"The Eternal Sabbath" Electric Sabbath Candles

The History of a Folk Tradition from a Modernist Perspective

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Several years ago, following one of my lectures on the images and artifacts related to the celebration of Sabbath, Diego Rotman, then one of my students, told me about the "electric candles" his father, Samuel Rotman, created while still in Argentina, to be lit when welcoming the Sabbath (Fig. 1). My curiosity was piqued by the story, which seemed rather odd at first hearing. What tied a man, particularly a person who could not be considered an observant Jew, to the "womanly mitzvah" of lighting Sabbath candles? What was this act meant to express and what place did it have in his life? As a scholar of Jewish art and folklore, I was especially intrigued by the fact that the candles were electric – I had never encountered such an artifact among the objects belonging to any of the communities I had studied. Its uniqueness aroused many questions about the object's design and use.

The centuries-old practice of lighting of Sabbath candles has become one of the most prominent and well-known of Jewish traditions. Although formal religious law permits men as well as women, single or married, to perform this ritual, the lighting of Sabbath candles has become associated primarily with the feminine sphere – usually the mother, the woman playing the most important role in the family's life. Over the years, a spectrum of customs regarding the lighting of Sabbath candles emerged in the Jewish communities residing in Europe and the Muslim world, each of which acquired its own meaning. The customs have been intensified by elements of the material culture associated with the visual representation of Jewish culture (or folk art), a culture that largely expressed itself in the creation of

◂ Figure 1. Eternal Shabbes, Samuel Rotman, ~1985

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artifacts required to celebrate the commandments (such as the making of a special box for spices to be used in the Havdalah ceremony, the writing and decoration of marriage contracts, and the ornamentation of Hanukkah lamps as well as containers for the etrog or citron fruit used on Sukkot).

With respect to Sabbath candles, two factors are particularly salient for our discussion of Samuel Rotman's electric candles: the materials used as fuel (commonly wax or oil) and the implement used to light them, both from the perspective of their design, appearance, form, ornamentation and materials. Yet, before proceeding, I should mention some of the basic issues touching upon the lighting of Sabbath candles. Specifically, when is this ritual first mentioned? Why do women customarily light candles? And what is the customary number of candles to be lit?

Contrary to common beliefs, the lighting of candles on the Sabbath is not mentioned in the Bible. What is mentioned is lighting a fire on the Sabbath, which is strictly prohibited ("Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day").[1] Whereas the Samaritans and the Karaites take this prohibition literally, Talmudic sages, in their commentaries on this verse, effectively eased the restriction while stating that lighting a fire was prohibited during the Sabbath itself, doing so was possible and even welcome before the Sabbath's entry because it served the festive celebration of the Sabbath as well as other festivities.[2] This is apparently the original reason for lighting Sabbath candles and the transformation of the custom into an obligation[3] – that is, the provision of light during the festive Sabbath meal, which occurs after dark.

[1] Exodus, 35:3

[2] This issue was already discussed in the Mishnah ,tractate *Shabbat*, Chapter 1.

[3] In the language of the Babylonian Talmud: "Rabbi Nachman Bar Rabba said, lighting Sabbath candles is an obligation" (*Shabbat*, 25b).

This idea is generally associated with *Oneg Shabbat*, a concept taken from the Bible ("And call the Sabbath a delight").[4] For the Talmudic sages, this verse meant indulging in the enjoyment of spiritual and physical pleasures on the Sabbath (such as eating and drinking well and even having sexual relations). Such behavior was rationalized in relation to the lighting of candles: "'And call the Sabbath a delight' – means lighting of Sabbath candles. If you are seated in darkness, there is no delight".[5] The Medieval *Tosafists* expanded this argument, explaining that it is impossible to enjoy the meal without seeing the dishes served.[6] Later sources rationalize lighting the Sabbath lamp as an act "honoring Sabbath" or, in Rashi's words: "The Sabbath is honored in that no meal is important unless served in a place having light".[7] In addition to *Oneg Shabbat* and "in honor of Sabbath", we find a third argument, "domestic harmony", that is, the candles' light contributes to the creation of "familial tranquility." In other words, the candles' light creates a peaceful, conciliatory atmosphere among the household's members and prevents the squabbles and incidents that may erupt during darkness.[8]

[4] Isaiah, 58:13

[5] *Midrash Tanchuma*, Genesis, Noah, 1 (for an English translation, see Samuel A. Berman [ed. and trans.], *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* [Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Pub. House, 1996], 39-40). The meaningful phrase: "Should you be seated in darkness, it is no delight", does not appear in the ancient edition of the *Midrash Tanchuma* that was edited by Shlomo Buber (Vilna: The Widow and the Brothers Rom, 1885, Vol. 1, 27-28; in Hebrew). According to Leopold Zunz, the phrase was added in the ninth century during the dispute with the Karaites, who prohibited the kindling of the Sabbath lights prior to entry of the Sabbath so that to prevent its use after the Sabbath began. Cf. Marc Bregman, *The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature, Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003), 185 (Hebrew).

[6] See the Tosafot section in tractate S*habbat*, 25b.

[7] For Rashi's argument see the page from tractate *Shabbat* cited in note 6.

[8] In the words of R. Joseph Caro: "There is no peace at home without a [the Sabbath's] candle [=light]." See *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim*, 263, 3.

The material culture associated with lighting of the Sabbath candles during Biblical times was examined in minute detail in the Mishnah. The well-known quote on the subject, which opens with the words: "With what may they kindle [the Sabbath light] and with what may they not kindle them?" [9] begins a discussion of the wide range of materials to be used when preparing wicks and oils. Due to the importance of these tracts and their relationship to the Sabbath, they achieved a unique status in the liturgy and from the Gaonic period (sixth-eleventh centuries) onward they are recited in the synagogue every Sabbath eve, between the *mincha* (afternoon) and evening prayers. The materials recalled in the respective chapter come from the animal (for instance, the oil produced from a sheep's soft fatty tail) and the vegetable world (such as the *tapuah sdom* or desert Calotropis, a type of flowering plant also referred to as Sodom apples or a rubber bush, the hairs of which can be used to produce wicks).

Although the majority of these oils and wicks are listed as prohibited for use when lighting candles**,** their itemization accurately reflects the reality of daily life in Late Antiquity. Olive oil emerges from the list as an especially refined and highly appropriate oil, as Rabbi Tarfon declares: "They don't light with anything but olive oil".[10] This statement reflects the physical properties of choice grades of olive oil – such as clarity, density, purity, pleasing aroma and stability of the flame – which were recognized in this and later periods.[11] Alternatively, the preference for olive oil in the production of Sabbath (as well

[9] Mishnah, Shabbat, Chapter 2.

[10] Mishnah, Shabbat, 2, 2

[11] Compare, for example, with the paragraph "Laws of the Wick and Oil," *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim*, 264. Caro summaries the rules for the different oils as follows: "In any event, [the usage of] olive oil is a chosen [or: among the best] mitzvah (Ibid., 264, 12). For a study of the realia and background of the materials, oils and wicks mentioned by the rabbis of the Mishnah in Eretz Israel of the time, see Zohar Amar and Avivit Shwiky, *Ba-meh madlikin* (Elkanah: Mekhon Eretz Chefetz, 2003; in Hebrew with English summary).

as for Hanukkah) candles was accompanied by a clear symbolic relationship to the kindling used to fuel the menorah situated in the Holy Temple ("pure olive oil beaten for the light").[12] In doing so, the meaning of the mitzvah was strengthened because it relates to the main artifact found in the Temple but also to the ultimate symbol of Judaism during the Talmudic period.[13]

After the meticulous listing of oils and wicks, the tractate's chapter ends with a passage from which we learn that already in the time of the Mishnah, the mitzvah of lighting Sabbath candles was imposed on women rather than men: "On account of three transgressions women die in childbirth: for negligence (of the laws) during their menstruation, neglect of separating the first dough, and for neglecting to light the (Sabbath) lamp."[14] Over the generations, different explanations were offered for the essence of the woman's role in fulfilling these mitzvot, the relationships between them and their salience in her life. The respective three commandments eventually came to be called the "Mitzvot Chanah ", the mnemonic Hebrew acronym for the female mitzvot in Judaism (i.e., **Ch**alla, **N**ida, **H**adlaka), while simultaneously tying it to the ideal of womanhood captured in the image of the Prophet Samuel's pious mother.

One of the explanations commonly offered in Late Antiquity that tied the three mitzvot to the severity of the punishment, should a woman neglect to perform them, referred to Eve's sin when in the Garden of Eden: "Why was she [woman] given the precept of menstruation? Because she spilled the blood of the first man [Adam]. And why was she given the precept of challa? Because she corrupted Adam, who was the challah of the world. And why was she given the precept of Sabbath lights? Because she extinguished the

[12] Exodus, 27:20.

[13] For a comprehensive selection of illustrations and articles, see the exhibition catalogue: Yael Israel (ed.), *In the Menorah's Light – The Story of a Symbol*, (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1999).

[14] Mishna, Shabbat, 2, 6

soul of Adam, which is described in these words: "the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord'".[15]

Elsewhere I have discussed the visual representation of these three commandments in European Jewish art.[16] For the purpose of the present discussion, it is sufficient to note that within this corpus, images of women lighting Sabbath lamps represent female piety and their specific sphere of activities within the Jewish world. Moreover, sources from the Middle Ages onward treated the mitzvah of lighting the Sabbath lamp not as punishment but as a woman's unique contribution to the household. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides wrote: "Women have a greater obligation in this regard than men, for they are normally at home and are involved in the household tasks".[17]

A further issue in this regard pertains to the number of candles to be lit. In the Talmudic linguistic form, the reference is frequently noted in the singular: *ner shabbat*; mention is made of a single candle even when citing the obligation to kindle Sabbath lights.[18] To this day this phrasing is echoed in the blessing generally recited when lighting candles: *le-hadleek ner shel Shabbat* ("to kindle the light of the Sabbath)". However, in only a few instances did the Jewish communities light only one candle. I personally witnessed a rare example of lighting one sole candle many years ago, when I visited Uzbekistan for the first time. My informants among the Jews of Bukhara were surprised to hear that other communities light more than

[15] Proverbs, 20: 27, in *Yalkut Shimoni*, Genesis, 23; cf. also *Midrash Tanchuma*, Genesis, Noah, 1.

[16] Shalom Sabar, "Mitzvot Hannah: Visual Depictions of the 'Three Women's Commandments' among the Jews of Europe from the Middle Ages to Late Nineteenth Century," in: *Textures – Culture, Literature, Folklore for Galit Hasan-Rokem vol. 2*, eds. H. Salamon & A. Shinan (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2013), 383-413 (Hebrew; English summary).

[17] Maimonides , *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Zemanim* ["Times"], Shabbat, Ch. 5, *halacha* 3.

[18] Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat*, 25b.

one candle. I should also mention that the blessing over a single candle (more precisely, a wick), is preserved in the Portuguese among the Crypto-Jews (*anusim*) who, for centuries, carried out this commandment in secret: "Blessed be the Lord, my God, my only God, who has commanded us to fulfill this very blessed, sacred commandment to light the holy wick and celebrate the Lord's holy evening, so that He may lighten our souls and deliver us from our guilt, offenses and sins".[19]

Turning to Ashkenazi Halakha from the Middle Ages, we find the custom of lighting two candles, which is first mentioned in the second half of the twelfth century by R. Eliezer ben Yoel HaLevi of Mainz (known by the Hebrew acronym Ravyah, born c. 1140, died after 1220): "It appears to me customary to light two candles, one [for the mitzvah, and the other is] meant to provide light while eating [the Sabbath meal], and this cannot be done properly unless there are two lights".[20] According to the Ravyah's interpretation, like those of other Ashkenazi authorities, the Halakhic explanation for lighting two candles is that one candle, in Talmudic tradition, is dedicated to *Oneg Shabbat*, meaning "not to sit in darkness during the Sabbath". The second is "in honor of Shabbat", that is, for the purpose of

[19] This original text in Portuguese and its translation into Hebrew (by Schulamith Hava HaLevy) appear in Samuel Schwarz, *The New-Christians in Portugal in the 20th Century*, ed. C. B. Stuczynsky, (Jerusalem: The Dinur Center for Research in Jewish History, 2005 [1925]), 168. Other versions are available, with interesting differences, but they all mention a single candle or wick. For an additional version in Hebrew translation, see Aliza Lavie (ed.), *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book* (New York: Spiegel & Garu, Random House, 2008), 166-169 (and see there, 154-183, for a collection of prayers upon lighting candles as recited by women from various Jewish communities). See also idem, *Women's Customs – A Journey of Jewish Customs, Rituals, Prayers and Stories*, (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2012), 179-184 (Hebrew).

[20] Eliezer ben Joel HaLevi, *Sefer Ravyah*, section 139. See the edition of Avigdor Eptovitcher, 2nd printing (Jerusalem: The Harry Fischel Institute for Research in Jewish Law, 1964), Part I, 265 (Hebrew). Cf. Israel M. Ta-Shema, "Candle of Honor," in Ta-Shema, Early Franco-German Ritual and Custom (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), esp. 126-127 (Hebrew).

fulfilling the mitzvah or to comply with the need to remember that one candle is lit not only for its benefits, but also for its acknowledgement of our compliance with a core religious obligation.[21]

Other reasons were later added in support of the explanation that two is the correct and more meaningful number of candles. Most often mentioned was the relationship to observation of the Sabbath as it appears in the two versions of the Ten Commandments: One candle in relation to the verse from the Book of Exodus: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy",[22] and the second candle in reference to the slight but highly meaningful variation found in the Deuteronomy: "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy".[23] Other sources grounded the reason for lighting two candles in the dualism associated with keeping the Sabbath, which expresses the "importance of the day whose virtues are double" – such as the two loaves of challah bread in memory of the Biblical *lechem mishneh* (originally denoting the double portion of manna that fell on Fridays in the desert),[24] or the two offerings sacrificed on the Sabbath – "And on the Sabbath day two he-lambs of the first year without blemish".[25]

Alternatively, in Germany, Poland and other places, no limitation was placed on the number of candles. In Germany, a candelabra having seven or more branches was lit, while in Poland, there might be a candlestick with three or more spouts, according to the number of children. Under the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah, some lit the number of candles that bore

[21] In the words of Ta-Shema" :In Ashkenaz of the Middle Ages the widespread custom had been not to take advantage or enjoy the single Sabbath candle, but to dedicate that candle primarily to the honor and sanctity of the Sabbath, and lighting additional candles, distinct from the Sabbath candle, for the purpose of light" (*ibid.*, 126).

[22] Exodus, 20: 8.

[23] Deuteronomy, 5: 11.

[24] Exodus, 22: 16.

[25] Numbers, 28: 9.

a mystical value for them, such as ten candles arranged in three levels, in compliance with the ten Kabbalistic *Sephirot* (emanations or spheres). Nor was the number of candles uniform among the communities in Islamic lands, and even in the same community. For example in Morocco, the number of lights varied from to four or to eight, as we can deduct from the Sabbath lamps that came down to us.

The implement used to kindle the Sabbath lights acquired, over the ages, highly varied forms, with each reflecting the material culture, art, customs and relationships with the host environment of the distinctive Jewish community. To date, no comprehensive research has been conducted on the subject, although several important studies have been completed on selected communities while others provide detailed analyses of specific items.[26] Due to space limitations, I mention here just a few of the main features as they evolved in the various communities surveyed.

The Talmudic Sabbath lamp apparently differed little from the contemporary simple oil lamps used for domestic lighting.[27] Workshops in ancient Israel and its environs produced large quantities of oil lamps from different materials, primarily clay and, to a lesser degree, bronze and other metals. Clay lamps were especially common during the Roman and Byzantine periods due to the possibility of producing numerous copies by means of molds. The closed clay lamp was produced in the shape of an elongated pear whose main components were a fuel chamber containing oil, an opening through which

[26] The bulk of research has been conducted on German Sabbath candelabra. See Adi Blumberg, *Hanging Sabbath Lamps* (Jerusalem: The Adi Foundation, 2009) (Hebrew and English). See also Susan Nashman-Freiman, *The Sabbath Lamp – Development of the Implements and Customs for Lighting the Sabbath Lights among the Jews of Ashkenaz* (PhD Dissertation, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2013) (Hebrew).

[27] Cf. Yehoshua (Joshua) Brand, *Klei ha-Cheres be-Sifrut ha-Talmud [Clay Lamps in the Talmudic Literature*] (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1953) (Hebrew).

the oil was poured, and a nozzle that held the wick (Fig. 2). Such a clay lamp was used on several occasions, apparently on the Sabbath as well, although some clay lamps were exclusively produced to be used on the Sabbath.

The decorations found on Jewish clay lamps—such as a menorah, a shofar, Etrog or palm branch (*lulav*)—were widespread in Jewish art for the entire period.[28] It is nevertheless possible that the motif of the menorah was used to recall the connection between the Sabbath lamp and the menorah used in the Temple, as noted previously, although it is clear that we are speaking of a fairly standard decorative pattern. Moreover, at times the standard design was enhanced to resolve a problem raised in the Mishnah—how to lengthen the hours during which the Sabbath lamp might burn.[29] Thus, Varda Sussman identified a clay oil lamp) third to fourth century CE) of unique shape, found in the Hebron hills, that was specially designed for use without desecrating the Sabbath by adding oil.[30]

During the Middle Ages, a new type of Sabbath lamp was produced in Germany that continued to be used up to the Modern Era: an ornately decorated metal lamp that was hung from the ceiling with the aid of a shaft; at its end a receptacle shaped in the form of a star was affixed, whose long rays served as oil containers; under the star, a drip bowl was placed (Fig. 3). Use of the type of this lighting was prevalent in German society, whereas the Jews used it only on special ceremonial occasions, such as on the Sabbath eve and during Jewish calendar festivities, as we can see from the Passover Haggadah illustrations and other works of art.

[28] For a detailed discussion of the various motifs, see: Varda Sussman, *Ornamented Jewish Oil-lamps: From the Destruction of the Second Temple Through the Bar-Kokhba Revolt* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1982), especially 20-28.

[29] Mishnah, Shabbat, 2, 4.

[30] Varda Sussman, "A Sabbath Lamp from the Third to Fourth Century CE," *Atikot*, 6 (1970): 80-81, Table XXIV, 5.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

In an illuminated manuscript known as the *Austrian Siddur* (c. 1300) from southern Germany,[31] there appears an illustration of a woman, whose head is covered by a headdress and a shawl; she holds a long rod by means of which she kindles the hanging Sabbath lamp in the presence of her husband. A star-shaped lamp from about the same period, in Gothic style and having six spouts, has also survived. It was discovered in the excavations of the Jewish Quarter of Deutz, a neighborhood resting on the banks of the Rhine (now a part of Cologne).[32] Later, after use of this type of lamp continued primarily among the Jews, the general population came to call this type *Judenstern* ("Jews' star"). This term appears mainly in German literature whereas in Jewish literature, the lamp is frequently referred to as the *lampa*. Use of this lamp in all its variations, including its refinement by means of intricate, delicate craftsmanship, was produced by several of Germany's great silversmiths (especially in Frankfurt) for the community's powerful and well-to-do.[33] In parallel, the brass lamps cast in standard molds for the ordinary family remained popular almost up to the Holocaust.

This lamp was popular in the communities which were culturally attached to Germany (such as those situated in Alsace), but its popularity also spread to Italy and the Netherlands. The Italian and Dutch Sabbath lamps, produced from diverse metals, are characterized by wider and deeper drip bowls and short rays; they were usually hung by means of chains rather than a shaft. Similar to the custom in Germany, the number

[31] Manuscript Mic 8972, fol. 119b, Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York. For more illustrations and a discussion of the lamp, see Sabar, "Mitzvot Hannah: Visual Depictions of the 'Three Women's Commandments,'" 385-87.

[32] See Norman L. Kleeblatt, Vivian B. Mann, *Treasures of the Jewish Museum* (New York: Jewish Museum & Universe Books, 1986), 30-31.

[33] See for example Vivian B. Mann, "The Golden Age of Jewish Ceremonial Art in Frankfurt: Metalwork of the Eighteenth Century," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 31 (1986): 389-403.

of the oil containers could vary, sometimes reaching 20 in number. Following the fashion imported to Holland from China, Sabbath lamps were also produced in Delft porcelain with blue ornamentation, set against a white background (known as Delft Blue). This style of ornamental porcelain blue vessels was popular in the Netherlands particularly during the eighteenth century, the same period in which the Jewish lamp in our possession was produced.

Oil lamps with varying numbers of spouts were also common among the communities in the Muslim world. Surprisingly similar in form to the German lamp is the Yemenite *masraja* lamp. Although made of stone rather than metal, the basic shape of the German and Yemenite lamps is very similar: a bowl containing oil with many spouts, connected to the ceiling by means of either a brass rod or a chain (Fig. 4). While this basic form was known in antiquity, the receptacle in the Yemenite version is made of one block of pale beryl, reminiscent in color to alabaster, with wicks placed in the notches of the surrounding spouts, and sesame or mustard oil poured into the vessel's container.

Stone was also used for Hanukkah lamps in Yemen and in both these cases, special meaning was attributed to this material, given that stone is considered not susceptible to ritual impurity.[34] An oil-lit Sabbath lamp or *candil* was taken to Morocco by the Jews after their expulsion from Spain; instead of the ceiling, this lamp was hung from a rod affixed to the wall. Made of either tin or brass (among the wealthy, it might also be made of silver), the majority of these lamps held a square oil container whose front (and sometimes back) corners were "pinched", with each corner holding a wick (Fig. 5). The lamp could contain more than one container, with an additional square oil container, placed on top, having two or four spouts,

[34] For further details and a photograph, see Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper, *The Yemenites. Two Thousand Years of Jewish Culture* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2000), 172-173.

making it possible for up to six wicks to burn simultaneously. Among Moroccan Jews, the number six had a symbolic value in the context of the Sabbath, referring to the commandment: "Six days shalt though labor, and do all thy work".[35]

This group of lamps was embellished with the finest motifs known to Moroccan decorative art, such as pairs of birds, or lilies, together with other vegetal forms, entwined within a Muslim classic octagonal shape (comprised of two superimposed squares). Some of these lamps were distinguished by an engraved inscription bearing the name of a deceased woman (e.g.: "Light [dedicated] to the ascent of the soul of [=in the memory of] Rachel, wife of / Shem Tov Assayag / may the Lord protect and watch over him, who [was taken to the 'Eternal House' [=cemetery] on/the new year 5715 [=28/29 September 1954]").[36] By adding the inscription, the Sabbath lamp was used for in an additional and most exceptional way—as a *yahrzeit* or memorial lamp commemorating an important deceased female member of the family. As far as I know, this practice and type of lamp, however, was followed exclusively by the Jews living in Morocco's cities and not in the villages of the Atlas Mountains.[37]

[35] *Le Judaisme du Maghreb: Traditions et coutumes suivant le cycle de l'année* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2000), 172-173.

[36] The lamp is part of the collection belonging to Paul Dahan, Brussels; a photograph of this item can be found in the collection's site: https://www.moroccan-judaism.org/collection (accessed February 2022).

[37] The author of this article intends to write an article on this unique group of Sabbath lamps. For another object belonging to the feminine rituals performed in the home by Moroccan Sephardim, see: Shalom Sabar, "The Mezuzah Case: A Special Artistic Ritual Object in the Life of the Jewish Woman in the Moroccan Cities," in: *Dameta leTamar: Studies in honor of Tamar Alexander* Vol. 2 [*El Prezente, Studies in Sephardic Culture*, 8-9/2), eds. E. Papo, H. Weiss, Y. Bentolila, Y. Harari (Beer-Sheva: The Moshe David Gaon Center for Ladino Studies, University of Beer-Sheva in the Negev, 2015), 575-600 (Hebrew).

Oil lamps having varying numbers of wicks were also known in communities other than those previously mentioned (e.g., in India and Afghanistan; see Fig. 6).[38] And yet, for the past few generations in Israel as in most of the Diaspora, the implement most closely associated with candle lighting in the Jewish consciousness is not a lamp whose light is fueled by oil but a metal candelabra, affixed with beeswax candles. The number of candles etched into "national memory" is two, set in a pair of brass candlesticks of familiar and most popular design. We therefore find that today's most common image of Sabbath candle-lighting is that of a woman, whose head is covered by a headdress or scarf, lighting a pair of brass candlesticks. This image reverberated in advertisements and illustrated children's books in addition to brochures exhorting women to light Sabbath candles (such as those distributed by Chabad), Rosh Ha-Shana greeting cards, illustrated pamphlets of Grace after the Meals, as well as film and television, whether in Israel or abroad.

Hence, this conventional image of women lighting candles did not emerge out of thin air; it has long and sturdy roots in Jewish culture. Although the use of wax candles is mentioned as early as the Middle Ages,

[38] For examples from Afghanistan, see: Zohar Hanegbi and Bracha Yaniv (eds.), *Afghanistan: The Synagogue and Jewish Home* (Jerusalem: The Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991), 143-144. With respect to India, customs vary from one Jewish community to anther (Cochin, Bnei Yisrael, and Baghdad); see: Orpa Slapak (ed.), *The Jews of India - A Story of Three Communities*, exhibition catalog, (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1995), 78, 82-83, 90-91.

and even documented in fifteenth century Italian Jewish art,[39] the main Jewish community making use of brass candlesticks with wax candles in the last two centuries is clearly that of Eastern Europe. Despite the Biblical-Talmudic preference for olive oil (see above), researchers believe that olive oil was rare and quite costly. As a result, the Jews of Eastern European used candles made of beeswax, which was more available and prevalent, easy to produce and much less costly.[40]

Eastern European candlesticks commonly took various forms. Unlike the German hanging lamp, they were generally placed upon the Sabbath table, a fact that influenced eating habits because the candlesticks became, from the viewpoint of the Halakha, *muktzeh* (namely, an object forbidden for use on the Sabbath) — meaning the candlestick could not be removed from the table or from the tablecloth upon which it rested, making it impossible to shift from meat to dairy dishes, thus influencing directly the food habits for the Sabbath.

[39] For a discussion of the halakhic origins, see Nashman-Freiman, *Sabbath Lamp – Development of the Implements and Customs*, 123-124. Several Italian manuscript miniatures depict candlesticks of two candle holders, probably made of copper (based on their yellowish color), placed on the festive table. See, for example, the miniatures in the *Passover Haggadah contained in the manuscript* known as "The *Rothschild Miscellany*," produced in northern Italy in ca. 1470 for an Ashkenazi family (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, Ms. 180/51, folios 156a, 162b, 166a, etc.). For more on this and other related issues, cf. Franz Landsberger, "The Origin of Ritual Implements for the Sabbath," in *Beauty in Holiness: Studies in Jewish Customs and Ceremonial Art*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (New York: Ktav, 1970), 180-81 and Fig. i.

[40] Mordechai Narkiss had already voiced this hypothesis in 1939 as part of his discussion on Eastern European Hanukkah lamps, which also used bees wax as opposed to oil .See M .Narkiss, *The Hanukkah Lamp* (Jerusalem: Bnei Bezalel, 1939), 22 (Hebrew). Additional hypotheses raised regarding the choice of kindling referred to climate (liquid oil hardens in cold climates) and the desire to avoid the use of the oils commonly used in Polish society but forbidden to Jews. Cf. Nashman-Freiman, *Sabbath Lamp – Development of the Implements and Customs*, 125-126.

Figure 8

Figure 9

A popular and well-loved form of candleholder, known in the literature as the "Krakow Candelabra", was made of brass and had four branches. We also know of candelabra of three, five or even seven branches (Fig. 7).[41] Several hypotheses have been formulated to explain the changing number of branches. Folk tradition, for example, speaks of adjusting the number of branches to reflect, as mentioned earlier, the number of children (the branches could be screwed onto the main shaft and be adjusted as needed). Rabbinic tradition also assigned a symbolic meaning to each number, often according to Kabbalistic doctrines.[42] The candelabra were cast in brass according to a simple technique and were often decorated with symmetrical motifs favored by Eastern Europe craftsmen, whether a pair of lions, a pair of deer, a single- or two-headed eagles (animals which symbolize ideal qualities according to a famous mishnah in *Pirkei Avot*, 5, 20), or flowers and plants.[43] On several occasions, a single word would be engraved on the front and back of each lion's body; when read together, they create a phrase comprised of four words: "[To] kindle the Sabbath light".

Parallel to this ornate candelabra, and perhaps even more common, was a pair of candlesticks that were similar in their decoration to the candelabra

[41] The subject was mentioned by one of the great Polish rabbis, R. Moshe Isserles ("The Rema"; 1530-1572), who wrote: "It is allowed to add and kindle three or even four lights, and so we did. A woman who once forgot to kindle lights throughout her life three candles" (Rema, *HaMapah [*Glosses on the *Shulchan Arukh], Orach Chaim*, 263, 1).

[42] For instance, R. Isaiah HaLevi Horowitz ("Shelah ha-Kodosh," 1558-1630) writes: "I saw the fastidious kindling [of lamps] according to the secret of the seven lights, which is correct, because it [fits the verse] 'When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the candlestick' [Numbers 8: 2], while other kindle ten lights because they all together illuminate. And both methods are the words of the living God." Horowitz, *Shney Luchot HaBrit* (Warsaw: Y. M. Alter Press, 1930), 101 sec. 72 (tractate "Shabbat" - "The Secret of Lighting the Sabbath Lamp").

[43] For a broad selection of examples see: Aleksandr Kantsedikas, *Bronze* ("Masterpieces of Jewish Art," Vol. 1) (Moscow: Image 1989).

used for illumination in the broader society. Among wealthy families, these might be a pair of silver candelabra, ornately embellished with different motifs and objects. Other families used silver-plated candelabra (Fig. 8), whereas the majority owned candelabra made of brass. Images of more simple candlesticks generally appear in paintings by the period's artists (such as Isidor Kaufmann) and Jewish folk art – such a large series of New Year's and other greeting cards printed in Poland and its neighbors. These items disseminated this style throughout the Jewish world (Fig. 9). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when the masses of Eastern European immigrants arrived in the United States, the image of this particular candelabra spread even further, as we see from Jewish greeting cards printed in New York during the first decades of the 20th century.[44]

Eastern European Jews carried this tradition elsewhere as well. Numerous customs and artifacts that are currently considered by the Israeli public as traditional or generally "Jewish" items originated, in effect, in Eastern Europe (an outstanding example is the braided challah, eaten on the Sabbath eve, or the legless Kiddush cup). Modern Judaica artists likewise frequently prefer Eastern European patterns to those developed in their home countries, such as the elaborately East-European looking decorated candlestick designed by the German-born Ludwig Yehuda Wolpert (1900-1981), a silversmith, who was active in Israel and the U.S. (Fig. 10).[45]

[44] See for example: Shalom Sabar, "The Custom of Sending Jewish New Year Cards: Its History and Artistic Development," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 19/20 (1998): 85-110 (Hebrew), Fig. 17 (New Year's greeting postcard with an illustration of the *Birkat Habanim* ("Blessing of the Children"), recited on the Sabbath eve, New York, early twentieth century).

[45] On the Judaica created by Wolpert, who was influenced primarily by the clean-lined designs of the Bauhaus School, see Sharon Weiser-Ferguson (curator), *Forging Ahead: Wolpert and Gumbel, Israeli Silversmiths for the Modern Age* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2012).

The Eastern European tradition also journeyed to other places. An outstanding example is the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi community in Argentina and other Latin American countries, who devoutly preserved their folk culture with the exception of a few changes in the production and design of ceremonial and other ritual artifacts.[46] The electric candles that are the subject of this discussion (Fig. 1) are a fitting example of the continuity of Eastern European Jewish tradition and folk art on the one hand, and the intriguing, unique changes introduced in that tradition in modern times on the other.

Like many immigrants who remain deeply attached to their home culture, Diego Rotman's grandparents likewise brought with them a pair of typical candlesticks (Fig. 11), produced in Poland, to their new home in Buenos Aires. These candlesticks continued to loyally serve them for many years. Today, after the couple's passing, they came into the possession of their grandson Diego, in Jerusalem. The couple's son, Samuel, did not place any special importance to the traditional candlesticks, not only as a result of the tendencies toward secularization found among young Jews of his generation living in Argentina's capital, but also (and most probably) because of the remoteness of the old traditions they represented. That remoteness was, nevertheless, only partial, thanks to the respect that youngsters like him continued to feel for their parents and their culture.

While employed in an electrical appliance shop selling popular and highly demanded goods, Samuel Rotman decided to create, in his spare

[46] As far as I know, no research explicitly on this subject has been conducted although numerous examples and short discussions have appeared in the small number of books published on Latin America's synagogues. See: Mónica Unikel-Fasja, *Sinagogas de México* (México City: Fundación Activa, 2002); Jaime Spitzcovsky et al., *Sinagogas do Brasil* (Sao Paulo: Banco Safra, 2010); Sara Mónica Vaisman, *Arquitectura de las sinagogas de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Librería Concentra, 2011).

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

time, a modernistic candelabra that would integrate values from the past with contemporary aesthetic values. And so, in the late 1980s in his home city of Buenos Aires, free of any deep religious motives and without any planning or thorough historical-artistic knowledge of the subject, Samuel contrived an item of Judaica that is, at least from my perspective, totally original. At first glance, we appear to be speaking of a most improbable concoction: parts of various products found in the shop – an old electrical wire, a black plug, white metal rods, a stylized oval stand, blinking lights, and screws – were joined and soldered into a pair of electrical candles. In doing so, Samuel designed a traditional ceremonial item resembling a familiar and well-loved artifact but more aesthetically and functionally attuned to modern society.

Samuel's parents, who had been raised in the lap of tradition and who had brought with them a pair of candlesticks belonging to the "old world", lovingly accepted their son's gift and his desire to update their traditional culture. They used the two pairs of candlesticks now in their possession – one made of silver and the other of electrical implements – simultaneously although the electric candles gradually replaced the traditional candlesticks. During the last years of his life, Samuel's father lit only the electric candles.

Only one matter now requires a bit of discussion: The ages old halakhic traditions that dealt in great detail with the production of the Sabbath lamp, underlie the electric candlesticks' design. When planning this modernist artifact, Samuel Rotman, apparent without any prior knowledge or conscious intent, captured the tangle of halakhic issues emerging at the end of the nineteenth century with the entry of electric light bulbs and other electrical appliances into daily life. As to our present discussion, Samuel's candles raise a broader issue: Is it permitted to use electricity on the Sabbath and, more narrowly, is it permitted to light an electric Sabbath candle?

Numerous disputes and diverse rabbinical approaches have emerged for confronting the halakhic conundrums placed before the traditional Jewish world by new technology. For instance, is lighting an electric lamp or candle similar to lighting a fire, which the Bible prohibits? Is the use of electricity included among the thirty-nine categories of activities prohibited on the Sabbath, and if so, which category of these activities? Is turning on an electrical appliance on the Sabbath considered an act of "use" or "creation," which are also prohibited on the Sabbath? Is this prohibition decreed by the Bible (de-'oraita) or by the rabbis (de-rabbanan)? And so forth.[47]

With the advent of light bulbs, even narrower issues, such as lighting an electric rather than an oil lamp or wax candles, aroused halakhic debates. The first to discuss these issues in detail was Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Schmelkes, the Chief Rabbi of Lvov (Lemberg), who in his volume of *responsa, Beit Yitzhak*, discussed questions that had emerged with modern technologies (telephone, telegraph, electricity). R. Schmelkes went so far as to delve into the kashrut of electric (or incandescent) light (bulbs) within the framework of the Sabbath. This initial discussion already revealed a deep understanding of the new technology and its halachic implications. R. Schmelkes consequently ruled that:

[47] For examples of the Rabbinical literature on the subject, see: Shmuel Aharon Yudelovitz, *Sefer ha-Chashmal le-Ohr ha-Halachah ["Electricity in the Framework of Halachah*] (Jerusalem: Horev, 1954) (Hebrew); Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *Kovetz Maamarim be-Inyanei Chashmal be-Shabbat [A Selection Articles regarding Electricity on the Sabbath*] (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Technology and Halacha, 1935) (Hebrew); Moshe Harari, *Kedushat HaShabbat: Rules Regarding Electrical Appliances on Shabbat and Religious Festivals, 2 Vols.* (Jerusalem: M. Harari, 2006) (Hebrew); Ovadia Yosef, *Shu"T "Me'ayn Omer": me-Asher Nisha'lu Meshekh ha-Shanim al-Yadei ha-Tzibur be-Nochechuti oh be-Emtzauti ["Responsa: Questions Raised Over the Years by the Public Before Me or with My Intervention, 4 Vols.*], esp. Vol. 2 "Electricity on the Sabbath" (Jerusalem: Y. Naki, 2008) (Hebrew).

> Regarding whether we can make a blessing over a gas light, or over electrical [incandescent] Sabbath candle – in my humble opinion, we are permitted to recite the blessing [over an electrical light used as a Sabbath candle] and thereby fulfill the obligation of the mitzvah. In my opinion I believe, one can recite [the blessing] "to light a candle" over any source of light, [material] soaked in oil or a wick serving as a "candle" as well as any source of light attached to any implement having platinum filaments emitting rays of light or carbon arc lamp, without worrying whether this act is totally groundless.[48]

R. Schmelkes' position was not accepted by all the rabbinical religious authorities, who voiced numerous reservations. Some differentiated between an arc lamp, which functioned on the basis of heated platinum filaments as described by R. Schmelkes, and other, more up-to-date technologies (e.g., neon lights). Other authorities, such as R. Avraham Yitzchak ha-Kohen Kook (1865-1935), called for some discrimination between oil lamps or beeswax candles and electric bulbs, while arguing that the latter do not meet the appropriate criterion with respect to either Hanukkah or Sabbath candles, "because they did not exist when *Chazal* amended the rules for fulfilling the Mitzvah".[49]

Sephardic rabbis, as well as rabbis from Islamic countries, also began to discuss this issue before establishment of the State of Israel, but

[48] Yitzhak Yehuda Ben Haim Shmuel Shmelkish, Responsa Beit Yitzhak, *Yoreh De'ah*, Part I, *Przemyśl*, 1875, facsimile edition (Jerusalem, Chatam Sofer Institute, 1973), *Yoreh De'ah* 5 ["Meat in Milk"], 91b. For an additional discussion see ibid., *Yoreh De'ah*, Part II (*Przemyśl*, 1875), *Mikve'oth* ["Ritual Baths"], sec. 31, 34a. (Hebrew).

[49] Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Mitzvot Raiyah :Birurei ve-Chidushei Halachot"] Halachic Clarifications, Innovation and Comments Regard the Four Sections) Turim (of The Shulchan Arukh and Its Commentators*] (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), *Orach Chaim*, sec. 673, 85-86 (Hebrew).

especially after their *aliyah* (immigration to Israel). The first Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880-1953), argued that should a mishap occur during the Sabbath meal "due to an electrical power failure, the *Oneg Shabbat* is interrupted", meaning the blessing over the candles becomes void; hence in his judgment, it is prohibited to use electric lights as Sabbath candles.[50] As a result of this problem (i.e., the sudden break in the flow of electrical current), R. Ben-Sion Abba Shaul (1924-1998), who was born in Jerusalem to a family that immigrated to Israel from Iran and served as head of the Sephardic Yeshiva Porat Yossef in Jerusalem, sanctioned the use of electric light bulbs so long as they were not connected to the general electric grid but to a "direct current from which all the electricity was produced"— such as a "battery [the word 'battery' appears in the original, in parentheses] or a matzber [electric storage cell]".[51] R. Ovadia Yosef (1920-2013) also sanctioned electric bulbs, although only in situations where neither oil lamps nor beeswax candles are available.[52]

With respect to the subject of our discussion, the conclusion demanded is that an artifact that may appear, at first glance, to contradict institutional religion and custom, there are, after all, unmistakable instances where halakhic authorities permit the use of such an implement and even view

[50] Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, *Mishpetei Ouziel, [Responsa According to My Limited Comprehension*] (Tel Aviv: Yaakov Levitzki Publishers, 1935), Part I, *Orach Chaim ve-Yorei De'ah*, sec. 7, 25 (Hebrew).

[51] Ben-Sion Abba Shaul, *Sefer Ohr le-Zion] Responsa - Rulings and Examinations of Halakhic issues arranged by the Order of the Shulchan Arukh*...] (Jerusalem: Porat Yossef Yeshiva and the Ohr le-Zion Institute, 1993), II: *Orach Chaim I*, 170, with a further discussion in the notes, 170-171 (Hebrew).

[52] "In every place where it is absolutely impossible to obtain oil or beeswax candles, it possible to bless and light electric candles, which satisfies the obligation to light [candles]". See Ovadia Yosef, *Sefer Chazon Ovadia [The Book of Ovadia's Vision: Rules for the Sabbath], Part I* (Jerusalem: The Maor Yisrael Institute, 2008), 212 (Hebrew).

it as preferable, so long as it allows people to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting candles on the Sabbath's eve (Fig. 12).[53]

In conclusion, the electrical candles, visually so remote from the Sabbath lamps and candelabra we have been discussing, truthfully express the progression of this artifact during its long and varied history, whether from the perspective of design or of halakha. Beyond their use as Sabbath candles, which some authorities have sanctioned from a halakhic perspective, Samuel Rotman's electric candles capture contemporary Jewish ethnography in an intriguing way. After coming to Israel in 2008, the candles were displayed as part of an exhibition of contemporary Jewish art, held at Beit Hatfutsot (The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv), where they were captioned as "The Eternal Sabbath".[54] The candles were again displayed at the Department of Ethnography, the Mamuta Art and Media Center (*Museon shel haAchshavi*, Jerusalem), after which they found a home in the Museum's permanent exhibit, installed at Beit Hansen (Hansen House). In doing so, Lea Mauas and Diego Rotman, the artists so closely associated with Sala-Manca, expropriated the candles to transform them into artistic-ethnographic artifacts, immersed with meanings that go beyond their initial, traditional and straightforward use.

[53] Thus, for instance, some (according to stringent rabbinical recommendations) light a pair of electric candles in hospitals or hotels abroad where the lighting of live fires indoors is prohibited. The Zomet Institute (*Makhon Tzomet*, Tzomet being an acronym for *Tzevtei Mada'a ve-Torah*, lit. *Teams of Science and Torah*) produces electric candleholders that respond to these contingencies (as in Fig. 12).

[54] The exhibition, entitled "The "Drama of Identities", was curated by Irena Gordon. Although a catalogue was not published, a description of the event can be found at the Museum's site: http://www.bh.org.il/he/event/%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%90%D7%98%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%96%D7%94%D7%95%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA/

As someone involved in this field of Jewish art for many years, this artifact caught my attention immediately after I first heard of its existence. This short article is therefore a tribute to the innocent creativity of its producer and his contribution to the continuity of the world of Jewish traditional artifacts.

▾ Aron Haesh (Fire Ark). Sala-Manca. Embroidery on velvet cloth, fire extinguisher cabinet. 2017.


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