founded upon the Kabbalah of the Ari'zal. This has been the case in Sephardi communities, around the world, including Eretz Yisrael for hundreds of years. The classic example of this is with regards to the end time of Shabat.

Although Maran Yosef Karo wrote in his Shulkhan Arukh (O.H. 261:2) to follow the opinion of Rabbeynu Tam, the minhag of the Sephardim around the world has never been to do so. This is clear and evident from the writings of Maran HaHida. (Reference Sefer Minhagei HaHida, Laws of Erev Shabat 7, and in the Roeh Yisrael, 9).

With regards to our issue of candle lighting, the only contemporary Sephardi Rav of note not to accept the authority of the Ari'zal, Maran HaHida, the Ben Ish Hai (and others) in this matter is HaRav Ovadiah Yosef. It is his words that we must address and understand.

In his Yibeah Omer (2, O.H. 16) and in his Yehaveh Da'at (2:33), HaRav Ovadiah rules that the correct practice is to follow Maran Yosef Karo and to recite the blessing for the Shabat candles prior to their lighting. Granted, while many authorities agree that this may be "*Ikar HaDin*," it is clear that the minhag is different and therefore, the minhag should be followed as is. One is left to ask why does HaRav Ovadiah disagree with all the great Sages who have come before him?

The ruling of HaRav Ovadiah with regards to this matter must be viewed in a greater understanding of the Rav's general philosophical outlook. Throughout his writings, HaRav Ovadiah has often expressed harshness towards the Halakhic opinions of the Ben Ish Hai, especially towards those having anything to do with the Kabbalah. HaRav Ovadiah has often expressed opinions of Jewish law that not only contradict the Ben Ish Hai, but also contradict numerous generations of Sephardic Sages. At times, he has even expresses Halakhic opinions against the Ari'zal himself. This type of Halakhic philosophy is expected and accepted from our brothers, the Ashkenazim, but it unheard of and unprecedented among Sephardim!

HaRav Ovadiah's harshness towards the Ben Ish Hai got him into some deep trouble many years ago with his fellow Sephardic Rabbanim. My teacher in Sod, HaRav Meir Levi (obm) related to me that during the 1950's the leading Sephardic Rabbis in Israel were contemplating putting HaRav Ovadiah in Herem because of the disrespect shown towards the Ben Ish Hai in his writings. HaRav Ovadiah was saved from this terrible fate by one of the leading Sephardic Rabbis and Mekubalim of the time, HaRav Ephraim Cohen (obm). Today, Hakham Ephraim's son, HaRav Shalom Cohen is the Rosh Yeshiva of the Sephardic Yeshivat Porat Yosef in the Old City of Jerusalem and serves on HaRav Ovadiah's Council of Torah Sages, which leads the Shas party. With this insight into HaRav Ovadiah's attitudes and history, we can better proceed to view and understand his Halakhic opinions on this matter.

In his Yehave Da'at (2:33), HaRav Ovadiah addresses the issue of when one should recite the Shabat candle blessing. The Rav goes to great lengths to prove that a majority of earlier Halakhic authorities (Rishonim) support the view that "*oveyr l'asiyato*" is applicable to the Shabat candle lighting. Thus, in his eyes, the only right thing to do is to first bless and then light.

The Rav does make mention of a small number of later Sephardic authorities who support this view. Yet, when it comes to mentioning Maran HaHida and the Ben Ish Hai's view on this matter, HaRav Ovadiah does so almost in passing. While he mentions their objections, he does not respond to them. HaRav Ovadiah simply proceeds to proclaim what he calls "the truth."

What is disturbing about this is that we are all sure that the scholarship of Maran HaHida and the Ben Ish Hai are both at minimum on par with HaRav Ovadiah Yosef, if not far beyond him. Yet, the "truth" of these two giants of Torah is not the same "truth" as that for HaRav Ovadiah. HaRav Ovadiah says that to light and recite is "*lo b'tzedek*" (not correct). Yet, the majority of Sephardic Sages, both from generations gone by and today (as seen above) disagree with HaRav

Ovadiah. It is not appropriate for one Torah scholar in the minority to say of holy Sages in the majority that they are all *“lo b'tzedek”* (not correct).

HaRav Ovadiah originally addressed this question in his larger work *Yibeah Omer* (2, O.H. 16), with the same conclusions as in his *Yehaveh Da'at*, only with longer exegesis. As we have seen above HaRav Ovadiah's peers and elders do not accept his position on this matter. However, many Sephardic Rabbis who were educated under HaRav Ovadiah directly or indirectly all hold by his view.

Among them include Rabbi Moshe Levi of Yeshivat Kiseh Rahamim in Benei Brak in his work *Minuhat Ahava* (1, 4:5). Rabbi Levi mentions in note 20 a quote from HaRav Moshe Malka's *Mikveh HaMayim* (5, O.H. 33) that *“after the words of the Yibeah Omer have been revealed who determined in the abundance of his greatness to bless and afterwards light, who would dare contradict his word, for who is a teacher like him?”* The implication here is that HaRav Ovadiah is the final word on this and every matter, period!

Yet, what is most interesting here is that if one reads the full teshuva written in the *Mikveh HaMayim*, one sees that HaRav Malka concludes that the minhag does not follow HaRav Ovadiah at all! HaRav Malka began his teshuva with the above praise of HaRav Ovadiah out of deep respect for him. This is an appropriate manner of speech for all true Talmidei Hakhamim. For although we disagree about matters of Halakha, we nonetheless, must do so respectfully. I personally wonder why Rabbi Levi did not fully quote HaRav Malka's views on this subject.

There is one thing in common amongst all of the modern day Sephardic Rabbis trained under HaRav Ovadiah's influence. They all share his “distance” from the classical, traditional Sephardic orientation to integrate Kabbalah and Halakha.

It is clear that with regards to lighting and blessing or blessing and then lighting that the majority of Sephardic opinions do not follow HaRav Ovadiah. Indeed, all those who do follow his opinion are his students, or those who align themselves with him politically through Shas. A Rabbi's disciples are expected to follow in his footsteps and opinions. However, we do not count the opinions of the students as being separate from the opinions of their Rabbi. Therefore, the number of Rabbis who support blessing first and then lighting are few indeed.

Being that the Yachin and Boaz (two central pillars) of all Sephardic Jewry, Maran HaHida and the Ben Ish Hai both hold to light first and then to bless, we have here the answer to the question proposed by the *Mikveh HaMayim*. Who would dare contradict the words of HaRav Ovadiah? The answer is Maran HaHida, the Ben Ish Hai, and the other five leading Sephardic authorities of our generation. Therefore, as the general rule of Halakha dictates, we follow the majority opinion, which in this case decides Halakhic practice for us against the opinion of HaRav Ovadiah Yosef.

Now that we have addressed the Halakhic side of this matter according to the pshat, there is yet a Kabbalah aspect to this Halakha to discuss. The Ben Ish Hai reveals that there is a Kabbalistic reason underlying the minhag to first light and then bless. Unfortunately, the Ben Ish Hai did not elaborate on what the secret meaning here is. Nonetheless, the fact is that there is a Kabbalistic element to this minhag. This now requires of us to introduce another Halakhic principle about the relationship of Kabbalah to Halakha. The author of this principle is none other than Maran Yosef Karo, the author of the *Beit Yosef* and the *Shulkhan Arukh*.

Maran Yosef Karo, the author of the Shulkhan Arukh has clearly stated (Beit Yosef, Orach Haim 141) that *“M’ahar Sh’lo Nizkar Zeh B’Talmud B’hedia Lo Shi’vaki’nan Divrei Zohar Mip’nei Divrei HaPoskim.”* (Any law not specifically stated in the Talmud is to be observed in accordance to the directives of the Kabbalah, even if all the Rabbis disagree with what the Kabbalah says.

This general rule has been applied even against Maran Yosef Karo himself. One of the greatest examples of this rule is with regards to the Morning Blessing, *“HaNoten L’Ayef Koah”* (who gives strength to the weak). This blessing is not found in the Talmudic order of the Morning Blessings and Maran states in the Shulkhan Arukh (O.H. 46:6) that he disagrees with those who say it. Based on his word, the Sephardim did not recite this blessing. All this changed just a few years later once the Torah of the Ari’zal was revealed.

The Ari’zal revealed a profound Kabbalistic reason for reciting this blessing. Since then all Sephardim have adopted it based on the authority of the Ari’zal, even against the word of Maran Yosef Karo. This example, amongst others, has set the precedent that Sephardim follow the minhag of the Ari’zal even over Maran. Reference Maran HaHida in his *“Birkei Yosef”* (46:31) and the *“Kaf HaHaim (Sofer)”* (O.H. 46:47).

Just as this rule applies to the Morning Blessing, so does it apply to the Blessing of the Shabat candles. The minhagim of the Ari’zal and the Kabbalah take precedence over the Halakha of the master Maran Yosef Karo (Beit Yosef O.H. 141). Therefore, they must also take precedence over the Halakha of Maran Karo’s disciple HaRav Ovadiah Yosef.

In conclusion, although according to *“Ikar HaDin”* a blessing is to be recited prior to an act, in this case with regards to the lighting of the Shabat candles, the minhag is different. The rule therefore applies: *“Minhag b’Yisrael Torah He.”* This is true for the Sephardim as it is for the Ashkenazim. In this case, we Sephardim are to follow in the footsteps of Maran HaHida, the Ben Ish Hai and the majority of other contemporary Sephardic Sages. In this case, the Halakha and thus Sephardic practice does not follow HaRav Ovadiah Yosef.

Indeed, HaRav Meir Levi (obm) related to me that when the opinion of HaRav Ovadiah began to disseminate amongst Israel’s Sephardic communities, the Chief Mekubal of Jerusalem, HaRav Mordechai Sharabi (obm) spoke up. He instructed women not to heed to HaRav Ovadiah on this matter, but to continue the accepted minhag and to follow the Ben Ish Hai and the majority of Sephardi Poskim.

Sephardic women everywhere, in Aretz and abroad should be informed of this decision. They should follow the proper procedure for the lighting of the Shabat candles. Being that this is such an important mitzvah, as discussed in the Holy Zohar, I will here outline the proper order and practice for Sephardic women to follow. This order is taken from Siddur Kol Eliyahu of the Rishon L’Tzion HaRav Mordechai Eliyahu (pages 341-343).

The Order for Lighting the Shabat Candles

It is good to give tzedaka prior to lighting the Shabat candles. It is also good to recite the “L’Shem Yihud” prayer for giving the tzedaka.

“For the sake of the unity of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekhina, in love and awe, and in awe and love, the unite the Name Yod Key with Vav Key in perfect unity (contemplate the holy Name YHVH), in the name of all Yisrael. Behold I come to fulfill the positive

commandment to give tzedaka. I hereby give two coins to tzedaka and a third one, so to give comfort to our Maker and to do the will of our Creator. To rectify the source of this mitzvah in the supernal places. "May the pleasantness of HaShem our G-d be upon us. May He establish the work of our hands upon us, yes, may He establish the works of our hands."

Give the three coins to tzedaka. First, give two together and then the third by itself. Then recite the following:

"For the sake of the unity of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekhina, in love and awe, and in awe and love, the unite the Name Yod Key with Vav Key in perfect unity (contemplate the holy Name YHVH), in the name of all Yisrael. Behold I come to fulfill the positive commandment of the Rabbis to light two lights in honor of the Shabat, one for "Zakhor" and one for "Shamor." . . .

If one lights extra lights for the members of her household she says:

"I also add lights to honor the Shabat for the members of my house."

If one lights seven lights one says:

"I also add lights to honor the Shabat to honor the seven who are called up to read the Torah."

. . . So as to give comfort to our Maker and to do the will of our Creator. To rectify the source of this mitzvah in the supernal places. "May the pleasantness of HaShem our G-d be upon us. May He establish the work of our hands upon us, yes, may He establish the works of our hands."

Then light the lights, put down the match, cover your eyes and bless:

Barukh Atah Adonai, Elo'heyenu Melekh Ha'olam, Asher Kida'shanu B'mitz'vo'tav Vitz'i'vanu L'had'leek Ner Shel Shabat.

Blessed are you HaShem, our G-d, King of the universe, who has made us holy by the observance of His mitzvot, and commanded us to light the Shabat lights.

"May it be acceptable before You HaShem, my G-d and G-d of my fathers, that You have pity and grace on me. May Your mercy be great upon me to give me children who will do Your will and sincerely study Your Torah. May they radiate Torah in merit of these lights, as it is written, 'for a mitzvah is a lamp and Torah is light.'" May you also show pity and grace to my husband (so and so, son of, so and so). Give him length of days and years of life filled with blessing and prosperity. Help him to completely do your Will. Thus may it be Your will. Amen. (here one may add whatever prayers one may wish). "May the pleasantness of HaShem our G-d be upon us. May He establish the work of our hands upon us, yes, may He establish the works of our hands." May it be Your will that the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable before You, HaShem, my Rock and Redeemer."