



5 candle-lighting customs

“Let there be light” (Gen.1:3). With God’s command, order replaces chaos as the world is created. Whether a burning bush, a pillar of fire, or a ritual lamp, the symbols of light, flame and fire are used often in the Hebrew Scriptures to express the inexpressible: divine presence. Candle-lighting rituals, such as those mentioned below, continue in Judaism to this day.

1. *“Blessed are you, Lord...who commands that we kindle the sabbath lights”* (from Jewish ritual). At sunset each Friday in Jewish homes, two candles—sometimes more according to varying customs around the world—are lit to welcome the *Shabbat* (Sabbath).
2. *“In your light we see light”* (Psalm 36:9). As part of the Jewish festivals of Shavuot and Sukkot (8th day), candles are lit for 24 hours.
3. *“The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord”* (Proverbs 20:27). A Jewish custom at the start of Yom Kippur is to light a memorial candle to honor the memory of deceased parents.

4. *“Light is sown for the righteous”* (Psalm 97:11). Eight candles are lit, one by one, for each of the eight days of the festival of Hanukkah. Here the lights shine as testimony to a miracle associated with Hanukkah’s origins.
5. *“God is light and in him there is no darkness at all”* (1 John 1:5). Light is a potent symbol in Christianity too, especially at the Easter Vigil. As you reflect on the symbol of light in the Hebrew scriptures and in Judaism, notice afresh your Christian candle-lighting practices, at home and in church.



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 27:20—30:10

Tetzaveh:
‘you shall instruct’

Why reflect on Torah?

“Furthermore, for the first time ever, the Synod of Bishops also invited a rabbi to offer us a precious witness on the Hebrew Scriptures, which are also part of our own Scriptures.” - *Verbum Domini* (2010)

This quotation refers to a gathering of Bishops from around the world held in October 2008 where the topic under discussion was the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. The historic step noted (for the Synod of Bishops) follows logically from previous Church statements concerning the contribution of Jewish biblical insights to the education of Christians. For instance:

“What ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament... Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years.” (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001)

Light of Torah takes up this conviction in a grassroots forum. By drawing on Jewish commentators and approaches to the Torah (first five books of the bible), Christians discover afresh their own scriptures.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Exodus 27:20—30:10

Today's portion is another long list of ritual instructions: for the lighting of Temple lamps (Ch. 27), the making of priestly vestments (Ch. 28), the ordination of priests (Ch. 29) and construction of the incense altar (Ch. 30). Read as much as you can, then let's take as our focus the first two verses: 27:20-21.

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY, 2007).
Scripture: NRSV.

Tasting Torah

"You shall further command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for the light, so that a lamp may be set up to burn regularly. In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that is before the covenant, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a perpetual ordinance to be observed throughout their generations by the Israelites" (Exodus 27:20-21).

Read these verses slowly, prayerfully and try to imagine the scene and its significance.

Touching Torah

Do we have the picture? Just outside the innermost section of the shrine containing the stone tablets inscribed with the Decalogue ('ten commandments'), stands a lamp which is lit by the priests every evening. It is lit using high quality fuel ('clear oil of beaten olives') and it burns throughout the night until morning.

This ritual lighting takes on a significance that will be transmitted through generations. Much later in Jewish history synagogues came to feature an ever-burning lamp (*ner tamid*: an 'eternal' light) suspended in front of the ark which contains the sacred Torah scrolls, much the same as Catholic churches have a sanctuary lamp near the tabernacle. (Have you been to a Jewish synagogue? Perhaps you could approach a Jewish friend or local rabbi to introduce you to their place of worship.)

Depthing Torah

Some commentators express surprise at the placing of this verse. Why here? Why not later when the priests have been ordained, vested and the sanctuary is ready to be used for worship. Wouldn't that be the time to think about lighting the lamp?

How would you enter this conversation? Would it help to recall that one of the most compelling images in the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish tradition is that which describes the Torah as spiritual illumination?

"But those who study the Torah give forth light wherever they may be. It is like one standing in the dark with a lamp in his hand, as it says, 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path' (Ps. 94, 105)" [Numbers Rabbah 11, 6].

Perhaps then we can see a deeper reason as to why the lamp lighting instructions take priority, even before the ordination of priests. More than a practical ritual detail, it signifies the whole purpose for the tabernacle: that by a life faithful to the Lord's teachings, Israel may dwell always in the Lord's light.

"If My light will be in your hand, your light will be in My hand" (Exodus Rabbah 36, 3).

Doing Torah

Reflect on the quotations above. In your life, is your engagement with scripture—God's Word—a priority? Does it light your way? Does it draw you closer to the Lord and his people?



Faith & life

At the request of the local synagogue, I took a group of Jewish young people through our parish church, explaining the various symbols associated with Catholic worship. The young people seemed shy and I was told it was their first time inside a Catholic church. As we approached the sanctuary, however, a ripple of animated recognition passed through the group... smiles, whispers, pointing. I looked up to see what had caught their attention. It was the sanctuary lamp alight near the tabernacle. In their synagogue, the tabernacle containing the sacred Torah scrolls is marked by a similar lamp. It was a touching moment of interfaith connection. (TP)