

By Maggie Anton

The quintessential image of home, holiness and Jewish motherhood is that of a woman blessing the Shabbat candles, performing a ritual we assume has existed since time immemorial. But this assumption is wrong. In fact, it was only 900 years ago that, after much debate, lighting the Shabbat lamp came to be defined as a mitzvah - one with its own unique blessing, one that Jewish women took upon themselves.

Because there is no such commandment in the Torah, some rabbis before 1000 C.E. maintained that lighting the Shabbat lamp was not a mitzva; it was a task women did since they were home and men were in synagogue on Friday afternoon. It was important only because without her lighting the lamp before sunset, her family must sit in the dark. And while the Talmud (Tractate Shabbat) meticulously details what kind of oil and wicks are best to keep the Shabbat lamp from going out, there is no mention of any special ritual for lighting it.

The great French Talmudist Rashi (1040-1105) took the opposing view. In his commentary on Tractate Shabbat (page 23b) he stated, "By observing the mitzvot of kindling a lamp on Shabbat and Hanukka, one brings the light of Torah into the world." Yet even if a community accepted that lighting the Shabbat lamp was a mitzva, should a blessing accompany it? And if so, which one? There is no such blessing mentioned in the Talmud and halakha forbids any non-Talmudic blessings. Because of this, medieval Sefardic women lit their Shabbat lamps in silence.

However during the 11th century, Ashkenazic women had greater religious status and autonomy than those in Sefarad, so much so that they began to fulfill those mitzvot that only men were obligated to perform, such as blowing shofar, and wearing tefillin and tzitzit. According to Machzor Vitry, a compendium of laws and customs collected by Rashi's students, women took these commandments upon themselves and recited the blessings as well, in the same way that women today have taken on men's mitzvot, instituted new rituals like Bat Mitzva and women's tefila groups and minyans, become rabbis and cantors.

Rashi clearly held that kindling the Shabbat lamp was a mitzva, one that women, as well as men, were obligated to perform. Thus it seems logical that, if women made a

blessing when they performed mitzvot from which they were exempt, surely they must say one if they perform a mitzva for which they are obligated. And indeed, Rashi's grandson, Rabbenu Tam, declared that lighting the Shabbat lamp required a blessing.

But creating a new blessing is prohibited, so what prayer should be said? The solution was to take the blessing for lighting the Hanukka menorah, which was in the Talmud, and substitute "Shabbat" for "Hanukka." As astonishing as it may seem, the Hanukka blessing is the original one, hundreds of years older than the Shabbat blessing, its derivative.

We know this blessing because we have a responsum by Rashi's granddaughter, Hannah, describing the ritual her mother performed. She explained that in Rashi's house, the woman first lit the Shabbat lamp and then recited the benediction, her words being the same ones we say today. Rabbenu Tam's decision and his sister Hannah's responsum were so authoritative that within a hundred years, even women in Sefarad were saying this blessing when they kindled Shabbat lights.

Today, when women (and men) light Shabbat candles, they never imagine that the ritual doesn't come from Sinai, that the blessing was once a source of controversy. And who knows? Maybe 900 years into the future Jews will assume that girls have always had a bat mitzvah - or that women have always studied Talmud. As for our generation, it seems we are only following in the footsteps of our ancestors, the women in Rashi's time.

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