

Family Traditions and Chanukah Crafts

by Eileen Chadis Wood

Chanukah - the holiday of miracles and lights. Often when I think of Chanukah I think of candles and lights. The miracle of the oil lasting eight days always makes me want to light candles. Real candles and lots of them!

As someone who loves making Judaica, it means finding new ways to make Chanukah candles each year. It is fun to try to make something different for a holiday that most think of as simply buying a box of candles, a plastic dreidel, and some chocolate GELT.

It is a challenge to come up with some new Jewish craft to put on my educational web page to excite someone else to try to make a craft. Even those who think they have no artistic skills. Especially them.

When asked to write another article this year about Chanukah crafts and traditions for ShalomBoston, it again made me think of my childhood. Causing flashes of memories of my growing up in Chelsea although I live so far away now.

With the years passing and many things turning to electricity, the magic of the candles and the beauty of real candles' flames still move me. I remember back to the excitement of being allowed to light the candles and to possibly be allowed even to light the wooden match. I loved my parents' simple aluminum hannukiyah (menorah), a twisted shape with its Star of David on the side of the low long frame. A familiar style with my mother's siblings married in the late 40's. I treasure an inherited one in my own house. We love the new fancy ceramic-style ones, but feel we need to use the inherited ones, both big and small, to keep alive the memory of their long-departed owners. Of course, the kids would light as many menorahs as I would let them. Four seems to be the tradition we will continue for now, one for each of us.

When reading stories of people taking their menorahs or hannukiyot and placing them near the window for all to see, I would sadly think "can not do that here, it is not safe." Was it not safe because of my Mother's heavy winter drapes that she carefully would hang before Rosh Hashanah each year? Would they catch on fire? Or was it not safe because we did not want to have strangers see we were Jews?

Things were fine for Jews in Chelsea in the 50's and 60's when I was a child. Most of my teachers were Jewish. We had an active YMHA where I went most days after school or Hebrew school. Three Hebrew Schools and a small Lubavitch School. The public schools closed for the High Holidays. But still we did not put our candles in the window.

Thousands of Jews still lived there, even more at the turn of the century, as it was the city where most Jews in Boston came when they first arrived in the country. But the fear of neighbors and of course strangers was deep in my parents' memories from stories from my grandparents and the "old country". Hearing these horrible stories both sets of grandparents shared of terrible things that happened at the turn of the century to all of their family, their fears were justified!

Now I live in the South, Southern Virginia. The neighborhoods near me look much like Newton, Brookline or Sharon. Small neighborhoods with lots of trees near main roads and malls. But very few Jews for neighbors. Very few Jews in the community compared to most of New England. Oh, we have a day school where my son goes a mere forty-five minutes away by bus. We have five shuls in our area and many more over the bridge to Norfolk. A JCC/UJC less than two miles from my house with a new preschool building, and a full time kindergarten I helped start. It has a very active after-school Community Hebrew school.

In my neighborhood over the years, few had put up Christmas lights. Most just had single lights in each window and some garlands. Very colonial looking as Colonial Williamsburg is about 15 minutes away.

The last few years a few new neighbors have hung fancy lights and even one with a large lite cross standing in the yard! (OK that makes me feel strange.) It is even near a "I support the Ten Commandments" sign that is a local church project. (The need to proclaim this still troubles me.)

For many years we were in Boston with the children for Chanukah. We stayed with my parents in Chelsea. Still we did not put our Menorah in the window. Just was not their custom I would say.

Even in the South, no more are my neighbor's children taught in Catholic churches bad things about Jews. In fact the opposite. They are told we did not do what they had said we did. They are taught of our shared traditions and they respect our holidays. Ok, the Southern Baptists say it is their "duty" to teach us the "way," but none of our neighbors ever would or have and all enjoy seeing us build our Sukkah each year.

Yes, I did buy for the children an electric menorah many years ago, to place in the window for all to see. Times had changed my fears pushed down far inside.

We thought it would be the safer way to put electric Chanukah lights near my curtains and narrow window frames. We even started the tradition of placing it in the upstairs guest room so all could see even above the trees and bushes in our front yard.

As I had two boys, but only one had a room in the front of the house, to be fair the treat of the menorah had to be put in the neutral "guest" room. The boys love proudly turning the light bulb on each night for all to see. They were little when we started this tradition but they would stop neighbors and friends as they jogged by during our mild winters. They would tell them to watch us "light" the candles and add a new light each night.

They still rushed to light the "real" candles downstairs in the dinning room. (They still do!) Each person in the family wanting to light a full set of candles in their own menorah. The menorahs started getting bigger as they made newer and bigger ones in school. By second grade they each in turn made a tall wooden one that could hold glass oil cups or full-size Shabbat candles! Bigger was better! Taller! Brighter lights! Oh, the beauty and excitement, especially when you would see four or more hannukiyot on the eighth day.

This year it will be different. We MAY have an extra single electric candle stick in the other guest bedroom window. There is one there now.

We are a military town. We have Navy, Air Force, Army Bases and more near us. The Norfolk Naval Base across the bridge tunnel is the largest in the world. There are more bases across the water too. We even think we have a CIA training base near by. This always gave us a sense of security and pride. Do we feel secure this year?

After September 11 even that changed. Now the newspapers tell us we could be targets because of the bases. Our neighbors and friends have always gone out to sea for months at a time but this is different. Now the TV commercial asks us to put the single candle in the window until all of the military come home. Just like we were asked in Desert Storm.

During Desert Storm a Christian neighbor offered me a Christmas candle light to use. This time I bought my own! It will be there until our neighbors come home. Hopefully all of them.

Yes, this year will be different, yet the same. We will be home this year for Chanukah. We will light all of our candle menorahs. We will place our electric menorah near the window for the eight days. Hopefully there will not be the other single electric candle light in the other guest room window!

Part of my work is to offer free lessons on the Internet for crafts and links to other resources. I had already reorganized some of my crafts and links into a new web page just for Chanukah. It included some new crafts and pictures. But I felt that I needed something new for candle crafts, especially this year. Out came the bees wax sheets, cookie cutters and other things to make a style of candles I had read about and never made the time to do - Cookie Cutter Layered Bees Wax Candles. Of course a dreidel-shaped candle had to be the first kind. What better time to make a new style of candle?

Sure I had plans for a new clay lesson for filigree dreidels that I had also read about and I still may try and make some before Chanukah. But the time left for teachers, especially Sunday school teachers, to teach a new craft really is limited. So the candle had to come first.

I was surprised to see the idea of using a cookie cutter to cut bees wax sheets that are then layered into a thick decorative candle. The lesson said you cut multiple layers at once but my bees wax has not been kept air tight. I had last used the huge box for teaching a havdallah candle class. I had to cut each layer individually.

These candles are for decorating a table or for fun and not meant to be used in a hannukiyah/menorah. You can add as many layers as you would like but they suggest a minimum of eight. They can even end up thick like commercial table candles. They can be made in any shape but for Chanukah I would use a dreidel or menorah shape cutter. (I bought a multi-sided metal cookie cutter, when on vacation in Brookline, from the Israel Book Store.)

I don't think I will place these in the window. Not for fear of neighbors but for fear of fires. Bees wax candles burn hot and often fast. There are enough fires out there from people leaving candles unattended.

Have a great holiday, make some crafts and pray for peace EVERYWHERE!

Shalom Y'all

[Click here](#) to go directly to Eileen's article Chanukah Crafts to Make.

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