

אין מברכין על הנר עד שיאותו לאורו (משנה ברכות ה:א)

A common custom is to gaze upon one's fingernails to the light of the Havdalah candle. The Mishnah in Berakhoth (8:1) teaches us that one may not pronounce a blessing on the candle until one makes use of its light (Rashi: "benefits") (אין מברכין על הנר עד שיאותו לאורו).

How does one make use of the light of the candle? The Talmud Bavli uses describes "usage" as distinguishing between different types of coins (Berakhoth 53b). The Talmud Yerushalmi provides additional examples (Berakhoth 61:1):

רב יהודה בשם שמואל כדי שיהו נשים טוות לאורו. אמר רבי יוחנן כדי שתהא עינו רואה מה בכוס ומה בקערה. אמר רב חנינא כדי שיהא יודע להבחין בין מטבע למטבע.

Rambam (*Zemanim*, Laws of Shabbath, 29:25) basing himself on the Talmud Bavli uses the criteria of coins of different countries:

אין מברכין על הנר עד שיאותו לאורו כדי שיכיר בין מטבע מדינה זו למטבע מדינה אחרת

A different method was employed by some of the Geonim. Halakhoth Gedoloth (*Laws of Kiddush and Havdalah*), Rav Natrunai Gaon (*Seder Rav Amram Gaon*), Rav Saadiah Gaon (*Siddur*, pg. 125) and Rabbi Yitzchak ibn Ghayyath (*Laws of Havdalah*) record the practice of looking at the palm of the hand to use the light while Rav Hai Gaon mentions the practice of looking at the "outlines" of the palms.

The practice of looking at the fingernails, as we have seen does not appear in any of the Talmudim. However, Rav Natrunai Gaon attests that he was familiar with it, but it was not practiced in either of the Babylonian Academies.

Rav Natrunai further points to Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer (chapter 20) which in his version states that it is a commandment (mitzvah) to look at one's fingernails at Havdalah. However, the known texts of this work have it that one should gaze upon his fingernails "which are whiter than the body", and in that manner use the light, but only in the case where one does not have any wine available to him. The reason for this distinction appears to be that if one does have wine his use of the light of the Havdalah candle comes to be when he looks at the cup of Havdalah along the lines of Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud Yerushalmi: אמר רבי יוחנן כדי שתהא עינו רואה מה בכוס ומה בקערה

The practice of looking at the fingernails is also mention in Midrash Tehillim (Buber, pg. 248) (תשכ"ג) and in Yalkut Tehillim (הצפרנים בהם להסתכל אור להבדלה).

Although the practice of looking at the fingernails does not appear in the Talmud Yerushalmi as we know it, the practice is in fact cited by various sages in the Middle Ages in the name of the Talmud Yerushalmi, but most likely originates in a different source such as Sefer Yerushalmi. מאימתי מברכין על האור? משיכיר בין ציפורן לבשר.

The practice is codified by Tur (*Orach Chayim*, 198) and Shulkhan Arukh (*Orach Chayim*, 198:6) states that this is the practice.